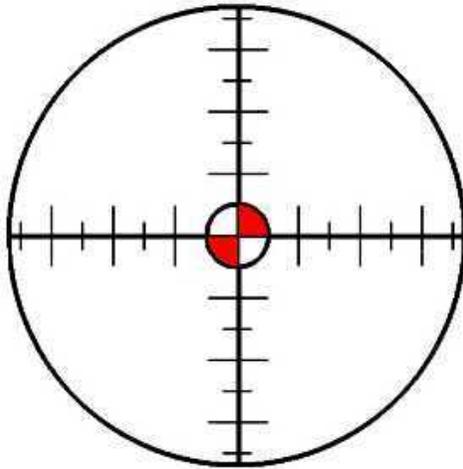


Principal Target



A Novel

Stellen Qxz

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

And you just try to prove otherwise!

For *Dad*.

For *Lana*.

And for **Ed**.
(Late friend and fellow warrior.)

Prologue

Chihuahua, Mexico

The Don did not like to receive bad news. His temper was legendary and many men would rather slit their own throats than tell the Don something he was surely not to like. However, Ignacio Riva was not most men, and he was paid quite well not to frighten easily. Still, he was not looking forward to delivering the news he had to the Don. Not because he was afraid, but simply because he knew how much it would hurt a man he had come to admire and respect so much through his years of service.

Don Fabio Paulo Sandoval was *el padrino*, the godfather—or as the Sicilians put it, *il capo di tutti capi*, the boss of bosses—the undisputed head of the largest, most influential, and most lethal drug cartel in Mexico, responsible for smuggling black tar heroin, cocaine, and hashish. This in essence made him the number one drug dealer on the planet, although the Don didn't quite see himself that way. More as a very well diversified *businessman*.

Ignacio Riva was *el jefe de Seguridad*, security boss, or chief of security for the cartel, which was more popularly known as *El Sangriento Puño*—The Bloody Fist. Riva in his own right was one of the most powerful men in the cartel, really only second to Don Fabio's heir apparent, his youngest son Raul, a graduate of Yale Business School in the United States, and currently managing the day-to-day operations of the cartel as its chief operating officer. Riva knew that he should, for form's sake, deliver his news to Raul first, but this he believed should go directly to the Don. After all, it was not strictly

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cartel business and Riva knew the old man would want to know right away.

So here he was, in the ultra secure mansion-estate of the great man himself, outside his private study at nine o'clock in the morning local time, steeling himself for what he must now do.

He knocked once and waited until the Don told him to enter. He did so crisply, went to the great dark oak desk where the old man sat having his breakfast, served by an extremely attractive and young dark skinned woman—girl really—with large brown eyes. The Don was delighted to be ministered to by this young angel and was clearly a little perturbed to be interrupted by even his closest of associates. However, he could tell by the expression in Riva's eyes that the matter was urgent. The Don dismissed the girl quickly and wiped his mouth on a linen napkin.

“Si, Ignacio,” the old man said in a voice that still had iron in it after seventy-two years of use. “I can see you have something serious to discuss with me. Your eyes give you away, *mi amigo*. Tell me.”

And so Ignacio Riva did just that. As succinctly and gently as possible.

From the utterance of his first sentence, Riva could see the impact on the old man, and by the time he had finished he was sure that the Don would faint. But that would not be the man he knew, the all-powerful and lethal Don Fabio Paulo Sandoval—*The Don* as he liked to be called, a fan of old American gangster movies, in particular *The Godfather* trilogy.

Though his eyes were moist, his voice was still strong when he finally spoke a full two minutes after receiving the worst possible news of his life.

“I want the body brought to me as soon as possible,” he instructed.

“Si, Don Fabio,” Riva replied automatically. “I have already begun the process. Perhaps a full day.”

“Good,” the Don continued, taking in air and running a shaking hand through what was left of his unruly gray hair. “Then I want you to find out exactly who killed him, and then kill them all. And their sons. If they have no sons, take their daughters.”

“It will be done, Don Fabio,” said Riva.

“And I want those who put him there,” the Don went on, his voice rising with seething anger. “I want them all dead. The agents who arrested him, the prosecutors who tried him, the prison guards who could not protect him, and I especially want the life of the woman who put him there. She would not listen, she would not deal, she did everything she could to see him put away. I want her head most of all. That *bitch!* I was given assurances that he would not be harmed if...”

The Don’s voice cracked and he had to turn away quickly to gather himself. Riva stood perfectly still waiting for his boss to regain control. It took five full minutes, and when the Don turned back, his eyes were the coldest in the world, devoid of anything remotely human, almost enough to frighten even Ignacio Riva himself, a man not normally known to fear anything.

“I want her to suffer greatly, Ignacio. She must suffer and die slowly. Bring her to me. I don’t care if she is a federal judge in *Gringo* Land.”

“Actually she is retired now, Don Fabio,” Riva offered. “Three years, according to the information I have. I am not sure where she is at the moment, but she will be found. I promise this.”

“*Bueno,*” the Don said. “Then get her. Bring her here to me. Hire whomever you have to. No price is too high. They will all pay for what they have taken from me this day. Paulo was a good boy, my lifeblood. They took him from me and now they all die! Especially that American *puta* in the black robe! Is that clear, Ignacio?!”

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Orders had been given. And now people would die. Ignacio Riva had been given and carried out many such orders in the past and was fully prepared to do so this time. Even if it meant going to war with several government and law enforcement agencies in the United States. Of course, that task would be made much easier with the assistance of quite a few paid *friends* the cartel had on the inside of these agencies, not to mention a large number of American politicians. They would be quite useful right now, especially when it came to locating and abducting the former U.S. District Court judge in Miami, Florida who had personally sentenced Paulo Enrique Sandoval to life in prison.

Debra Kathryn Patterson would suffer a painful, humiliating, and excruciatingly brutal death.

Riva left the study and left the Don alone to his grief, telling the young woman waiting out in the hallway that she was not to disturb him further until called for. She seemed a little disappointed, but knew better than to question Riva. He stood and watched her leave, secretly admiring the old man's taste. A bit younger than he personally cared for, but in a few years...

Now he would go and tell Raul that his brother was dead. Then he would get started with the cold and dirty business that lay ahead.

Chapter 1

Hurricane, West Virginia

Alex Wells was standing two feet to the right of her principal when she saw the man with the gun step from the side doorway. All her training and instincts took over in that instant and as she shouted "*Gun right!*", she was already grabbing the principal and pulling him down, turning him in the opposite direction and shielding him with her body.

Jim Paxon and Andie Pearth had been walking three feet behind the principal and as soon as Alex shouted, they went into action. Both had drawn Glock pistols from paddle holsters on their hips, moving forward, Jim covering Alex and the principal as they retreated, while Andie confronted the gunman, who was now raising his semiautomatic pistol.

Andie ordered the man to lower his weapon but he did not, so she fired her weapon twice, striking him twice in the chest and sending him stumbling backwards. At that same moment, Jim caught sight of a second hostile to his left, moving forward with a pistol of his own. Jim adjusted his position slightly, dropping to a crouch, and shot the man twice as well.

By this time, Alex had run the principal back to the car that they had arrived in, the rear passenger's door already standing open and guarded by another member of her team, Gerald Conrad. She shoved the principal inside flat on the backseat and dove in on top of him as Conrad slammed the door and shouted to the driver to go.

Wally Holt was at the wheel and already in gear, and a split second before the door slammed he floored the accelerator and the

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specially built Lincoln Towncar roared off out of the kill zone, followed closely by an identical vehicle that was driven by Tino Vega, yet another member of protective detail, providing cover.

Jim and Andie were now shoulder-to-shoulder backing up, their weapons and eyes tracking for additional hostiles, their adrenaline high, but their minds calm. They were total professionals who had been in situations like this before, each knowing that the key to their survival was staying calm and in control no matter the danger they faced. *“Keep your head, keep your life. Lose your head, lose your ass!”*

Up ahead the main doors to the building in front of them burst open and four more men appeared, two with automatic weapons, the others armed with pistols. Without a word between them, both protection agents fired on the holders of the automatic weapons first, dropping them with quick bursts from their Glocks. However, now the remaining two were aiming in on them and would fire before they could adjust their aims.

That’s when Gerry Conrad shouted: “Drop!” and they did, just as their colleague opened up with the FN P90 submachine gun he’d been carrying in his briefcase. He drilled both hostiles and drove them back against the building with precision 5.7X28 mm bursts before either could fire.

Jim and Andie were up on their feet now and moving back to Gerry, each covering a different direction from the center where they knew Gerry Conrad was covering. When all three of them were side by side they started backing up as one.

“End simulation!” a voice called over the loudspeaker.

Gerry, Jim, and Andie each lowered their weapons and started taking deep breaths, relief flooding over them.

“Jesus!” Gerry swore, lowering the SMG to his right side, the safety already back on, his finger along the trigger guard. “Boys get intense ‘round here.”

Andie Pearth was grinning as she slipped her Glock-19 back into the holster on her right side, pulling her jacket forward to cover it.

“That’s what they get paid for,” she said, reaching into her pocket for a cigarette and a light.

“And we get paid to have all of this fun,” Jim Paxon said, checking his weapon and then putting it back into the holster on his left hip. “I love training.”

Gerry looked at the tall and fit ex-Minnesota State cop and shook his head.

“Sometimes you scare me, Jimmy,” he said.

Jim smiled, glancing over as the two Towncars returned and Alex Wells climbed out of the lead, followed by the “principal”, Ray Alvarez, still another member of their team.

“Well looks like everybody survived this one without any blood pellets staining their clothes,” Alex said, nodding with satisfaction as she glanced around at her team. Wally Holt and Tino Vega had also joined them. “Very good job, guys. If you weren’t already on the payroll I’d hire each and every one of you.”

Everyone was smiling when Robert Chandler and Bill Rendale came out of the command bunker fifty yards to the east and walked up to where they were gathered. Rendale was the owner of the training center, called Professional Training Solutions, Inc., based in Hurricane, about twenty-six miles northwest of Charleston, West Virginia. Rendale was a fully certified close-protection agent himself with more than twenty years experience, but now, at age 47, he was retired from the field and ran a training school that taught new agents and helped already established ones hone their skills. He walked with

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a noticeable limp on the left side, the result from an on-the-job *injury* that was largely responsible for his decision to leave the field and start teaching. His mobility had never fully returned and he knew that he might well be a liability to clients and fellow team members alike, and professionalism would not allow him to risk either.

Next to him, Robert Chandler, as fit as ever at age forty. Well built, not overly muscular though, with an easy step, his shaved head gleaming in the spring sunshine, his neatly trimmed mustache and goatee showing only a few hints of gray here and there. Some said he favored the actor Avery Brooks during his 1980's portrayal of bodyguard and enforcer *Hawk* in the TV series *Spenser for-hire*. Only shorter. Chandler was the Director of Centurion Protective Services, the Charleston-based company for which Alex and the others all worked. He had been inside the command bunker watching his team as they went through their exercise, very impressed with their performance, as he usually was. As he approached them he was actually smiling. Or what passed for smiling for him.

“Great work everyone,” he said, moving into the center of the group, glancing around at all of them. “Covered all your points, got the principal out of the kill zone, and neutralized the bad guys and gals, too. And the bonus was none of you got clipped. Outstanding. Lunch is on me.” He paused, then added: “After we go through one more.”

Some groans, some frowns, and a couple of smiles. Robert's expression never changed, however. They had been at this for four hours now and he knew that everyone was starting to get tired, but he also knew they'd keep going all day if he told them to. After all, it's what professional did. And the Centurions were nothing if not that.

“Alex, this time you stand down,” he said. “I'll be the principal. Jim, you take lead. Assign everyone else to the positions

you want them in. Bill, tell your guys no holding back at all. Give us the best you've got. Or the worst."

Bill Rendale grinned, stroking his beard, it, too, showing increasing signs of gray.

"*The Boys* will love that," he said, then glanced over at Alex. "Come on, I know you like my coffee."

Alex grinned and slowly rotated her neck from side to side, adjusting her dark shades as she followed Rendale toward the command bunker. In addition to being a lead agent, she was also the Associate Director for Operations and responsible for managing most of the day-to-day business affairs of the company. Usually during training either she or Robert would sit and observe the rest of the team, evaluating strengths and weaknesses and trying to come up with ways of improving both.

It took Jim Paxon no more than a minute to assign everyone to their positions and a minute after that the final simulation began. It was, as promised, spectacular, and during the course of it, two agents went down, one fatally, but the principal was extracted without injury. In close-protection circles that was considered a success. Not to Alex and Robert, however, so one more simulation was ordered up after that.

This time they did much better, only one agent shot in the foot. Recovery possible.

Robert called for lunch after a quick debrief, and they adjourned to a nearby Chinese place with a large selection buffet, inviting Bill Rendale to join them. There was no discussion of training or work or anything even remotely having to do with anything professional in nature. Primarily there was talk about family—children, spouses, an ailing parent or two. But mostly there was laughter. Lots and lots of laughter.

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Robert sat back for the most part and listened, occasionally uttering a sentence here and there. During these times he usually preferred to listen and see what was on everyone else's mind, how they were doing, if anything appeared to be wrong in their lives. Any undue stresses that he should be concerned about. Right now he saw nothing, and that was good. It had taken quite a while to build his team and he hoped to keep it intact for a long time to come. This is one of the reasons he insisted on such regular and intense training. It built trust and camaraderie and sometimes exposed problems that people were trying to keep hidden. But today none of that seemed to be a problem.

"Well you know sometimes my husband actually does that, too," Alex said with a sideways glance at Robert. "Although he swears that he doesn't."

Robert lifted his glass of iced tea to his mouth and took a large sip, then put the glass back on the table, shaking his head.

"I have told you over and over for the past sixteen years now, madam, that I do not snore."

Alex was grinning now and so was he. She leaned close to him, for he was sitting next to her, putting her face close to his.

"And I have told you over and over again for those same sixteen years, husband-dear, that you *do!* Not often, but when you roll onto you back, you *snore!*"

Robert put the tip of his nose against the tip of hers, his brown eyes staring right into hers, unblinking.

"Well, it's gonna be hard to hear me when you're sleeping on the sofa downstairs in the living room tonight, Ms. Wells."

Everyone at the table whooped and laughed.

"And who's gonna make me sleep on the couch?" Alex retorted.

Robert gave her lips a quick peck and then pulled back, glancing around the table at grinning faces.

“The people around this table don’t call me director for nothing,” he said lightly.

Alex grinned and poked him in the side, reaching for her tea glass.

“Okay, *Mr. Director*,” she mocked playfully, taking a sip from the glass. “We’ll have to see about that.”

They stared at one another for a few long seconds, then started laughing, and everyone else joined in, the mood suddenly very playful, and slightly charged with an odd sexuality.

At the conclusion of the long lunch, Robert got the check and told everyone to go home and have a good weekend—today was Friday—and everyone was to report to the office in South Charleston on Monday.

Bill Rendale stayed around for a few minutes longer talking to Alex and Robert in the parking lot, and then he climbed into his pickup truck and headed back to his training center, which just so happened to occupy the same piece of property as his home.

Alex and Robert got into their black Chevy SUV, Alex at the wheel, and started back towards Charleston where they lived off of Kanawha Boulevard, just down from the State Capitol, with a perfect view of the Kanawha River along which they often ran in the mornings.

“You know somebody just earned herself a good *spanking*,” Robert commented stuffily, reclining slightly in the passenger’s seat. “Mouthing off like that in front of the others. Discipline must be restored.”

Alex laughed as she pulled onto the interstate.

“Yeah, well... when we get home we’ll see who gets *his* pants pulled down first,” she said.

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Robert simply closed his eyes and smiled. Either way, it would be a fun and very satisfying Friday evening at the Chandler-Wells home. Snoring being the least of either of their concerns.

Chapter 2

Washington, D.C.

Dan Cox had had a very busy and distressing weekend. In total, four of his agents had been murdered; two while working on undercover assignments that Cox and his superiors had thought were airtight secure. Apparently, this had not been the case, however.

Nor was it the case in regards to the home residences of the other two agents who had been killed, one while playing ball with his son and daughter in the front yard at his southwest suburban Chicago house. In that incident the agent's daughter had also been wounded, though not critically. She would make a full recovery, at least physically. Her father had been blown apart in her full view. She would never recover from that, and neither would her brother. He was killed, too, on purpose.

And if those killings had not been bad enough, Cox had just learned that two federal prosecutors and three officers assigned to the federal corrections facility in Miami-Dade County in Florida had also been murdered, along with three of their children, two boys and one girl. It seemed to be open season on federal law enforcement and their families. First his four DEA agents, and now these others. There was clearly a method to the madness, and it did not take long for someone in his office to make the connection between the nine grown victims. All had been directly involved with the case or the aftermath of the case involving one Paulo Enrique Sandoval, son of Don Fabio Paulo Sandoval, head of Mexico's infamous *El Sangriento Puño* drug cartel. The four murdered agents had investigated, worked undercover, and eventually arrested the younger Sandoval. The two

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prosecutors had tried the case against him, piling the evidence high and deep around him, ensuring only one outcome. And the three dead corrections officers had been working the cellblock where Paulo Sandoval had met his violent end a week and a half ago in prison, the result of a falling out between Paulo's forces and a rival Jamaican gang. No doubt the Jamaicans were trying to send a message to Don Fabio that they didn't fear the old man's reach anymore, and killing his oldest son was the best way they could think of to express this. Cox had no doubt that very soon the Don's killers would be slaughtering whole villages of Jamaicans all over the Caribbean and the U.S. to avenge his son. He had already wiped out the people responsible for putting Paulo away, including those who were responsible for his safety in prison, and some of their kids, now he would turn his ire toward...

Cox paused. He was where he had been for most of the past forty-eight hours, in his office in the basement of DEA Headquarters in Washington, D.C., just down the hall from the International Narcotics Interdiction Task Force command center where he served as a supervisory special agent in the Undercover Operations Branch. He hadn't been home and he hadn't slept in days. And his brain was not working as well as it might have been otherwise. He had been staring at it for hours and had not seen it, but then he suddenly remembered that not everyone involved in putting Sandoval away had been killed in the past few days. At least not yet. There was still one other. *Fuck!*

Cox reached for the phone on the right side of his desk and quickly dialed a number. He was angry with himself for not thinking of this sooner. It might already be too late. He prayed that it was not.

"Drake, it's Dan Cox over at DEA. Look, sorry to call so late, but it's urgent and I need a favor. You gotta locate a former federal judge named Patterson. Debra Patterson. I don't know where she is

now. Used to be on the bench in South Florida. Retired a couple years ago and went into private practice I think. Anyway, I've got good reason to believe that her life may be in great danger. I don't have time to go into it now or to go through official channels at this time of night. I just need you to get somebody in your office to find her and then get a team of marshals over to wherever the hell she is pronto, before it's too late. Please!"

A couple minutes later Dan Cox cradled the receiver and pushed back in his uncomfortable leather chair, sighing heavily. It was probably already too late. Patterson was probably already dead, too. These Mexican bastards were thorough and quick. There was no way that they would not have already moved on the judge who put Sandoval away for life.

"Fuck!" he swore out loud, furious. There was nothing else he could do. Not one damn thing. Other than try to locate the killers and put them away. The chances of that happening were slim, he knew. And even if they got them, there was no way he'd ever be able to link the murders to *el padrino*. No way, no how.

His people were dead, others as well, and probably a federal judge—former. Maybe her child, too. And the thing that really galled him was that he knew no one would ever really be punished for it. No justice.

Cox was staring at one of the dark gray walls in his office when a knock sounded at his door and it opened. A young female agent stepped inside carrying a folder in her small hands. Special Agent Cynthia Marrow. Her expression was grim and he knew she had even more bad news for him.

"All right, Cindy," he said in a tired voice. "Tell me."

Chapter 3

Paris, France

Hugo Bock was a man who enjoyed his life and his work immensely. He found satisfaction in everything he did, or he would not do it. At age forty Hugo was exactly where he wanted to be both personally and professionally and wanted for nothing.

He was a man comfortable with violence, had been thoroughly indoctrinated in it from the early age of eighteen when conscripted into the German Army (West German at the time). He had found that he was exceptionally capable in the field of arms and when his conscription ended, Hugo chose to stay on for a few more years. Eventually he was recruited into Special Forces where he was trained and honed to a fine point of physical and mental perfection, then dispatched to many of the world's hotspots as a member of the German contingent of many a peacekeeping mission for the United Nations. Not always easy or glamorous work, but rarely was it boring.

Then, at the five year mark, he had decided to leave the Army, but his superiors had other plans in mind for the young sergeant. He was brought into the office of *Oberst* Kurt Krigle, the commander of Special Forces Brigade Two, one cool spring afternoon and introduced to a stout, hard-faced man of about fifty whom Colonel Krigle introduced as *Hauptfeldwebel* Banke, despite his being dressed in civilian clothing. Upon the introduction, Krigle and his aide left the office, leaving Hugo in the company of Banke.

They sat and talked for more than an hour about everything from Hugo's personal life to his military career, and his plans for the future. To his astonishment, Hugo found himself liking this man, and

wanting to tell him things he rarely spoke of to anyone. At the conclusion of the meeting, Banke thanked him and told him he could go.

Hugo left feeling quite odd, not sure of what to make of the encounter with the mysterious sergeant major. A week later, he was once again summoned to Colonel Krige's office. This time the colonel was not there, only Banke. He wasted no more time on idle conversation at this meeting. He told Hugo directly that he was the recruiting and selection noncom for the *BundesGrenzSchutz*, Germany's elite antiterrorist strike force that was better known by the designation GSG-9. Although it was officially a part of the Ministry of the Interior, GSG-9 acted on direct orders from the German chancellor to take whatever actions necessary to defend the state against terrorism and violence domestically and internationally. Banke said that he wanted to recruit Hugo, remarking that he was exactly the kind of man the unit needed.

It only took a second or two for Hugo to make up his mind, if that long, and he was smiling uncontrollably when he said yes to the sergeant major. Banke had smiled as well, kind of. But he was obviously pleased with the young man's decision.

After this, five more years of the hard life followed, five more years of risking his neck, of fighting, of killing, and being critically injured twice, all for the continued survival of the state—by that time a united Germany. Which was all fine and good for Germany, but what about old Hugo? Didn't he deserve a little something for himself? Just a taste here and there? Considering all he was doing for his country.

Unfortunately for Hugo, his superiors didn't see it quite the way he did, and they were quite perturbed to discover that one of their tireless and selfless warriors was not as selfless as they had supposed. It seems that on a couple of occasions when the team that Hugo had

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risen to command after three years with the unit had taken down terrorist cells, a discrepancy arose in the accounting of the funds that the terrorists claimed to have in their possession during later interrogation. A quiet investigation was begun after the second incident and a sordid tale of greed and corruption on the part of Hugo and some members of his team began to surface. Eventually they were all dismissed, quietly of course, because, after all, they were members of a fairly secretive organization, and it would not do the government any good for its citizens to learn just how little control there actually was over the nation's Special Forces.

And then Hugo Bock was on the bricks, unemployed, and without a good recommendation from the Army or anyone else of standing to smooth life along. Also, what skills did he really possess that could be offered to a civilian employer, least of all in a profession that really suited the born soldier and commando?

Well lucky for Hugo, then aged 31, he did not have to ponder this for long. One of his former superiors from the Army, himself dismissed from the service at that point, approached Hugo with a proposal. And much like he did when offered the shot at GSG-9 by Sergeant Major Banke several years before, Hugo Bock had smiled and agreed for two reasons. The paycheck was substantial, more than he would make in several years working for the German government, and the job involved what he did best.

Two weeks later, in Africa, Hugo carried out his first job as a professional contract killer. Many more jobs followed. Now nearly nine years later Hugo's services were still in high demand. And the fees for those services had increased exponentially with his success and reputation, affording him many pleasures in life.

At this very moment he was in one of the finest hotels in Paris, the Four Seasons George V, enjoying the company of an exquisite Swiss prostitute who worked for one of the most established

French madam's in the whole of Europe. The young woman was called Madeleine, and despite her youth, she was quite experienced in the art of pleasing a man. She was Hugo's favorite, and every time he got to Paris, he always requested her. She was expensive, but well worth the price; he could afford it.

Madeleine finished doing what she had been doing and then excused herself, deftly climbing from the four-poster bed and smiling demurely down at Hugo, before turning and padding off toward the bathroom.

She was slender, in excellent physical condition, narrow hips, but her backside was just a bit larger than one would expect on a European woman. This delighted Hugo greatly. Over time he had found many uses for Madeline's alluring posterior, and when she returned from the bathroom, having brushed her teeth and freshened up, he intended to... His cell phone rang and that annoyed him. Nonetheless, he reached over on the night table and picked it up.

The number was blocked and that annoyed him even more, but he answered it anyway, knowing this probably meant the call was business related. Not that he ever got many other kinds of calls.

"Yes?"

"Mr. Black," said a voice in fluent, but accented, German. "You do not know me, but I know your work. Quite impressive. I represent a client who has expressed an interest in employing you for an assignment. If you are not busy with something else."

Nothing would be discussed over the telephone, that was not the way it was done, Hugo knew this and he assumed the caller knew it as well. He was silent for nearly a full minute before responding, and then he hung up as the bathroom door opened and Madeline returned, a smile on her perfectly sculpted face. He held out a hand to her and she took it, climbing back onto the bed.

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Hugo was smiling as well, only his contained a hint of wickedness in it, and a touch of cruelty as well. Suddenly he felt like being *bad*, and he could think of no better way of accomplishing this than by causing this Swiss whore just a little pain. Not much, but a little. Enough to satisfy that nasty part of himself that sometimes came out when he was feeling full of the rages of life.

He had to promise himself, however, that he would not leave marks. That would not do. He knew she was one of the madam's prizes and there would be no forgiveness for damaging this particular piece of merchandise. So no marks and no bruises. At least that could be seen from the outside.

Madeline could see it in his eyes, and she knew that a change had occurred in the man in just a few minutes, and she also knew that this change would cause her some pain and even more humiliation. However, she sighed inwardly, bracing herself for what would come; she was compensated well for the harsh indignities she had to suffer in her work. And to the future, she only had another year of service to her employer before she would be free and would never again have to endure...

Hugo took firm hold of her long, ash-blond hair and tugged it backwards as his smile grew and his shining white teeth became visible as his thin lips parted slightly. He pulled her onto her back and knelt above her, enjoying the feeling of power and domination that surged through him now.

Madeline lay still, controlling her breathing and closing off her emotions. This was no more real than anything else she had had to endure with this man or any other. It really was not happening to her. Not happening at all.

That is, until it did...

Chapter 4

Charleston, West Virginia

The bathroom setup in the house is a little unusual, but considering the couple in question, it actually makes perfect sense. Someone once said that the secret to a long and happy life together for two people was simple: NOT SHARING THE SAME BATHROOM!

For this reason, the bathroom situation in the master bedroom was designed to allow the two occupants to exist in harmony by not making them use the same space for most of their more intimate personal habits. On the wall directly opposite the foot of the bed is an alcove with two doors to the left and right. To the left is the entrance to her bathroom and to the right is the entrance to his. Sink, toilet, all the necessities, and in keeping with minor gender stereotypes, those items in her bathroom were fancier, somewhat *girly* if you will, while in his they were more spartan; most notably minus a bidet.

However, in both bathroom areas there is something distinctive missing. Actually two things. Which is why there is one common area between them, much larger than either, and here is where those two *missing* items are located. A bathtub and a shower. But not just any bathtub and shower. *The* bathtub and shower.

The tub was against the back wall with a large picture window above it that overlooked the well-maintained backyard. It is actually a Jacuzzi, round, deep, equipped with state of the art jets, and, most importantly, built for two.

The shower is also built for two, occupying the entire wall opposite the tub. Constructed of smooth granite and equipped with

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an adjustable six-nozzle system that can cover all points on the body simultaneously. Or two bodies. Most often, they use these two items together, and today was no exception...

At age forty, Robert Chandler loved his life as well. He loved his thirty-eight year old wife even more, however, and never did a day go by without his letting her know it. They met in college nineteen years ago. Alex had been a freshman and Robert a junior. For both of them it was cliché, yes, but love at first sight, although neither of them actually realized it at first. A friendship quickly developed because they discovered similar personal and political views, but neither of them ever considered—in the beginning—the possibility of anything more. In truth, neither of them actually saw the other as a member of the opposite sex, although both knew one was male and the other female, but it just never seemed to matter. For six months, they were just really good friends, and quite content with that. Could have gone on forever that way.

Then something happened one day when Robert was standing with a group of other friends in the campus' lower west parking lot holding court on some inane subject that probably seemed really important to them at the time. He spotted Alex walking down the hill behind the Fine Arts building. To this day, he remembers precisely the outfit she had on as if it were yesterday. Green pullover V-neck sweater, white collared blouse, checkered red and black skirt down to her ankles—back then Alex never wore a skirt above her knees—and three of the buttons along the left side of the skirt had been left unbuttoned so as not to restrict her long stride. Completing the outfit were a pair of white stockings and black pumps. She also had a black purse slung over her left shoulder and carried a stack books in her right arm clutched against her chest. That day her long brown hair had been clamped back behind her head. The color of the clamp was

the one thing Robert never remembered; probably never saw it as he was facing her.

When Alex was about halfway down the hill, she spotted Robert and the group. She raised her hand to wave as Robert also waved. Just then, a wind gust lifted her skirt above her left knee, and before Alex could lean down and pull the garment closed, in that instant Robert actually looked at her legs for the first time. His exact thought: “*Not a half bad looking knee.*” And in that moment, Robert Chandler started seeing Alexandra Wells as something more than just his friend who happened to be female. He saw her as a woman. Things were never the same after that.

Often times Robert and Alex would meet in a rarely used section of the library's fourth floor. Officially named *Special Collections*, though no one seemed to know why and no one ever seemed to check anything out of there. So they would meet here and do their homework, talk, or just hang out sometimes, just the two of them. However, after the day the wind exposed her legs to him, Robert found himself staring at Alex more and more. Looking at her and actually *seeing* her now, her eyes, her nose, her mouth, the smooth texture of her skin. He liked listening to her voice, too, the sound of it, its cadence, the way it changed tempo when she was pissed off. He was falling in love with her and never knew it. After all, he had never been in love before.

For Alex's part, she had been having feelings for Robert for about a month before the *skirt incident*, and she didn't know what to do about them either. It was obvious that he was only interested in being her friend. He spoke to her like one of the guys, they always talked politics, or school work, very little personal stuff, and he never once looked at her like she was a girl—a *woman*. Maybe he didn't like interracial relationships. And to be perfectly honest, in her brief eighteen years, Alex hadn't had much experience herself. None

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actually. But she was not opposed to the idea. Especially where Robert was concerned. But he had no interest, so the point was moot, right? Or so she thought.

One day while they were up in Special Collections studying at a table in the very back, she turned to ask him a question and received the shock of her life. Alex noticed Robert staring at her. More specifically, staring at her legs, even though they were covered by a long skirt that day. He tried to cover quickly, looking away and pretending to read from the history book that was open on the table in front of him, but Alex knew what he had been doing. Hot damn he *was* checking her out!

She couldn't believe it. She was elated. And now a little bit frightened, realizing the implications, where this could lead. Not sure if she wanted it to go there or not. So she let the incident pass, pretending not to have noticed, and life was normal for the two friends, but Alex had seen what she had seen, and she was happy about it. Mostly.

For a few weeks after that nothing developed, Robert was careful to mind his eyes, mentally slapping himself whenever his gaze started to drift any place on Alex's body that he felt they should not. After a while, Alex became frustrated, having come to the conclusion that she wanted something more to develop between her and Robert, even if she wasn't exactly sure what that something was. So she decided to push him a little and see what, if anything, developed.

She started sitting closer to him when they studied together in the library, occasionally bumping against him when she had a question to ask. Robert was the perfect gentleman, ignoring her closeness and not taking advantage of the small innocent touches she gave him from time to time, no matter how much he wanted to. Their friendship was very important to him and he did not want to mess it up by making a pass that she would probably reject anyway.

He need not have worried about that, however, and for Alex's part, she was becoming increasingly frustrated, and rapidly approaching the end of her patience. They were standing at their usual table in back of Special Collections putting their books away and a couple of times Alex slammed one of them down just a little too forcefully. Robert turned and asked her if something was wrong. A mistake he was about to regret, but considering the ultimate outcome, not really.

Alex had turned to him—actually *turned on* him would be more appropriate—and her brown eyes were blazing. She stepped closer before speaking.

“What the *hell's* wrong with you?” she said, her voice tight and filled with anger, something he had rarely heard from her, and never directed at him.

Confused, Robert stared back and frowned.

“What do you mean?” he responded.

“I mean, aren't you even the least bit attracted to me?” she blurted before realizing what she had just said, a door opening that could never be closed again.

Robert was shocked speechless at that point and could not tear his eyes away from hers. After about a minute, he recovered enough to clear his throat and find his voice, although it was barely above a whisper when he spoke.

“I think you're the most beautiful woman I have ever seen in my life,” he said simply. “And I'm in love with you, Alexandra.”

Alex stared back, her eyes widening, her thin lips parting into a spectacular grin that instantly infected Robert.

He reached out and pulled her to him, and they kissed for the first time. A long, slow, passionate encounter filled with love, longing, desire, and promise for the future. From that moment forward, they had been one, never separated, even when thousands of miles apart,

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always one heart, mind, and spirit. But two bodies. And that was a really good thing for both of them.

Robert loved Alex as much today as he had then, and she loved him. Something she never let a day go by without expressing to him.

They're in the tub, facing the window. Robert has his back pressed against the smooth surface while Alex sits in front of him, her upper body leaning forward while her lower body is pressing against her husband. She's moaning softly, her eyes closed, her hair pushed over her shoulders.

At that moment, Robert was carefully kneading the spot at the nape of her neck with the knuckles of his right hand while at the same time using the pad of his left thumb to work slow circles into the skin beneath her left shoulder. Light beads of perspiration roll down his face, the water is warm, the room is warm, and then there's the heat from their bodies. It isn't uncomfortable, though, just close, intimate, erotic.

Alex suddenly raises her head and sighs.

"Oh, god, that feels so good, babe," she whispers, moving her hips against him. "Maybe you should have taken this up for a living; you're so good at it."

Robert chuckled and continued what he was doing.

"Yeah, but if I did that, then you'd probably be jealous of all my clients, probably try to beat them up, or worse."

Alex snickered.

"No I wouldn't," she retorted. "Because all of them would be *men*. No chicks allowed."

Robert chuckled again, brought both of his hands together and placed his thumbs on either side of her spine, then he slowly began to trace a long line down her back, digging in as he went along, careful to avoid putting direct pressure on her spine. When he

reached her sacrum, he stopped, began using his fingers. Alex inhaled sharply, then laughed.

“Jeez! That was almost orgasmic.”

Robert laughs, kisses her on the shoulder.

“Well if I knew it was that easy twenty years ago...”

She snickers again, pressing herself against him.

“You know, if that *thing* gets much bigger, it’s liable to burst.”

Robert kisses the middle of her back this time, then reaches around and pulls her upper body against his chest, his hands clasped across her flat tummy.

“You have any suggestions on what we should do about it?”

She moaned again, turned her head to the left, glancing over her shoulder at him, the expression in her eyes unabashedly wicked.

“One. I think we should get out of this tub and go fuck in the shower.”

Alex speaks with a barely detectable southern accent, years of living and working all over the world having decentralized her regional tones, making it difficult to identify her origins. However, sometimes when she is angry or excited, she slips back into her roots. This is also true when she is in a lustful mood. As is the case right now. Robert hears the accent so well, remembers it from when they met and she spoke to him for the first time, and that just makes that *thing* grow even harder as his heart and body fill with desire for her. Adding to these feelings was her use of the word *fuck*, knowing what it did to him hearing her talk like that, the prim and proper southern girl from the conservative Christian Alabama family. She wasn’t normally a *dirty* talker, neither of them were, but sometimes just a word, one word, is all it took, and she knew just when to use that word.

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They stood up, dripping water. Robert climbed out first, carefully stepping onto the rug at the base of the tub. Alex turned and looked at him, glanced down and grinned.

“My, doesn’t *he* look happy today,” she said.

Robert smirked, reached out for her hands. “Let me show you just how happy he is,” he teased.

She put one foot on the edge of the tub, then climbed out and into his arms, encircling his waist with her long, slender legs, her mouth pressing against his at once. There was no more talking, no need for it. Dripping water all over the floor, Robert carried Alex into the shower, somehow managed to get the six nozzles going at one point, and then...

Well then they *fucked* in the shower.

LATER, THEY’RE DRESSED IN MATCHING robes and leaning against the kitchen counter eating grilled veggie burger on whole-wheat sandwiches, laughing, enjoying intimate conversation, and both knowing that at least one more carnal encounter was on the agenda before this day concluded. Tomorrow is Monday and it would be back to work. Meetings scheduled about potential jobs, reports about completed jobs to be finished, prep work for a couple of minor upcoming jobs. Routine and necessary. Which meant little time for the personal, at least until the next weekend. So right now they would enjoy each other as much as possible.

“Still hungry?” Alex asked after Robert polished off the second half of his sandwich and picked up his glass of cranberry juice.

“Nope,” he replied, emptying the glass. “At least not for anymore veggie burger sandwiches.”

Alex grins, biting into the last half of her sandwich, staring at her husband over the top of it. “Why, Mr. Chandler, if I didn’t know

any better I'd think you were suggesting something that no decent Alabama girl would ever participate in."

Robert's expression is one of quiet amusement as he sets his glass down and leans on the counter, looking up at Alex, resting his left cheek in his left palm.

"Guess it's a good thing I married you, then," he says.

She tries for a look of disapproval, but fails miserably, then shakes her head and starts laughing. He does, too.

Twenty minutes later they are in the living room. Naked for the last five. The plan had been to sit on the sofa and watch a little television, maybe catch up on the news they had been missing all weekend as other more important things took up their time. But that plan had gone out of the window following a playful struggle over the television remote control, culminating in the hasty removal of both their robes.

Now Alex is sitting on the sofa. Robert is kneeling on the floor in front of it, in front of her, doing one of the things he most thoroughly enjoys, and Alex seems quite pleased with as well. She is trembling all over, her skin is flushed, her mouth is wide open, her breathing is erratic, and her eyes are shut tight as both her hands clamp onto either side of her husband's bald head while he takes her with his mouth in an agonizingly slow and methodical fashion that he has developed over many, many years.

Alex starts to pant, and then she is moaning. The shrieks begin shortly before her lithe body is wracked by wave after wave of intense orgasms, all while Robert continues his unrelenting oral assault, driving his wife absolutely mad; she pounds the sofa with both fists, her voice cracking as she screams once, then collapses back onto the sofa.

Robert pulls back, looks up at his wife, smiles. A couple minutes pass and he's still looking up at her when she opens those

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incredible brown eyes, looks down at him. Without a word he puts his mouth back on her and she gasps...

Later still, after another shower, and the set of the sun by more than a couple of hours, Robert returns to their bedroom wearing his robe, Alex still in the bathroom drying her hair. He notices that the message light is flashing on his cell phone. Alex comes out of the bathroom, also back in her robe, still running a thick towel through her damp hair.

“Did you get a call?” she asks.

He nods, pressing the message retrieve button.

“Seems like it,” he says, then activates the speaker.

“Mr. Chandler, my name is Marvin Lincoln and I am the managing partner of a law firm here in Charleston. You may have heard of it. Patterson-Lincoln & Associates. I am calling you because you were recommended to me by a man named Barry Atwood. Mr. Atwood speaks very highly of you and your people. Mr. Chandler, I need to hire a professional security team, and very quickly. It is an urgent matter. I am sorry to disturb you so late on a Sunday evening, but as I said, the matter is urgent. If it's not too inconvenient, would you please return this call as soon as you receive my message? My number is...”

“Barry Atwood gave the recommend,” Alex says, still drying her hair. “Wonder if this Lincoln guy is one of Barry’s attorneys now.”

“Don’t know,” Robert replies, dialing the number on his cell. “But I suppose we’ll find out. He said urgent. Could be a big job. Might have to change some things around for next week if it is.”

Alex nods, walks over to the dresser and looks into the mirror.

The line rings three times before being picked up and Robert recognizes the voice of Marvin Lincoln at once.

“Yes, Mr. Lincoln. Robert Chandler. Sorry I missed your call earlier. My wife and I were downstairs... *eating.*”

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Alex turns quickly and swings her damp towel at him. He is smirking as he moves back out of range, eyes never breaking contact with hers while he continues to talk into the phone.

“I understand Barry Atwood recommended us to you...”

Chapter 5

The next morning Robert and Alex arrived at the downtown offices of Patterson-Lincoln & Associates, Attorneys and Counselors-at Law. It was a bit cool today and there was a thirty percent chance of rain. Typical for early spring. Both Alex and Robert wore black suits and white shirts, open at the collar. Robert had given up wearing ties years ago and had made it a staple of the company that nobody wore one, regardless of the assignment. Some clients thought this a bit odd, a little unprofessional, but the Director of Centurion Protective Services—most often just CPS—disagreed. And since he is the Director...

Around Alex's neck was a small gold chain that she always wore, a present from Robert on their fifth wedding anniversary. Robert didn't wear necklaces either, and the only other piece of jewelry he ever wore besides the gold band on his left hand was a gold-banded ring with a gleaming blue stone in the center of it on his right hand. It was a gift his grandfather had given him twenty years ago and he had never parted with it, almost never took it off. At one time, he wore it on his left hand, but when he married Alex, the ring that she slipped onto his finger, which he now never took off, replaced it.

As an engagement present, and because she had said she didn't want or need an engagement ring, Robert had had an exact replica of his grandfather's ring made—scaled down to fit her much smaller finger—and given it to her instead. She loved it, and it, too, was the only other ring she ever wore.

At exactly two minutes to eight Alex and Robert walked into the top floor reception area, this entire floor belonging to the law firm, and told the young Latino woman sitting in the middle of the large circular desk just off the elevators who they were and that they were expected by Mr. Lincoln.

The receptionist smiled and said she knew they were expected, introducing herself as Stephanie and telling Alex and Robert to wait one moment while she called Mr. Lincoln's assistant to let him know they had arrived.

Robert and Alex stepped back from the reception desk and glanced around the well-appointed room. All the right pictures and licenses and certifications, everything about it was designed to let whoever entered this place know that the people that worked here were highly successful. There were photographs of well-known politicians, including a past U.S. Attorney General and two U.S. Supreme Court associate justices, some business executives from the covers of *Fortune Magazine*, and a few people neither Robert nor Alex knew, but assumed they were important to somebody.

Stephanie put her phone down and stood, telling them that Mr. Lincoln was in his office and ready to receive them. She would escort them back.

They followed her down one long corridor, passing several offices with doors open and young attorneys already busy working hard to earn their fees and their clients' judgments. Some doors were closed, but lights were on, indicating that the occupier was probably in some quiet consultation, or maybe taking a power nap, or maybe screwing a secretary—or their boss. Not an uncommon occurrence in any office dynamic. Quite common actually.

That particular thought occurred in Robert's head, his mind being just a tad more cynical than that of his partner and wife, but

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only just a little. Neither of them was naive anymore, life was a good lesson to cure that.

Marvin Lincoln occupied a large corner office on the north side of the building. Stephanie passed them off to the managing partner's executive assistant, a young man introduced as Simon, and he led them into the inner sanctum. When Robert and Alex were shown in, they were greeted by a tall, gray man in his mid to late fifties, slightly stoop shouldered, but dressed in a very expensive suit and wearing black bifocals that looked as if they had been specifically constructed to fit his narrow face.

Lincoln nodded and thanked Simon, then came around to the front of his large teak desk and shook both their hands, Robert then Alex.

"I'm very glad you could come so soon," Lincoln said, staring down into Robert's cool brown eyes. Robert knew what the man was doing. He was sizing him up, assessing him to determine if he was the right man for the job, whatever job it was that Lincoln had in mind. He had not been very specific on the phone, but the mention of Barry Atwood's name had been sufficient to get Robert and Alex to agree to at least meet with the man.

After a full minute, Lincoln glanced over at Alex and smiled.

"Would you two care to sit?" he said, indicating a sofa and two comfortable leather club chairs in the corner.

The three of them went over and sat, Alex and Robert on the sofa facing Marvin Lincoln on one of the chairs.

"I should have asked," he said. "Would either of you care for some coffee? Perhaps tea?"

They shook their heads.

"No thanks, Mr. Lincoln," Robert said. "We're fine. Had breakfast a little while ago. Please, tell us why you called. On the

phone last night you mentioned needing to hire a protection team but wouldn't go into specifics."

Lincoln was silent for a moment, staring at Robert, still appraising. Finally, he sighed deeply, glanced over to his desk, then back at the two of them.

"Barry Atwood told me about the trouble you helped him with last year," the lawyer said at length. "When he was having problems with those people who were trying to force him out of business."

Robert chuckled inwardly. *Those* people Lincoln was referring to were members of the underworld, the mafia. An outfit actually operating out of Wheeling, but had been expanding in all directions, including Charleston, over the past few years. Barry Atwood was the proprietor of a local waste disposal company that had exclusive contracts with just about every major corporation in Charleston and many surrounding lesser municipalities. This meant he was the principal target of the Mafioso when they came to town because for some reason waste disposal was always a favorite of theirs.

A polite offer was made to Atwood to sell part interest in his company to certain parties from Wheeling who were looking for investment opportunities in Charleston. The buy-in offer was substantial, but Atwood said no. And he said it quite emphatically because he knew exactly for whom the slick-haired guys in the ill-fitting suits worked.

The first offer being refused, no harm no foul. The way of the world, businessmen understand these things. So a second polite offer was made, more money along with it. And again, it was refused.

The third offer was not so polite, but Barry Atwood was not a man to be pushed around. He was also not a man known to care very much for thugs. He had been fighting them all his life, from the time he was a kid growing up in a tough neighborhood in Brooklyn, all the

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way through his adult life. In all that time—despite some bad times—Atwood had managed to stay clean, and keep his business clean. He did not intend to let these bastards get a foothold anywhere near him.

Two of his trucks were attacked while out on collections, the drivers and their crews weren't hurt, but they were encouraged to find employment elsewhere. All but two men did. More attacks followed, more vehicles damaged, and more employees departed for safer environs. Atwood filed several police reports, but they did little good. The hoodlums who did the deeds knew how to hide their tracks, and they knew how to intimidate witnesses, too, and probably pay off cops.

Pretty soon it was becoming hard for Atwood to meet the obligations of several of his contracts and his customers started complaining, threatening to take their business elsewhere if things didn't improve immediately. Atwood was on the verge of losing everything he had worked so hard for his entire life, and he was damned determined not to let that happen. Just as determined not to let the folks from Wheeling win either. That's when he decided to hire Robert Chandler, Alex Wells, and Centurion Protective Services.

Over the course of three months Centurion agents provided close-protection for Atwood and his family, set up a top-of-the-line perimeter security system at Atwood's main office and subordinate locations around the metro area, and managed to interrupt six separate attempts to cause further damage to Atwood's property and personnel, making it possible for the company to regroup and once again start meeting its contracts.

Eventually the hard-cases from Wheeling realized that their efforts might be better spent in more agreeable arenas, and an accommodation was reached. That is to say, they left Atwood Consolidated the fuck alone.

One thing Atwood never knew about was the late night visit two dark-clad masked figures had paid to the home of the head of the Wheeling mob, a guy by the name of Patrick O'Shayne. During the course of that visit, it had been explained to Mr. O'Shayne in extensive detail what would happen to not only him, but also every member of his family—including his eighty-two year old mother back in Dublin—if any further hostility was directed at Mr. Atwood. Then or at any point in the future. Seeing as how the two masked individuals had managed to enter his supposedly well-guarded and electronically secure house with very little trouble, O'Shayne took the threat very seriously. Angry, humiliated, but no fool, he called off the Charleston power play and went somewhere else.

Barry Atwood was very grateful, and this was reflected in the generous bonus he gave to Centurion, and the continued recommendations to anyone he did business with who required the best in personal protection services.

"We provided the services we believed would best suit Mr. Atwood's needs," Alex responded to the lawyer's query.

Lincoln looked at her briefly once more then turned back to Robert.

"I understand you have about twenty years experience in the security field, Mr. Chandler," he said.

"Actually eighteen," Robert said.

"And you, Ms. Wells?" he asked, not looking at her.

"Sixteen," she replied.

"Combined that would be thirty-four years," he said mutedly. "And you are married as well, and work together?"

"We are," Robert said.

"And we do," Alex said.

"Well that is one way to keep a relationship going," Lincoln said. "Working together, especially in such a high-stress profession. I

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understand that you two used to work for the government?” he said almost offhandedly. “The CIA, is that right?”

Neither Alex nor Robert said anything at first, nor did they glance at one another. Mr. Lincoln had just let them know that he had had them thoroughly researched. Not a surprise, really, it’s what they would do, what they had done in fact.

“Yes,” Alex said. “Robert for ten years, I was in for eight. Where we learned our trade.”

“An impressive thing to have on one’s resume. One doesn’t really equate the CIA with training bodyguards, though, more like spies, or people who catch them.”

“They don’t call it the *Company* for nothing,” Alex said somewhat facetiously, knowing full well that insiders never called it that. Only Hollywood and the naive. “No job too big, too small, or too irrelevant. We worked in the Office of Security.” She stopped then, feeling no need for further elaboration.

“Why did you leave?” Lincoln asked, now focusing solely on Alex.

“We wanted to do something else,” Robert answered, becoming slightly irritated, but keeping that in check for the moment. He understood that this was a job interview, but Lincoln was starting to try his patience. If there was a job to be offered, he’d better hurry up and get to it. They had other things scheduled for this week and some were actually paying jobs that might keep the entire staff busy for a while.

“But you’re still doing the same thing as you did before?” Lincoln said, still looking at Alex.

“Yes,” Alex said, “but now we do it for ourselves, and our way. At a point, bureaucracy gets in the way of doing a good job. It muddles your thinking, no matter how good you are, or think you are. Robert and I didn’t want to become bureaucrats. We’re operators—

the people who get the job done—and we like that. Going out on our own seemed the best way to keep it.”

Lincoln nodded thoughtfully then turned back toward Robert, a decision made. Another sigh.

“My partner in this firm is Debra Patterson, have you heard of her?”

“No,” Robert said.

“Didn’t she used to be a federal judge or something?” Alex said.

“Yes,” Lincoln said to her, sitting back and crossing his long legs, adjusting the crease in the top pant leg. “She was in the federal district court in Miami for seven years. Retired and moved back here—she was born in St. Albans—nearly three years ago.”

“Okay,” Robert said.

“Mr. Chandler, have either of you kept up with the news over the weekend?”

Robert and Alex glanced at each other, brief images of how they had spent their weekend nearly causing both of them to smile, but they shook their heads instead and turned back to Lincoln.

“Sorry, we kept pretty much to ourselves this weekend,” Robert said.

“Yes,” Alex said. “Mostly we just *worked* around the house. Didn’t watch TV or go out.”

“I see,” Lincoln said, glancing once more toward his desk before continuing. “Then you don’t know about the murders?”

The simple question was, *what* murders was he referring to, and Marvin Lincoln told them.

“Nine dead in total,” he was saying. “At least that we know about so far. DEA agents, federal prosecutors, and corrections officers—plus one of their children. All of them involved in a single case, a single defendant, now deceased. And my partner was the

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presiding jurist on that case. She personally sentenced the man to do life in federal prison, despite repeated attempts by the father to buy her, then to threaten her. Debi Patterson is a very strong willed and determined woman. She handed down that sentence without even flinching, knowing that it was the right thing to do. And as a result, for a year afterwards, she lived under the constant protection of U.S. Marshals. They went everywhere with her. And she hated every minute of it.

“When she left the bench they were going to provide continued protection for her but Debi refused. She said that it was a waste of taxpayer money and reasoned that if Fabio Sandoval hadn’t moved against her in a year, she was probably safe. But that was before his son was killed in prison.”

“Won’t the Marshals protect her now?” Alex asked, leaning forward, her elbows resting on the tops of her knees.

“Yes,” Lincoln responded. “But Debi doesn’t want them.”

“Why not?” Robert asked, frowning. “The Marshals are some of the best protectors in the business. And she wouldn’t have to pay them out of her own pocket.”

“First,” the lawyer said with a bit of a smirk, “Debi Patterson doesn’t have to worry about money. She is very financially sound. Her ex-husband is an investment banker and he made quite a bit of money for both of them before they divorced. Plus she’s written several well-received books that have earned her a good bit, too. Then there are the fees she receives from speaking engagements and articles she writes. The money is not at issue.”

“Okay,” Alex said. “But why would she spend the money on outside contractors when the federal government is willing to provide the protection without charge? After all, the threat exists because of her service on the bench.”

“True,” Lincoln said. “And I have gone over this with her. At length. She refuses to accept federal protection. To be honest, despite the obvious danger, I think she would gladly refuse private protection, too. But I have convinced her to reconsider that conclusion, stating plainly how stupid I thought it was. And she eventually agreed, telling me to find the best available, in the private sector. I spent most of the weekend checking around. Talked to a lot of people, including Barry Atwood. He’s a client of ours, too. You seem to fit the bill. Hell, anybody who can scare the mob off should have a fighting chance with the Mexicans.”

Robert smiled and shook his head.

“Obviously you’ve never gone up against drug thugs, Mr. Lincoln.”

The lawyer shook his head, his face serious.

“No, Mr. Chandler,” he said. “I can’t say that I have. Have you?”

Robert could have answered that question, but it would have involved a violation of his national security oath. Not that that particular oath meant much to him these days, but he chose to keep it to himself.

“Is Ms. Patterson here now?”

“Yes,” Lincoln said. “In her office down the hall. She stayed with my wife and me over the weekend. But she wants to return home today. Which is why I’d like to hire you immediately. Whatever resources you need, as I said, money is not an issue. Ensuring Debi’s safety is.”

“We need to meet her,” Alex said. “As soon as possible.”

“Of course,” Lincoln said, standing. “I just wanted to meet the two of you first to assess you, see if you were what I thought we needed. Debi agreed to go with my recommendation, and as far as I’m concerned, you two are it. If you want the commission.”

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Robert glanced at Alex and after a moment, she nodded almost imperceptibly. He turned back toward the lawyer and stood.

“All right,” he said. “We’re in. Provisionally.”

Lincoln frowned.

“What do you mean, *provisionally*?”

“I mean that until we meet Ms. Patterson and come to an accommodation with her, we can’t say one hundred percent. You might find us acceptable, but she may not. And then, we might not find her acceptable.”

Lincoln stared at Robert with something akin to disbelief on his patrician face for several long moments, but then he smiled.

“My god you’re in the right business, Mr. Chandler. You’d never make it as a lawyer. Too direct. But I suspect you are perfect in your chose profession. I’ll be right back with Debi.”

Alex stood as Lincoln departed his office, leaving the door open. Robert turned to face her.

“Are we nuts?” he said.

Alex grinned.

“Been that way all our lives,” she said. “But I take your point. This is a serious job, more so than many we’ve had since we went private. We’re talking about going up against some very ruthless people here. They kill as easily as some people breathe, without compunction, without concern for bystanders. Some of these cartels have money and resources like a nation-state. They have proven over the years that they can get to almost anyone. So far, they have killed nine people that we know about, four of them armed federal agents. If Patterson is targeted—and I see no reason to believe she isn’t—they will come after her, no doubt about that. We might want to consider moving her. If she’ll agree. Might be the only way to keep her safe.”

“Agreed,” Robert said. “I want everybody in their body armor on this job. No arguments. And as soon as we’re done talking to her,

if we take the job for sure, call Billy and let him know we're gonna need an armored SUV for our principal car, plus two of his specially modified sedans."

"Right," Alex said. "This threat assessment ought to be a breeze, considering."

Robert nodded.

"Yeah. Probably more data on the threat than we'll ever want to know. Still, might need to have a conversation with a friend of ours down in Miami."

"Think he'll talk to you over the phone?" Alex asked.

"Probably not even on a secure phone," Robert smirked. "Which we no longer have access to. But he'll talk to me in person. I'll see."

Alex was about to say something else when Marvin Lincoln returned to his office, followed by a woman of medium height and weight wearing a gray skirt suit with yellow blouse, her neck-length hair a combination of honey and chestnut. Age somewhere between fifty and fifty-five. A handsome woman. But obviously an unhappy one as well. Considering that some very nasty people were probably looking to kill her, her mood was understandable.

"Robert Chandler, Alexandra Wells, I would like to introduce you to my law partner, and my close friend, Debra Patterson."

Introductions made, hands shaken—coolly—and then the four of them sat. Robert and Alex once again on the sofa, and now Debi Patterson joining Marvin Lincoln on the chairs.

For a few strained moments, no one said anything, then Marvin Lincoln cleared his throat and started to tell his partner what the three of them had discussed earlier. The ex-judge turned high-powered private attorney listened without interrupting, the entire time her eyes moving between the two people that she might be about to trust her life to.

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Now it was her turn to do the appraising, and make a decision of her own. A decision that could be the difference between life and death.

Her life and death.

Chapter 6

Marvin Lincoln finished speaking and no one said anything, just sat staring at one another. For the most part Debi Patterson looked at Robert, probably because he was male and looked more the part of what people consider a bodyguard should look like. Large black man, good physical condition, shaved head, a look of confidence and toughness just below the surface of his well-mannered and neat persona. There was also a hint of something a little dangerous about him, too, that Debi Patterson had noticed right away, and oddly, that comforted her. The people who wanted to end her life were extremely dangerous and maybe that's just what it would take to keep her alive, a dangerous man of her own.

The female member of the duo, Alex Wells, had not impressed her, at least in terms of her appearance. Debi knew it was sexist and prejudicial, especially coming from a fellow woman, however when she looked at the slender brunette with the piercing brown eyes, she did not really see someone she felt confident could protect her, especially in light of the threat she was facing. Wells seemed like an intelligent young woman, probably very capable as a technician, Debi thought, but surely not a bodyguard, a person she would have to rely on to keep her safe from cartel assassins. No, not possible. Most likely she was here because she handled the *business* of the business, contract negotiations, client relations, the mundane details that kept every operation running smoothly. But Alexandra Wells was not a bodyguard, just not possible. At least as far as Debi Patterson was concerned.

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“Could you tell me why you refused federal protection, your honor?” Robert spoke, his deep voice breaking the silence that had taken hold of the room. “I mean, logically it would make sense for you to have federal marshals protecting you instead of a private outfit like ours.”

Debi Patterson stared at him for a few moments, her clear hazel eyes still assessing him, and then she slowly, almost imperceptibly, ran the tip of her tongue across her bottom lip as she crossed her legs left over right.

“To put it bluntly, Mr. Chandler,” she said, her voice reserved, “I’m not sure I know who to trust when it comes to the federal government. I know that sounds kind of paranoid, but I spent a number of years working as a prosecutor in the Department of Justice before being appointed to the bench, and I know how far the corruption reaches. There are prosecutors, agents of the DEA, FBI, Customs, etc., and no doubt even some federal judges on the payroll of *El Sangriento Puño* and criminal organizations like it. And I’m sure that probably includes some deputy U.S. Marshals, too. The fact that those who were murdered were killed so quickly and easily tells me that inside information was provided by somebody. I’m not suggesting that the whole system is corrupt, Mr. Chandler, not even the majority of it, but I simply do not wish to risk my life by trusting the wrong people. That’s why, once Marv and I discussed this and I agreed that he was right, protection is required, I insisted that he find a private company. And he found you.”

“You are aware, ma’am, that Robert and I used to work for the federal government ourselves?” Alex said, staring intently at the former jurist.

Debi looked back at her, silent for a few moments before responding, obviously choosing her words with care.

“Yes, Ms. Wells, I know. Marvin told me you two used to be CIA. Admittedly, given what I know about the relationship between the drug cartels of Latin America and your former agency—at least the *past* relationship—this did give me some pause. But Marvin assures me that you two come very highly recommended by people he trusts implicitly. And I trust Marvin implicitly. Tell me something though, Ms. Wells, while we’re on the subject, what exactly is your function with regards to my security? That is, if I agree to hire your firm?”

The question did not stun Alex, or even piss her off. She was quite used to it after sixteen years in a business that many—even women—still saw as *man’s* work. Somebody looked at Robert and right away had no doubt that he was good at his job, even before they ever found out about his background. When they looked at her, they saw a secretary or personal assistant, maybe an analyst or even a tech. However, this miscalculation had proven fatal for more than one hostile over the years, because Alex Wells was an operator in every sense of the word, something the other professionals on her team, Robert especially, never doubted for a second. Lest they get their asses kicked.

“Well with the company itself, I am half owner,” Alex explained patiently, her face expressionless. “I serve as Associate Director for Operations—chief operating officer if you like. Essentially I manage and oversee day-to-day business operations.”

“I see,” Debi nodded confidently, realizing that she had been right in her summation of the younger woman.”

“As far as on the field team,” Alex continued, interrupting the ex-judge’s mental self-congratulations, “I am a lead agent, and usually serve as the senior shift leader, which means I directly supervise the activities of the protection detail for whatever shift I’m on, usually the day shift.”

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“Simply put,” Robert spoke up, “she’s the one in charge of making sure the client is adequately covered during her shift, second only to the leader of the detail. Me. Of course, when I’m not serving as the head of the detail, then she is.”

Now Debi Patterson was frowning, and stared over at her law partner.

Robert sighed and glanced at Alex.

“Judge,” Robert said patiently, “Alex may not be a large, rakishly handsome black man with a shaved head, but I can assure you, she is most qualified for this job. In some ways more so than I am. And I don’t say this because she’s my wife or because she’s sitting a few inches away from me. I say it because it’s true. In the sixteen years we have been working together, I have found no one that I trust more with my life. On more than one occasion, she has saved it, and the lives of several clients and fellow team members. If she were not the best at what she does, despite being the love of my life, she wouldn’t be on the field team. One thing I can say with absolute certainty about Centurion, we don’t play favorites. Either you have the goods or you don’t. That goes for everybody. Period.”

Debi Patterson had been watching Robert intently as he spoke and she saw that in his eyes every word he spoke was true. At least from his point of view. And she was touched by his passion, even a little jealous of Alex, the woman who evoked it. Finally, she glanced at Alex Wells.

“I am sorry, Ms. Wells,” she said, a mild tone of conciliation in her voice. “I know it isn’t PC to question a fellow woman’s capabilities...”

Alex waved a hand.

“Your honor, I am absolutely the last person you have to worry about being politically correct with. And I understand your concerns. After all, this is your life we’re talking about and the people

who may be after you are very serious and very dangerous. I was not offended.”

Debi smiled a little.

“You can drop the *your honor* stuff, too,” she said. “Both of you. I’m not on the bench anymore. Call me Debi, please.”

Now that everyone was on a first name basis, most of the tension seemed to have evaporated. Not all, of course, considering the reason they were all there.

“Okay, Debi,” Robert leaned forward a little, “let’s say we agree to take you on as a client. The threat posed to you is quite grave. What we would designate as an Omega Level Threat. Ordinarily in cases like this we would remove a client from their known surroundings and sequester them in a secret location until such time as the threat had either passed or been otherwise neutralized. The downside to this is that it might take a very long time for the threat to pass. Especially in your particular situation. However...”

“No,” Debi said without hesitation. “I’m sorry, Robert, but I will not go into hiding. I know how serious the threat is, believe me, but I will not let them drive me away from my life. I won’t. I’ll agree to the protection, but I will not agree to go away. Not even for a day.”

Alex and Robert glanced at one another for a few moments then Alex nodded and turned back toward Debi.

“Would you agree to it as a fallback position should the situation grow critical and it was the only way we could guarantee your safety?” Alex asked.

Debi looked at her for a long moment and then slowly nodded.

“Fine,” she said reluctantly. “I’d agree to it if the situation became dire and it was the only way.”

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“Okay,” Robert said, not exactly happy, knowing this was not the best play. Also knowing that arguing about it now would do no good. The determination in Debi Patterson’s eyes and voice said it all. So he chose not to argue the point at the moment and instead offered, “But you have to agree that the decision, should it become necessary, will be mine and not yours. That is a right reserved strictly for the detail leader and when it is made, there can be no argument or discussion. I should tell you that this provision is even in the operational orders for the leader of the Presidential Protection Detail. He—or she—has the absolute authority to overrule the wishes of the President of the United States in matters of his/her personal safety. On any detail I lead I insist on this same authority.”

Debi glanced at Marvin Lincoln and he nodded after a brief pause, then she turned back to Robert.

“All right,” she said in resignation.

“Okay,” Robert said. “I understand you’re divorced. Do you still see your ex-husband?”

“*Hell no!*” Debi responded vehemently, pretty much telling Alex and Robert all they needed to know on that subject. “He lives in Colorado,” she said in a slightly calmer tone. “With some girl half his age. We don’t talk. No reason to. Our only daughter, Kathryn, died of kidney failure four years ago and we have not spoken since. We’ve been divorced for ten years.”

“The reason I asked,” Robert continued, “is because your enemies might try to get at you through loved ones. With your daughter being deceased...”

Debi stared at him for a few moments.

“Going after Frank would be a waste of their time,” she said. “But maybe I’ll ask Marvin to contact him and tell him what’s going on. As much as I can’t stand the prick, he shouldn’t have to suffer for

something I'm involved with. Nor should the *little girl* he's sleeping with."

Robert looked over at Alex, who was trying not to smile.

"Debi, if we're going to provide the kind of protection we believe is commensurate to the level of threat you face, we're going to have to be intimately familiar with all aspects of your life."

She looked at Alex and sighed heavily, uncrossing and recrossing her legs.

"I'm quite familiar with the drill, Alex," Debi said. "Remember, I lived with deputy marshals for a year after the Sandoval case ended. I know what to expect. And I'll comply as best I can. But as I said, I will not give up my life. Luckily for you I don't really have much of a personal life. Not seeing anyone right now. And I don't go to court much. Actually, I rarely come to this office. Marv runs things pretty much. He's the managing partner; I'm more of a figurehead. A lot of clients like the idea of being represented by a firm that has an ex-federal judge's name on the door."

Marvin Lincoln shook his head and spoke for the first time in a while.

"Nonsense and she knows that. She is a valuable member of this partnership and this firm. And not just because of her name. Debi is one of the most well respected legal minds in this country. And one of the reasons she is rarely here is because she is constantly sought out to give lectures and speeches around the country to this group or that. And she is a bestselling author as well. Working on yet another book as we speak."

"And that, ladies and gentlemen," Debi said with a smile, "is my biggest fan, Marvin H. Lincoln, JD."

Both attorneys laughed and Robert and Alex sat back watching them, wondering if perhaps something beyond partnership

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and friendship were going on between the two of them, despite Lincoln being married.

They continued to talk for another hour, Alex taking notes as Robert did most of the questioning. At the conclusion, they all stood and shook hands, Centurion Protective Services, Inc. formally accepting the assignment to provide round-the-clock, indefinite close-protection services for Debra Kathryn Patterson, JD.

Let the games begin and the good times roll!

THEY WENT DOWN THE CORRIDOR to Debi's large corner office suite where an assistant and a law clerk sat in the outer office busy on computers and telephones. Adjoined to Debi's personal office was a small conference room. Robert and Alex went in there and began to make plans while Debi checked in with her staff and took care of some work in her office.

Alex sat down and reviewed her notes while Robert began to pace slowly, organizing his thoughts.

"First thing I'll do is call Billy about those vehicles," Alex said, looking up.

"Good," Robert said, stopping on the opposite side of the table and leaning against the back of one of the chairs. "We're going to need to rearrange some things for the rest of the week. Cancel some meetings. One or two can't be though. We'll have to look at that later. This job is going to keep the whole team busy for the foreseeable future. But for right now, get Jim and Andie over here now, please."

"Will, do," Alex said, making another note on her pad. "I was planning on it anyway. Then I'll send Wally, Tino, and Gerry to pick up the vehicles. By the way, Jim's supposed to do that safety

presentation at Altmore Elementary this afternoon. I'll see if it can be rescheduled. I know it's late notice, but they'll have to deal with it."

"Okay, do it," Robert said, pushing off the chair and continuing to pace, glancing briefly out the window to his left. "Once Jim and Andie get here, I want you and Ray to head out to her place in Cross Lanes and do a thorough assessment, make recommendations for upgrades and everything. You know the drill. We need to be setup ASAP. However you want to handle it."

Alex nodded.

"Right. What about guards?"

"I was thinking that, too," Robert said. "We should have at least two on the house around-the-clock. Three shifts for them. Call Nyla at TSS and tell her what we need. Tell her we want the best, please."

"Will do," Alex said. "Robert, do you think it's wise not to move her?"

Robert smiled and stopped pacing again, turning to face his partner.

"Of course it isn't wise," he told her. "But she'll fight it hard if we try to impose it on her right now. I'm sure you saw that in her eyes just as I did. And she does need the protection. My hope is that at some point we can convince her to move before it's too late. We'll just have to be on top of our game until then. Like I said, everybody in body armor, including the guards from TSS. Heavy loads in their sidearms as well. Submachine guns and shotguns in close proximity, too.

"I want to have a team briefing, but we're not going to be able to do that until after we're moving because we have to rush. Everyone should be together tonight once we get her home. We'll meet then. And by the way, when you and Ray go to the house, watch yourselves. The first sign that something isn't right..."

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Alex nodded, remembering her training from sixteen years ago: *If something seems wrong then it is wrong. Wherever there is doubt, there is no doubt.* Some of the first words her lead instructor had uttered; words that had served her well throughout her career.

“We’ll be careful,” she promised, and then a smirk came to her face. “Kind of glad we spent the weekend the way we did. Considering it might be a while before we get to do that again.”

Robert smiled and came back to lean down on the table across from her.

“I was glad we spent it that way anyway,” he told her. “And look forward to our next opportunity.”

For a few moments, they stared into each other’s eyes and let everything else fade from their minds. But just for a few moments.

Then they returned to the task at hand and got down to business, putting together a protection scheme that they hoped would keep their new client safe from one of the most vicious groups of killers the world had ever known.

Piece of cake!

Chapter 7

Washington, D.C.

“What the hell do you mean she *refused* protection?! You did explain to her that around ten people were murdered, most of them on the federal payroll? Some of them carrying guns at the time? And she still refused? Christ, is she stupid? Well I know it’s her right, but she has to know that her life’s in danger. *Serious* danger! These are Mexicans drug gangsters we’re talking about for Christ’s sake! Yeah, well I still think the Attorney General should be made aware of this and he should order the protection anyway. I know that. I know that, too. I just don’t want another death on this thing, especially when we know ahead of time and could possibly prevent it. Right. Yeah. Okay. I’ll talk to you later.”

Lani Jenkins, Deputy Assistant U.S. Attorney General and Chief of the Narcotics Enforcement Branch at the U.S. Department of Justice, put down her telephone receiver and continued to stare at it with an expression of deep consternation on her face. DEA Supervisory Special Agent Dan Cox was sitting in a chair across from her desk and had heard most of the conversation, and his expression was similar.

“Does that mean Judge Patterson has refused protection by the Marshals Service?” Cox asked.

Jenkins glanced over at the DEA man, suddenly remembering he was in the room.

“Yeah,” she said, leaning forward on her desk and folding her hands together. “She has. And they’re gonna let her do it, too. I just can’t believe this. I’ve known Debi Patterson a long time and I know

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she's no fool. But this is certainly a foolish thing to do. She has to know that Fabio Sandoval would want her dead more than anybody else because she delivered the sentence, ultimately condemning his son to his fate. I can just imagine what that SOB has ordered be done to her. And would really rather not."

"And the Attorney General won't intervene and force the protection on her?" Cox asked.

"Apparently not," Jenkins responded. "He believes that she has the right to refuse. And he isn't really sure he has the authority to force her to accept anyway. She is a private citizen now. And even if she were still on the bench, the Attorney General really has no authority over federal judges. The order would most likely have to come from the presiding judge in her court. And since she isn't sitting a court anymore..." Jenkins broke off and sighed, shaking her head. "I think this is ridiculous. I'm gonna call her myself and see just what the hell she's thinking. From what the AG's Chief of Staff just told me, she's going to hire a private contractor, a local firm in West Virginia. That is just unacceptable. She shouldn't be paying for protection, not when the best protection in the world is available free of charge to her."

"How well do you know her?" Cox asked, shifting his weight in the chair.

"We worked together in Southern California about twenty years ago," Jenkins told him. "The first time. She was my supervisor in White Collar Crimes. Then about a year before she was appointed to the bench in Florida, we worked together again in Atlanta where she was the number two in the U.S. Attorney's office. She's a strong woman, a very good prosecutor, and I always thought she was smart. That is until this moment. I don't know what the hell she's thinking, but I intend to find out. Tell me how it's going on your end first."

The DEA supervisor reached into his top jacket pocket and pulled out a large spiral notebook, flipping it open and reviewing some notes before speaking.

“We’ve confirmed the additional deaths of five family members of those we believe to be responsible for Paulo Sandoval’s death. Three male offspring and two female. Apparently, Don Fabio’s people have come to the same conclusions as we have. Also, in spite of being moved into secured custody in prison, one of the men suspected in actually carrying out the killing has also been found murdered, decapitated, his head left between his legs with his pants pulled down.”

Lani Jenkins shivered and hugged herself as the image that was being described to her flashed in her mind.

“Christ, these people love to make statements, don’t they?” the prosecutor uttered in disgust. “And why is it we can’t seem to protect people even in prison?”

“Because the cartel has the bucks, Miss Jenkins,” Cox said matter-of-factly. “They seem to be able to buy almost anybody anywhere. Which is why they manage to keep operating despite our best efforts. Over the years, we in the DEA have come to realize that the temptations are just too great sometimes, that even the best agents we have, men and women we believe to be absolutely beyond corruption, have succumb to the money that was offered to them. Sometimes they did so knowing that if they did not accept, they, and perhaps even their loved ones, would be brutally murdered. In many ways, Miss Jenkins, we know that we fight a losing battle.”

Jenkins stared at the federal drug agent for a long moment, seeing a man who was very tired and very nearly at the end of his rope. He might only be in his mid-forties, actually three years younger than Jenkins herself, but he was probably much closer to packing it all in than she was. Most probably because he actually

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worked down in the trenches where he saw a lot of the bad first-hand. Lani Jenkins usually worked in nice, clean courtrooms, and more often these days, in her nice, clean, and safe office near the top floor of the Justice Department building in downtown Washington, D.C. She pitied the man sitting across from her desk, and all those like him.

“You think that might be why Judge Patterson refused federal protection?” Jenkins said in a low tone of voice. “She thinks maybe the marshals might be compromised, too?”

Cox didn’t respond right away. In truth, he had thought of this possibility immediately after hearing that Patterson had refused protection. In truth, it was really the only explanation that made any sense. Hell, even he would have reservations about putting his personal safety in the hands of federal agents he didn’t know personally and could vouch for.

“Could be,” Cox answered eventually, meeting the prosecutor’s gaze. “She has to know that whoever got to the others probably had some help from somebody collecting a federal paycheck. Maybe she just doesn’t want to take the risk.”

Jenkins considered this for a few minutes, turning to glance out her window at the low clouds boxing in the nation’s capital on this early spring day.

“You’re probably right,” she admitted finally. “And so is she. *Christ* what a mess.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Cox said softly, closing his notebook. “It is.”

Chapter 8

Charleston, West Virginia

Jim Paxon and Andrea (Andie) Pearth had both been hired on at Centurion at roughly the same time, almost two years ago. Jim just three weeks prior to Andie. They were both very smart, with a decent amount of experience for their respective ages. Jim was presently 37 and Andie 33.

Jim was a former Minnesota State cop with a good background in executive protection, having spent the last seventeen months of his service to the Minnesota Bureau of Criminal Apprehension as an agent assigned to the protection detail of the governor of that state. A very challenging assignment at the time because the state's chief executive had made it a top priority of his administration to go after and prosecute members of paramilitary militia groups who trafficked in illegal weapons and *recreational* narcotics. As a result, some of these groups openly declared the governor an *enemy of freedom and personal liberty* and vowed to assassinate him. There were actually two minor and incompetent attempts, and after the first, a special protection team was assembled to provide round-the-clock security for the governor, and that team included one James John Paxon, a man who had wanted to be a cop since the age of fifteen, and had been since twenty-one.

Jim really took to the new post and found that he was quite good at the work, would liked to have done if for a lot longer than he was able. Unfortunately, however, due to an illness in his wife's family, Jim had been forced to leave the BCA and Minnesota and move to West Virginia so that his wife could be closer to her family.

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He had considered trying to transfer to the West Virginia State Police or a local department, even going so far as to set up an interview with the commander of the local trooper barracks in South Charleston. However, a chance meeting with Robert Chandler just after that interview concluded convinced Jim Paxon that perhaps a life in the private sector was a better fit for him at that stage in his life. A fortuitous decision on his part because at the time, CPS was hiring.

It was a decision that the former Minnesota cop never regretted in the two years since. As he told his wife about a month after going to work at the company, nearly backing into Robert's car outside the state police barracks that afternoon was probably the best thing that had ever happened to him. Other than meeting her, of course.

Andie Pearth was divorced and the mother of twin eight year olds. She was also an eight year veteran of the U.S. Army and Reserves and had seen combat in both Afghanistan and Iraq. During her last tour in Iraq, she served as a member of a counterintelligence and security team assigned to the deputy commanding general of in-country forces, and on several occasions had been the one who had gotten the general's head down during not too infrequent attempts to kill him. In addition to being a capable warrior, she was also an accomplished linguist, fluent in Arabic and Spanish, and fairly capable in French and Italian. After surviving her last tour in the Gulf she decided that it was time to find another line of work. Her kids were growing up and she was missing it. Plus, with the situation between her and her ex-husband, she didn't think he'd be able to raise them if something happened to her overseas. And her parents weren't getting any younger. So she needed something else to do.

Her preferred choices were the CIA or the State Department. The State Department was quickly ruled out because during an interview tour she discovered just how frustratingly tedious the

process was with diplomacy, and she felt sure that the worst angels of her nature would materialize and she'd reach for her M-4 at the first opportunity. And, in truth, she really wanted to work for the CIA anyhow. Unfortunately for Andie the process for getting into that agency is not an easy one, as Robert and Alex can both attest. Despite her high qualifications with languages, she would still have to undergo months of interviews, tests, and complete security investigations. And at the end of the process she might still be rejected. Too much time and waiting for something that might never come to be. Perhaps it was too much to hope for. Maybe she could find something else to do while she worked the application process. Something that would pay the bills, of which there were increasingly many.

One day while looking through the want ads online she spotted a notice about the need for someone with good Arabic skills, both spoken and written, and Andie's eyes lit up. She sent her résumé via email and got a response the next day. The job was in West Virginia, and at the time, she was living in New York, so she decided to give it a shot. Nothing to lose.

And, like Jim Paxon, over the course of the next two years, she never once regretted the decision. Nor did she have any intention of joining the CIA now. The initial job that she had been hired for was the first one Jim Paxon had worked on for CPS. The protection of a Middle Eastern doctor who had been targeted by a powerful group of his own countrymen opposed to his bringing American medical products and procedures into their nation. The doctor had fled to the United States following several attempts on his life. However, the reach of the group from his country was believed to be strong, with many devout followers possibly already inside the country. This meant the man would require very good security.

There was an initial consideration of using federal agents for this task, but that idea was quickly nixed by higher ups in the political

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strata who didn't think it would go over well with some members of congress who were already starting to balk at the increasing national debt. Therefore, the decision was made to go private, and after a brief search, CPS was awarded the contract. The doctor himself spoke fairly good English, and Alex speaks passable Arabic, but there was his family to consider, a wife and two daughters who spoke no English, only Arabic and some Pashto. Both Alex and Robert felt they needed someone who could converse with them in their native tongue. When Andrea Pearth showed up for the interview, part of which was conducted by Alex in Arabic, within ten minutes they knew she was the right person for the job, and her experience as a soldier was an added bonus. They had only been looking for an interpreter, but in the end, they also acquired another capable protector for the same cost.

Following the conclusion of that assignment, they asked Andie to stay on, and she gladly accepted, feeling that she had found the place she needed to be at this stage in her life. And perhaps longer.

Now Andie Pearth and Jim Paxon were in the small conference room next to Debi Patterson's office being briefed on their latest assignment at eleven o'clock on an increasingly cloudy and gloomy looking Monday morning. Alex had left as soon as they arrived, and now they sat at the small table across from Robert as he explained the particulars of the job.

"The good news is that everybody is going to be working for a while," Robert said with an ironic twist of his lips that those who knew him would recognize as a smile. "The bad news is we're going up against a Mexican drug cartel. Specifically, *El Sangriento Puño—The Bloody Fist*. The worst of the lot from south of the border. People not known for kindness and fair play."

Both Andie and Jim smiled, unfazed, Jim reaching up to stroke the new goatee he had grown over the past few weeks. Robert really didn't like it, which was funny considering he had one himself, but he had become accustomed to the clean-shaven look of his senior field agent. But he kept it neatly trimmed, and *he* seemed to like it. So that was really all that mattered.

"Makes life exciting, boss," Jim said.

"Can't be any worse than the militias and death squads in Baghdad," Andie offered.

"Probably true," Robert admitted. "But I want you both to be aware—and I know that you two are—I just have to say it. This is a very serious assignment. The people we'll be opposing are absolutely ruthless. If they come, and they probably will, they will not stop until our client is dead, or they are. And in that eventuality, I would prefer the latter. You both have your body armor on, right?"

Jim knocked his fist against his chest.

"Sure thing. Cop's best friend."

Andie nodded.

"Never leave home on a dangerous mission without it," she said.

"Glad to hear it," Robert said, glancing over at the closed door that led to Debi Patterson's office. "Okay, we're running in all directions right now because of the suddenness and gravity of this assignment. You two are here for obvious reasons. Alex and I had a look at the layout of the building a little while ago and right now I want the two of you to do the same. Debi has said she doesn't spend that much time here anyway, but since she is here today, it would be good if we all got to know the place and look for routes of escape. As soon as Wally and the others get the vehicles, they're coming over as well. Andie, when you've finished your survey with Jim, I want you

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back up here and posted right in the outer office with the assistants. Nobody gets through that door unless you know who they are.”

Andie nodded.

“Jim, I want you moving through the whole office space, roving around, and making sure an escape route is always accessible.”

“Will do,” Jim said.

“I’m gonna keep Wally with the principal’s vehicle in the back lot, and Tino there, too, in one of the other cars. Gerry’s gonna do CS¹ throughout an expanded perimeter. Alex and Ray are on their way to the house in Cross Lanes now, along with Nyla Taylor from TSS. They’ll do an assessment, get things ready, post guards, and then give me a call. We’ll be moving her as soon as we know that location is safe.”

“How many guards?” Andie asked, reaching back and taking her long brown hair in both hands and pulling it behind her head, then twisting a rubber band around the ponytail.

“Two per shift,” Robert told her. “Three shifts a day. They’ll cover the front and back of the house on the perimeter. We’ll have people assigned to her round-the-clock as well. Depending on the size of the house, most likely inside. At least one of us. Once we get the preliminaries out of the way, Alex and I will work out a schedule. Probably have two agents assigned to the house at night; we’ll just have to see. Any other questions?”

There were none, and both agents shook their heads.

Robert stood and they stood with him.

“All right then, go do your walk-through and then report back to me when you’re done. I’ll be in the outer office until you come back, Andie.”

Since there was only one way into the conference room, through Debi Patterson’s office, Robert walked them through and

¹ Countersurveillance.

Stellen Qxz

formally introduced his agents to their new client. When they arrived earlier, she'd been on the phone and had only waved briefly as they passed through into the conference room.

Introductions complete, Jim and Andie left on their tour and Robert took up position in the outer office, standing in front of Debi Patterson's door like a sentinel. Or perhaps, more aptly, like a Centurion.

Chapter 9

Nassau, Bahamas

Hugo Bock was in the western hemisphere by late afternoon Monday and reviewing the details of the assignment he had been offered, the first part of the retainer having already been transferred to a numbered Swiss account that he used for such things. He was staying at a popular luxury hotel in Nassau, and as he read through the information contained on the encrypted flash drive that had been awaiting his arrival, he periodically glanced out the window across from the desk, staring at the fading sun out across the ocean. He would much rather have been down on the beach, enjoying the local environment, and the women, but now was the time for work. That is, if he intended to accept this assignment. He was under no obligation thus far. The retainer was his to keep regardless. It was simply payment for his consideration of the job; if he refused it, his would-be client knew full well they would never see that money again. In truth, it was no longer in the Swiss account. A half an hour after the funds transfer, Hugo had it transferred to another account, this one at a bank in the Cayman Islands. Completely untraceable.

The fee being paid for this assignment was substantial, and considering the target, he understood why. Additionally, he was not being charged to kill the target himself—and that was quite explicit—only to abduct her and turn her over to another group that would transport her to another location that had not been disclosed.

This really presented no problems to Hugo. He had done similar work before. He was more than just a killer, although he enjoyed that aspect of his job the best. In the past, he had done

kidnappings, even a few recovery jobs for the families of kidnap victims. He saw himself as a man of many talents, and if somebody wanted to pay him three million dollars plus all expenses to kidnap a former American federal judge, then the chances were good he'd take the commission.

He was curious as to exactly who his client was. In most cases he never knew, and liked it that way. His identity was covered as well, although anyone with enough money could probably uncover it if they looked hard enough. In today's information age, it was getting harder and harder to remain anonymous. However, in a few years when Hugo decided to hang up his guns for good and retire, he would find a way to wipe his record clean and disappear, living out the remainder of his years in a warm client with access to the most beautiful creatures he could find. Women like the delectable *Madeleine* most assuredly. But for the present, he had a job to consider.

Go to Charleston, West Virginia and kidnap Debra Patterson, now an attorney in private practice. It sounded simple, but somehow the German assassin did not believe this would turn out to be the case. Not for the price being offered. If he decided to take the job, and he pretty much had already, he would demand a lot more information from his unknown client. The only thing that counted with Hugo besides his fee was his own personal survival, and that actually came first. He never took an unnecessary risk to fulfill a contract, and if a client failed to disclose a crucial piece of information, they could well find themselves becoming the next target of Hugo Bock, the contract paid for by their own funds.

When he finished reading the files on the flash drive this time, Hugo used a shred program on his computer to wipe it completely clean, then took the drive from the machine and destroyed it, tossing the remains in the trash can under the desk. He powered

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down his laptop and sat thinking, occasionally glancing out the window at the gathering darkness.

Finally, he nodded to himself and stood up, going over to the window and peering down at the beach, still visible in the fading light. He would go to West Virginia, provided he was satisfied with what his client told him next, and by week's end Debi Patterson would be on her way to places unknown to face whatever the people paying him wanted her to face.

Most likely an unpleasant death. Didn't really matter to Hugo Bock, all that did was his collection of three millions dollars U.S.

This thought made him smile, as did the two young tanned women in bathing suits that he saw walking on the beach with two young men. Arm-in-arm, laughing, playing, young and free without a care in the world. Perhaps before he left the island he should *sample* some of the local offerings. It might be a while before he got back here and it would be a shame not to have at least one souvenir.

Chapter 10

Charleston, West Virginia

By two o'clock Monday afternoon it was raining lightly with a mild wind blowing from the south across the Kanawha River. A miserable day for some, but oddly the gloomy weather had the opposite affect on Robert. He had always thrived during dreary weather, something that Alex had always found a little strange, but loved him nonetheless.

Also, by two-thirty, the other three members of his team had arrived at the Capitol Street office building that housed the Patterson-Lincoln Law Firm on the top floor. With Andie Pearth posted in the outer office in Debi's suite and Jim Paxon roving through the firm's other offices, Robert went down to meet with Wally Holt, Tino Vega, and Gerry Conrad after Wally called to let him know they had arrived.

He found them in the back parking lot standing out in the rain by the vehicles they had brought with them. Robert was carrying a large golf umbrella—he was always prepared for any situation—and when he walked up to the other three men, he shook his head.

“Didn't your mothers ever teach you three to get out of the rain?” the detail leader said.

Wally Holt ran a hand through his damp hair and shook his head.

“My mom used to always tell me to go out and play in the rain, and to stand near trees during lightning storms.”

Everyone chuckled, Wally usually providing a bit of comic relief when needed.

“Yeah, well,” Robert said, moving closer and offering a small amount of shelter to his men. The rain was really little more than an

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annoyance, but Robert believed that if you didn't have to get went, don't. "I'm gonna make this brief. We'll have a full briefing tonight once we get our client to her place. For now, I'll tell you that we've been hired to provide protection to Debra Patterson. She's senior partner in the law firm on the top floor of this building. She's also a former federal judge, and it would appear that she has become the top target on the personal hit list of the leader of one of the world's most ruthless criminal organization out of Mexico."

He paused then to let what he'd just expressed to his men sink in. They all stared back with serious expressions.

"You did say Mexicans, right?" Gerry Conrad asked, water beads rolling down his dark brown face.

"I did," Robert responded.

"You couldn't have found us somebody more dangerous to go up against?" offered Wally Holt, an ironic smirk on his lightly bearded face. "You know, I hear the Ukrainian mob can be a lot of fun."

Robert smiled.

"I'll see what I can do for the next job," he replied. "Tino, anything?"

The youngest member of the team shook his head, a small smile forming at the corners of his thin goatee.

"Nope," he said. "Mexicans, Russians, Libyans, the L.A. Laker Girls, hell, as long as I get paid I don't care who it is. I'm just a foot-soldier. Tell me where you want me and when, and I'm there."

Robert nodded, glancing at the three members of his team.

"All right then," he said. "Here's what we're gonna do..."

A few minutes later Robert was returning to the building and his men were in their positions. Actually, all Wally and Tino had to do was sit in their vehicles and wait. Gerry was the only one who had to be on the move, driving five blocks in all directions, checking for

anything that seemed out of place, and keeping Robert informed at irregular intervals.

Jim Paxon was at the front door of the firm's offices when Robert returned. He nearly snapped to attention and Robert had to smile.

"How's it going?" he asked.

"All quiet here, boss," Jim said, glancing around, folding his hands in front of him.

"Good," Robert said, tapping his closed umbrella on the floor. "The others are in position. As soon as we get the call from Ray and Alex and they give the go ahead, we're moving her out of here and home. I'll go with Wally in the principal car, a nice black Escalade with state-of-the-art armor and the full package of goodies. Andie will go with Tino in the follow-up car. You, my friend, will go with Gerry. Countersurveillance and tactical, should the need arise."

"Yes, sir," Jim responded smartly. "I take it the other packages are in the vehicles as well?"

By *packages*, Jim was referring to the heavier armaments that they usually carried on assignments where the threat was deemed high.

Robert nodded.

"Affirmative," he said. "Standard Omega Level equipment, personally prepared by Billy Rendale himself."

Jim nodded, still glancing around.

"All right then," he said. "We'll be ready."

"Okay," Robert said, then his cell phone buzzed and he reached for it on his belt under his jacket. "Excuse me," he said to Jim, taking a few steps away as he answered the phone. "Yes, Alex, what's the word?"

"Joy One," Alex's voice said through the earpiece. "Seven, seven, one."

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“Acknowledged,” Robert responded, the knot in the pit of his stomach suddenly releasing a little. Alex had just signaled that the house was safe and that she and Ray were not under any duress. Debi Patterson could now be taken the nearly twenty miles to her home in Cross Lanes.

“We’ve got a few problems to work out,” Alex was saying, “but we can secure her here for now. Nyla has already assigned a team to this location. They’ll be on till midnight and then the next one comes on.”

“Excellent,” Robert said. “Then I’ll go inform our client we can leave. She’s really been getting antsy over the past hour. I get the feeling that she really doesn’t like being here. Ever, not just today. Maybe she is just a figurehead around here. But that’s not important now. I’ll call you back when we depart and once again when we’re halfway out.”

“Acknowledged,” Alex said. “I’ll be waiting to hear from you.”

Robert deactivated his phone and slipped a wireless receiver into his left ear.

“Showtime,” he said to Jim, then tapped the small pin attached to his lapel. “Centurion Five, this is One, let’s get the principal ready to travel. We’re moving out. I’m on my way to you right now.”

“Copy that, One,” replied Andie Pearth through the receiver. “I’ll go in and tell her now.”

Robert nodded at Jim Paxon, also known as Centurion Four, then turned and headed down the corridor in the direction of Debi Patterson’s office suite. And although to all outward appearances he seemed the absolute picture of professional calm, suddenly there was just a hint of moisture in the middle of both of his palms.

But no one besides Robert Chandler knew this.

Chapter 11

Cross Lanes, West Virginia is a small community less than twenty miles to the northwest of Charleston. A family town, whatever that means these days, most of the people who live there actually work elsewhere, mainly in Charleston, but prefer living in a smaller community. And Cross Lanes really fits that bill. Probably the most famous native of the town, at least as far as Robert knew, is country music star Kathy Mattea, a long-legged, dark haired beauty with a soulful voice and good humor that Robert had always liked. Yes, he was a very devoted country music fan; at least he had been back in college. The direction the genre had taken over the past decade was not one he could really support—too much pop/rock crossover crap was how he usually put it—and had to content himself with listening to most of the stuff produced in the mid-eighties through the nineties. When country music was still *country*, back before Garth Brooks, and especially Shania Twain, *fucked it up*. Ms. Mattea was country as far as Robert was concerned. Along with George Strait and Hank Williams, Jr. And George Jones, of course. *The Possum*.

By five p.m., the detail from CPS had Debi Patterson safely in her home on Dalewood Drive in Cross Lanes. The rain had picked up significantly and there was a high wind blowing from the south. It made traveling a little hazardous on the interstate, but that also made it hazardous and more difficult for anyone who meant to harm the Ms. Patterson.

Ray Alvarez and Alex Wells were waiting at the two story modern home, having been provided with the key and alarm codes by

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their client. Ray Alvarez, the team's resident technical wizard, had already begun augmenting the home's security system and was in the process of putting together the essentials needed to install unobtrusive video surveillance cameras and other perimeter security devices around the property.

The first thing Robert noticed when they arrived was the fact that the house was exposed. It set five houses down from the intersection at Hurley and was plainly visible from the street and other houses. Additionally, there was only about a ten-foot space between the house and its neighbors on both sides, with no fences in between. On the plus side, the backyard was fenced in, but not by a very good fence. Also on the plus side was the fact that the neighborhood was an enclosed community, only accessible from Dalewood Drive. Hurley ran into a dead end, so other than an air assault, any hostiles would have to come down Dalewood. Unless they were really determined and decided to hump their way through miles of overgrown woods and over rocky and dangerous bluffs to stage an attack. Always a possibility, of course, and Ray had plans to neutralize such an approach via small detection sensors and booby-traps, non-lethal, of course. In theory...

Alex had already explained to Robert over the phone that they could provide fairly adequate security for their client at the residence, but it would still be better to move her to a safehouse, a place unknown by anyone other than themselves and much easier to defend. Robert agreed at once upon seeing the house, but also knew Debi Patterson would not agree to move, at least not yet. So for the time being they would just have to make due with what was available. With luck, they would make things so tough for the opposition that they would give up and go home.

However, Robert was under no illusions about the threat facing their client. The difficulty level did not matter to the

Mexicans, or the killers they hired. They would never stop unless they were dead, or their target was. Eventually other arrangements would have to be made, and that would require a lot more information about the opposition. And probably a personal visit to an old friend.

Now at six p.m. the entire CPS team was assembled in the living room at the front of Debi Patterson's house. Debi was upstairs soaking in her tub, having been introduced to everyone and thanked them for their help. The living room was large and richly furnished. There was a fireplace at one end that looked like it hadn't been used in a while, two plush sofas, three armchairs, and a carved oak coffee table in the middle space between the sofas.

Wally Holt, Tino Vega, and Gerry Conrad occupied one sofa, Andie Pearth, Jim Paxon, and Ray Alvarez the other. Alex and Robert both stood with the fireplace to their backs. They had taken off their jackets and the Glock pistols in quick-access paddle holsters riding on their right hips were now exposed. Robert wore the Model-30, a subcompact .45 auto, while Alex favored the subcompact Model-27 .40 caliber.

"Okay folks," Alex began, glancing around at all members of the team before continuing. "Everybody knows what the drill is here. This is a very serious operation and no doubt we'll be facing some very serious shooters on the other side. You all know we're dealing with a violent drug cartel. Probably the most violent in existence to day. You also know that there have been about a dozen killings since everything started last week. Briefly, I'm going to run everything down for you so you'll have a basic understanding of the problem.

"First, our client, Debra Patterson, is a former federal judge in Miami. About five years ago, she presided over a case involving the son of one Fabio Paulo Sandoval from Chihuahua, Mexico. He likes to be referred to as *Don* Fabio. The son's name was Paulo Sandoval. I say *was* because he was killed a week ago in prison by some rival gang

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members. My understanding now is that the Mexicans have declared war on this gang and are systematically wiping them out of existence, along with their family members, both in and out of prison.

“Additionally, nine federal employees who were involved with the case before and after the prosecution have been murdered. The DEA agents who made the arrest, the prosecutors, and the prison guards responsible for Sandoval’s safety. All killed, execution style. Judge Patterson sentenced Sandoval to life in prison without parole, and she did it despite several threats to her life and attempts to buy her off, all the while knowing how deadly these people were. For a year afterwards, until she left the bench, she had protection from the U.S. Marshals around-the-clock. After leaving the bench, she refused further protection. And before any of you ask, they offered again when this all started, Debi refused. So we’re it. Any questions so far?”

“Yeah,” Gerry Conrad said, raising his hand. “This could become a full-time job, assuming we don’t fuck it up. She prepared to foot the bill for a long-term op?”

“Apparently so,” Alex told him. “We’ve discussed this with her, told her how expensive it might get over time, but we’ve been assured of her financial health, and she insists on hiring a private team. So until further notice, consider all of yourselves on full-time service. Full field pay and expenses. There are some other things that we have on schedule that Robert and I are going to have to reshuffle. From time to time, we may pull personnel to deal with something else, but for now, this operation is top priority. Everyone understand?”

Everyone nodded.

“Yes, ma’am,” Gerry said, sitting back and grinning. “Long as I get a check, I understand everything you want me to.”

Alex smiled a little, everyone else laughed, except Robert, even though he was a little amused by the comment, too.

“Anything else?” Alex asked.

“I don’t suppose we can get her to move out of this place?” Wally Holt said in his quiet, somewhat cynical tone. “I mean, this place, a heavily armed team comes in here...”

“For now she won’t budge,” Robert told him. “Alex and I will continue to work on her. Subtly. And we are taking steps to make it a more secure location. There are a few good features about the location. Hard for strangers to get in unnoticed. Plus there is only one road leading in here.”

“And out, too,” Wally pointed out. “If we needed to get her out of here we’d be trapped.”

“Perhaps,” Robert said coyly, looking the bulky younger man in the eyes.

Wally stared back at his detail leader for a few moments, caught the implication in his eyes, and then smiled, knowing that the other man had something up his sleeve in the event a quick evac of the principal was required. Of course the sneaky bastard did, that was his way.

“Okay,” Robert said. “Anything else?”

There was nothing so he turned it back over to Alex.

“All right, everybody will be on twelve hour shifts. For the time being, it will be every day. As things progress we’ll see about rotating a day off here and there. And covering other assignments for other clients as necessary. The good news is our client spends most of her time here working on a new book. She doesn’t do much law practice anymore and rarely goes to her office. Her business partner manages the day-to-day stuff. She does have appointments to keep from time to time and will be preparing a list for us so we can do advance work. She also gives speeches and lectures around the state and the country. In fact, she has one scheduled in Dallas for next Monday and I don’t think we’ll be able to discourage her from going.

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We'll have to see how things go over the next week, but as of right now everybody should be prepared for a road trip."

Alex paused and picked up her notepad from the coffee table, glancing over her notes before continuing.

"Assignments," she said, glancing around at everyone before continuing. "Wally, you're the primary driver, of course, and you know what that job entails. Mainly it's day shift. Seven to seven, but if she goes out later..."

Wally nodded.

"Then it's whatever to whatever," he said. "Got it."

"Correct," Alex responded. "And Ray will be running the CP². We thought about putting it in the house but decided against it. So he's going to be in the van. There's a somewhat isolated vacant space down close to the end of Dalewood and he's gonna set up there, monitor everything. Wally, you'll back him up when not driving, give him breaks and such. Tino and Andie, you're night shift. One will be inside the house and the other outside, relieving each other. In addition, there will also be two uniformed guards from Trenton Security Services here around the clock. One posted out in front of the house and the other in the back. They'll work a three-shift rotation. And it has already been explained to each of them by their Director of Operations that they are to follow our orders without hesitation. If something goes down, or looks like it is about to go down, they defer to us, whoever the senior person on duty is. At night that will be you, Andie."

Andie nodded but said nothing.

Tino glanced across the room and smiled at her, mouthing the word *BOSS!* She smiled back at him, mouthing *your ass belongs to me now, young man*, good naturedly, of course.

² Command Post.

“Jim and Gerry will be the day shift team,” Alex continued. “Jim, you will be lead on the team.”

“Roger that,” Jim responded, Gerry nodding.

“Now Robert and I will be around a lot, especially when the principal goes out. Night or day. And if we have to pull any of you for other assignments, we’ll fill in. And when we do travel, the basic movement scheme will be as follows. Wally as driver with Robert in the primary car. I’ll either be in the follow up car with Jim or advancing the site, most likely the latter. Gerry will be doing countersurveillance in the second Taurus. If it’s a night movement Andie and Tino will supplement. It isn’t going to be perfect hours wise, but we’ll work it out like we always do.”

No one complained about that, and she hadn’t expected them too. They were all used to long hours and were compensated well for their time and their talent. If standing a post twenty hours without a break is what the job called for, they’d do it without hesitation or complaint because that was the job. Simple as that.

“And who knows,” Robert interjected, “if this job goes on for long enough, we might have to start hiring new personnel. And then Tino wouldn’t be the *baby* anymore.”

Everyone chuckled, except for Tino who discreetly gave his boss *the finger*, but with due respect, of course. This time Robert did smile, albeit briefly, then continued.

“Any questions for either of us right now?” he asked.

Everyone thought for a few moments, looked at one another, and then shook their heads.

Robert gazed at Alex, a serious expression in his eyes, which really wasn’t new; he was always serious when they were working.

“One more thing I need to say to everyone,” he said when he turned back to them. “You are all the best agents Alex and I have ever worked with and we are proud of each and every one of you. And you

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all know me, I don't bullshit or pass out bullshit compliments. I say what I mean and mean what I say. So take this seriously, too, and don't be eager to respond too quickly. Take your time and think about what I'm about to say."

He paused and the mood in the room was suddenly extraordinarily solemn.

"The people we're about to oppose are the most ruthless and outright dangerous I have ever encountered. They are capable of absolutely anything. Of killing anyone, regardless of age or sex. During our time with the Agency, Alex and I participated in three operations that involved peripheral contact with the cartels in Columbia. And I'll just say that on each of those assignments we encountered atrocities that are not easily imagined or forgotten, even after all the time that has passed since. These people just don't give a damn how many they kill. As I said, age, sex, race means nothing to them. They do not discriminate." Again, he glanced at his partner before continuing. "And this is why Alex and I developed a simple policy for dealing with the *sicarios*—cartel assassins—we encountered. A brief aside first, just FYI if you don't already know. The word *sicario*, literally translated from old Latin, means *dagger-man*. Murderer, killer, etc. Now generally used to describe any native-born Latinos—Mexican, Venezuelan, Colombian, whatever—who work as killers for the cartels. Usually teenaged boys and girls or youngsters in their early twenties. Ruthless, vicious, and absolutely unafraid of death. Theirs or anybody else's. It would seem unlikely that Don Fabio will send *sicarios* to West Virginia to kill our client though. They would be spotted too easily. But whomever they send is likely to be just as dangerous. Which brings me back to the policy Alex and I developed for dealing with cartel hitters."

At this point Robert turned to Alex and she continued, her eyes just as grim.

“We don’t hesitate with these people,” she said in a flat tone. “That gets people killed. The wrong people. You come up against one of them, know this, they only do one thing. They kill people. Which means either they die or you do. So don’t hesitate, kill them. That’s our policy. No *reasonable force to stop* or any of that other lawyer horseshit talked about in law school classes or wherever. Think like that and you’re gonna die, along with our client. Hell, I’m a lawyer and I’m telling you flat out: *kill the motherfuckers! Period! Got it?*”

Everyone nodded, trying to suppress grins. Sometimes they forgot that just how tough Centurion’s second-in-command was, but only for a minute.

“I do not intend to tell any family members that any one of you has been killed,” Robert said. “To paraphrase Patton: *‘It’s not my job to see that my men die for their country. It’s to see to it that they make the other poor bastards die for theirs!’* Same way I feel. We don’t take bullets and die for our clients, but, if necessary, we’ll fill up a few body bags for the opposition. Understood?”

Everyone nodded.

“One final thing,” Alex said, her tone softening a bit. “Your families. It is possible, should any of you be identified, that they may become targets themselves. And you all have to consider that possibility. We won’t hold it against any of you if...”

Almost simultaneously, the whole team shook their heads, and Andie Pearth spoke for the group.

“Screw that,” she said. “Fuckers come after my kids and they better hope they kill me first. Otherwise I’ll burn down Mexico and every last one of them in the process.”

This time Robert actually did smile, staring at the ex-Army Intelligence sergeant, knowing full well she was quite serious, not to mention capable of carrying out her threat.

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“Andie’s right, boss,” Tino Vega said. “I got a wife and a kid, too, but I ain’t gonna let that scare me from doing my job. We’ll deal with anything that comes up. But we’re all in.”

The sentiment was the same with everyone else.

Alex and Robert looked at each other, a little pride in their eyes, and then turned back toward their team.

“About what we expected,” Robert said. “All right, that’s it. Andie and Tino, you’re on duty. Everybody else be back here at seven in the morning. Get some rest. Dismissed.”

TO START OFF, TINO WOULD BE posted in the driveway in one of the Taurus sedans while Andie remained inside the house. The other agents departed after a few minutes, leaving Alex, Robert, and Ray Alvarez behind in the living room.

Robert turned to the big Mexican-American who had remained quiet throughout most of the briefing.

“Ray, your thoughts?” he asked.

Alvarez grinned and stroked his thick black goatee.

“I think we’re nuts,” he said. “But that’s nothing new. When I was with the federal prison system, I dealt with these thugs all the time. Real bad asses. And I hate ‘em all. I like working though, so I got no problems. Alex and I already discussed some improvements we need to make, so I’ll get started on some of them before I go.”

“Okay,” Robert said.

“Thanks for your help today, Ray,” Alex said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

The veteran of a twenty-four year—mostly happy—marriage and father of four smiled and nodded.

“No problem, pretty lady. See you in the morning.”

Alex and Robert watched as their tech and gadgets guru turned and headed off down the hall in the direction of the security system control box, and then she turned to him and looked up into his eyes.

“Are you going to see our friend down south?”

He nodded slowly, reaching out and lightly resting his right hand on her waist.

“I think I need to. I’m gonna call him in a bit, see if I can fly down tomorrow. I really don’t want to leave right now, but I think I’d better. There might not be time later and we need to know what he can find out about all this. With luck I’ll be able to fly back tomorrow evening or night.”

Alex nodded.

“I understand your not wanting to leave right now, but you know we’ve got a good team, we can handle it while you’re away.”

“No doubts in my mind about that, sweetheart,” Robert said earnestly. “But ultimately my place is here, with all of you. This thing could jump off hot at any second. I’d sure as hell hate to be out of place if that happens.”

“So go to Miami tomorrow,” Alex told him. “Then get that sexy ass of yours back up here ASAP.”

They were both smiling now, and Robert glanced around quickly, making sure they were alone, and then gave his wife a brief kiss on the lips.

Thirty seconds later, Debi Patterson came in wearing jeans and a sweatshirt. She wanted to sit and talk for a while, and they obliged her, taking the opportunity to get to know their client a little better, letting her feel more at ease with them. In addition to the threat she was facing, she also had to contend with having several new people in her life and in her house. It was only natural for her to be curious.

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At a quarter after nine, Alex and Robert left the house, Andie in the living room with their client and Tino outside in the driveway. The uniformed guard assigned to the front of the house was right up on the porch dressed in a glistening rain slicker, evidence of his recent patrol of the grounds in the now lightly falling rain.

Robert opened his large umbrella above their heads and he and Alex walked down the front path to the curb where their black SUV was parked, Alex having driven it over from Debi's office this morning.

Robert let her into the passenger's seat, then went around and got in behind the wheel. As he started the engine, he reached down to his belt and pulled out his cell phone, handing it to Alex.

"Why don't you call our friend?" he said to her. "He likes you better than me."

Alex chuckled, accepting the phone.

"Yeah, right," she said. "You're the one he spent three months in training with, and you saved his life that time in Burkina Faso."

"True," Robert said, pulling out onto the street after checking the rearview mirrors. "But you're the one who introduced him to Ruth."

Alex nodded as she dialed the number from memory.

"And after all this time they still haven't killed each other. Another incident of loving wedded bliss. Imagine that."

Chapter 12

Kendall, Florida

Tuesday morning Hugo Bock arrived in Miami, Florida and picked up the rental car reserved under the name he was using and then took an hour and drove around the city. He'd been to Miami a number of times in the past, mostly on jobs, but sometimes for pleasure. He was very familiar with the area and enjoyed being here. Especially when it was just for pleasure. Today, however, this was not the case.

By eleven a.m. he was in Kendall, an affluent community to the southwest of Miami proper. There was a well-connected Haitian who lived there who went by the name of Jean-Pierre. His real name was not Jean-Pierre, and although Hugo did not know his real name, he did know that the Haitian had at one time worked for a brutal crime syndicate that had come out of the bad old days of the small island nation. Not that the days in Haiti were necessarily all that good at the present time. The word on Jean-Pierre was that once upon a time he had been a junior member of the regime of the former *president for life*, Jean-Claude "*Baby Doc*" Duvalier, the brutal and murderous dictator that the U.S. had helped into exile back about twenty years ago. Jean-Pierre had been a member of the counterintelligence and subversion arm of the Interior Ministry and had gained something of a reputation as a brutal and murderous bastard in his own right before the regime was brought down.

Following the ouster of *Baby Doc*, many of his functionaries fled the country, knowing that there would be a lot of people trying to hunt them down to settle old blood debts. Jean-Pierre, like dozens of others, ended up in Miami. And it wasn't long before the former

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captain of the Haitian Interior Ministry for Law and Security began to thrive in the criminal underworld in South Florida, eventually bringing many of his former associates into his burgeoning organization.

Today, Jean-Pierre was a prime dealer in weapons and mercenaries and Hugo had used his services on a number of occasions, always satisfied with the product. So naturally, he returned to this trusted source today. He arrived at the well-guarded compound on Southwest 136th Street just a few miles east of Tamiami Executive Airport, and after undergoing a thorough physical search, Hugo Bock was permitted access. Hugo considered that Jean-Pierre had probably selected his base for its close proximity to the small, unobtrusive airport, no doubt an integral part of the arms dealer's operation. Many locals would probably be surprised to discover the amount of covert activity that took place there. It was rumored that even the CIA had a proprietary facility located at the airport that handled sensitive transport operations for their deniable (black) missions in Latin America. Which Hugo suspected was probably true.

He was led into the study at the back of the first level of the main house by a tall, ebony skinned young man who did not identify himself. Hugo had not seen him before but he knew the type. Probably another refugee from Haiti, too young to have been a part of the *Baby Doc* era, but no doubt a hard man with plenty of blood on his hands like all the rest.

In the years since leaving his native land, Jean-Pierre had become corpulent and just too damn jolly for Hugo's liking. He had also shed any pretense of his former macho persona and surrendered to his previously closeted urges. Oh, he was still seen as quite fierce, ruthless, even bloodthirsty when necessary, but today he was *out and proud*, as seemed to be the phraseology of the day. And he didn't care who knew. He dressed flamboyantly—even Elton John would be

embarrassed to wear some of the outfits Hugo had seen the Haitian put on over the years—and he had an unnerving way of smiling and looking at a person that left them feeling like a sweet dish on a plate. But at least he could deliver the goods he promised, and he didn't require payment *in kind*; thank the universe Hugo thought, remembering not to think the word *god* as he was shown into the study where Jean-Pierre sat behind a large steel desk. Hugo was a committed atheist and trained himself not to use the word *god* ever, unless, of course, describing his hatred and disbelief of anything even remotely religious.

“Heinrich,” Jean-Pierre greeted Hugo fondly, using the name the German assassin was known to him by. “A distinct pleasure to see you again.”

The Haitian did not rise and Hugo had to go over to the desk, lean over, and shake his flabby hand, restraining his impulse to pull away as the man used his other hand to pat the back of his.

“And you as well, Jean-Pierre,” Hugo said with a smile that did not seem as forced as it was. “Thank you for seeing me on such short notice.”

The fat Haitian with four chins was wearing a custom-made long sleeve button-down pink taffeta shirt; open at the collar out of excessive necessity, and a black fedora hat tipped down over his left eye. He smiled and waved a hand in the air.

“You are a valued customer, my friend. There is always time for you. Thank you, Jock,” he said to the tall man who had patted down and escorted Hugo in. The man nodded respectfully, bowed slightly, then turned and left the study, closing the door behind him. He would now post outside the door standing ready to come to his boss' aid should the need arise. This made Hugo smile. If he intended to harm this fat oaf there was no way the man outside the door could prevent it. However, getting out passed all the security in

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the compound would be no mean trick. Luckily, Hugo had no plans to harm Jean-Pierre, at least not this day.

“Sit, please, Heinrich,” Jean-Pierre told him, indicating the comfortable looking leather club chair across from his desk. Only one chair, indicating that he only did business with one customer at a time.

The German sat, crossing his thickly muscled legs under a pair of new designer trousers he’d purchased just yesterday in the Bahamas, getting comfortable, brushing his longer than operationally prudent dark hair away from his face with his left hand.

“What can I do for you today, my friend?” the arms dealer asked, leaning his bulk against the back of the desk. “No doubt you require some of my delightful products.”

“I do,” Hugo said. “A nice package. And I will also require some contract personnel to assist me.”

Jean-Pierre smiled, nodding his jowly head.

“I see. Are you able to tell me where you will need their services? I need to know because there is the consideration of environment you see. For instance, if you were going to be operating here in South Florida, almost any ethnic group would be acceptable, but in certain neighborhoods, some would stand out more than others. But say your operation is in Memphis, Tennessee, a team of Cuban professionals would stand out too easily.”

Hugo nodded, already knowing this, and so he told him where he would be operating, sort of.

Jean-Pierre nodded, making notes on a pad on the desk.

“I see,” he said. “And how soon do you require them?”

Hugo told him this as well.

More notes made.

“And the equipment?”

Hugo provided the list from his memory and Jean-Pierre took this all down. He spent a few minutes calculating things on his pad, then looked up at his customer and smiled a big toothy grin.

“Very good,” he said. “Is there anything else?”

Hugo shook his head.

“Not at the moment,” he told the Haitian, trying not to show the sudden revulsion he felt toward the man when he smiled.

“All right then, my friend. We can do business. I can have what you need within a day. Will you remain in town to take delivery or should I send the products and personnel somewhere else?”

“Actually I’ll be leaving today,” Hugo told him. “I will need you to ship the merchandise to me.”

“Very good,” Jean-Pierre said, still smiling. He glanced down at his pad and then looked back at the German. “That will, of course, include a shipping charge.”

“Of course,” Hugo said. “What is the total, my friend?”

Jean-Pierre told him. Hugo nodded. It wasn’t cheap, but well within the range of acceptable. Besides, the money was coming out of the operational budget set up by his client, not his own pocket.

Hugo stood.

“I am in your debt as always, my friend,” he said with an easy smile, no emotion behind it.

Jean-Pierre did not stand this time either, but he did continue to smile himself.

“As always,” the Haitian said, leaning back in his large leather chair, staring up at his most favorite and valued customer, “your business is greatly appreciated, *meine freund*.”

Now it was time for the part that Hugo hated most. The handshake. Just get it over with he told himself. Once again, he leaned across the desk and took the soft mushy hand, steeling himself as best he could.

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Then the door behind Hugo opened again and the tall, dark skinned Haitian called Jock returned. He escorted Hugo from his master's study and delivered him once again to the front door, saying not a word.

Five minutes later Hugo was driving out of the compound and heading to another appointment he had scheduled in about an hour. This one with someone who was far more pleasing company than the Haitian death dealer. And much more imaginative.

This last thought made Hugo smile, this time with something approaching actual feelings. At least as close as he was capable. Life was good. At least for him. Very soon it would not be so for Debra Kathryn Patterson, or those who had been hired to guard her.

Chapter 13

Chihuahua, Mexico

Don Fabio was a shadow of the man he had been before receiving the news about his oldest son Paulo last week. He ate sparingly, kept away from the young women that usually provided him with the little delights of life that he had grown so accustomed to over the years, and every time Ignacio Riva saw him he seemed to have aged another year. The security boss of *El Sangriento Puño* thought for sure the old man would not last much longer if he did not start taking better care of himself. But no one, not even his remaining son and heir-apparent Raul could do anything to relieve the old man's anguish and sorrow.

Riva had recounted to him how his hired assassins had already hunted down and killed the federal agents and prosecutors who had taken Paulo away from him, and how those in the rival Jamaican gang had also begun to suffer greatly. But still the old man could not be consoled. He accepted the news with a look of grim satisfaction in his once bright and brutal eyes, but there was no joy, no real life behind them.

However, when just a few moments ago Don Fabio had asked about the woman judge who had put his boy in prison, there was a hint of the old steel in his voice, something Riva was glad to hear, and he smiled a little to himself.

"That is proceeding, Don Fabio," Riva spoke. "Very soon she will be in our hands. Next week at the latest."

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The head of *El Sangriento Puño* glanced up from where he sat on the sofa, staring out the large floor-to-ceiling windows at the spectacular landscape of which he owned every bit and piece.

“Why so long, Ignacio?” the voice asked, a weaker tone this time, but the eyes were gathering some strength, and again this pleased the security boss.

“Unfortunately, Don Fabio, because she was no longer a judge it took us a bit longer to locate her. And by the time we did, she had been warned of the other deaths. She has a home in a city called Cross Lanes, West Virginia in the USA. She owns a private law firm there now. In the capital city of Charleston.”

“So now you know where she is, go and get her, dispatch your best men, Ignacio, she must not be allowed to escape justice for what she had done to my dear boy.”

Riva nodded slowly, knowing that it would be nearly impossible to explain the intricacies of what was involved in abducting and secreting Debra Patterson to Mexico to face Don Fabio's *justice*. The old man had never been one to concern himself with the how, he just gave the orders and expected things to happen. It was usually Ignacio Riva who had to be concerned with the how, and it was never easy. Made even more difficult in this instance because the Don did not simply want the woman dead. If that was the case he could easily arrange for a group of *sicarios* to go to her house and hit her, killing anyone and everyone who got in their way, without regard for their own lives either. And in the end of this business, it would probably come to a bloodbath anyhow, but if at all possible the target must remain alive long enough to be brought before the old man to face his rage, to give him the peace and resolution he now desperately sought. All of this required proper planning and an exceptionally skilled operator. Which is why he had sought to hire the German mercenary Hugo Bock. He had done work for various cartels

in Latin America before, although he never knew the true identities of his employers, and preferred it that way. His work had always been first-rate and efficient and Riva was convinced that if anyone could do this job as it needed to be done, then Bock was the man.

But how to tell a grieving father, a man of near infinite power such as Don Fabio, that it was going to take time? Not an easy chore, but Ignacio Riva was a man of many talents. Which is why he had survived so long in his present job.

When Riva left the old man's study a few minutes later, the Don was placated, but still eager for results. He would give his security boss the time required, and then he would personally see to it that the American woman suffered greatly before she died. His one regret was that she had no children of her own, at least not alive. If her daughter had not already preceded her in death then the Don could have had the most delightful pleasure of watching the horror in her mother's eyes as the girl was slowly butchered in front her, just before she died herself.

Sighing and returning to stare out at his property, the brokenhearted lord of drug pushing comforted himself as best he could with the knowledge that soon his revenge would be complete, and Paulo could rest in peace.

This last thought caused a single tear to run down the corner of the old man's left eye. He did not make a move to wipe it away, simply continued to sit and stare, seeing not the landscape, but Paulo as a little boy, a beautiful, smiling little boy with his whole life ahead of him.

And now that life was gone.

The old man was weeping openly now, his rage fueled by sorrow. Soon, he thought. Very soon...

Chapter 14

Hollywood, Florida

Robert Chandler liked South Florida, particularly Broward County. During his earlier life right out of college, and right out of three months of intense training at the headquarters of the CIA's Office of Security, he'd been assigned to the Miami Field Office as a freshman special agent. He actually lived in northern Dade County in a small city called North Miami Beach, just south of the Broward border, but he came north as often as he could to shop and to look at places he wished he could afford to live.

At that time, Alex still had two years of school to complete and she would come down from their hometown of Birmingham, Alabama as often as she could—not often enough for Robert—and they would both spend a good deal of time in the southern cities of Broward County; Fort Lauderdale, Hallandale, and Hollywood in particular.

After about a year of being apart, the strain proving to be more than either of them could have imagined, Alex told Robert that she was moving to Miami. She had already checked and discovered that she could transfer to the University of Miami and have nearly all of her credits accepted, making up what was necessary in summer school. Robert desperately wanted her with him, but he knew how much she had wanted to graduate from the university in Birmingham where they had met. It was important to her and to her family, her mother in particular since she, too, was a fellow alum.

Nevertheless, Alex told him it was not important where she got her degree from—actually *degrees* because she would eventually

go on to obtain several, including a doctorate in jurisprudence—as long as she didn't have to be apart from him any longer. That argument eventually won the day and the decision became final. Telling her parents wasn't easy, especially because they were not yet married. And secretly, Robert knew her parents had always hoped that they would grow apart and Alex would find and marry a more *acceptable* young man. Acceptable to them that is.

The Wells' were not exactly racists—not anymore than the Chandlers—but they were not excited to find out that their only daughter had fallen in love with a black man. Nor were Mr. and Mrs. Chandler to learn that their little boy had fallen for a white woman. Mrs. Chandler less so than Mr. Chandler. Eventually they learned to accept their children's choices, realizing how determined they were, and how much they loved each other. They also knew that it did not matter whether they gave their blessings or not. Alexandra and Robert had decided to be together and they would be together. And they were.

A year later, Alex graduated from the University of Miami with honors and a degree in international relations. She had already applied for a position within the Agency, a task made easier by already having a spouse on the payroll, and a couple of powerful political friends on her side of the family.

Initially, both she and Robert thought Alex would go into the Directorate of Intelligence and become an analyst. Her primary area of expertise in international relations had been Russia and Eastern Europe, and she had a decent command of Russian by the time she graduated. However, in the early 1990s, the Soviet Union was falling apart and relations between east and west seemed to be thawing as the Cold War seemed to be reaching its conclusion. And, if she were truly honest with herself, Alex had begun to lose interest in international politics. She wanted to do something else. Something

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different, even unexpected. And to her, the answer was obvious as to exactly what that unexpected thing should be. Although she was certain Robert would disagree with her decision, Alex decided to apply for the Special Agents' Program in the Office of Security and to try to become a member of the same team as her husband.

For his part, Robert thought it was a great idea. It meant that the chances were better that they would be assigned to the same area of operation, making life much easier for the newly married couple. Two days after her graduation, Robert and Alex were married in a small ceremony with only close friends and family in attendance. They were in Miami anyway for the graduation ceremony and the timing was perfect. Even more so because it was also Alex's twenty-second birthday.

Alex was accepted into the Agency and the Office of Security a few months later. She went through her three months at Headquarters, excelling to the top of her class, and completed training with one of the highest scores ever in threat recognition and analysis and technical security countermeasures. One of the senior instructors remarked at the time that Alex's entry into the Agency was a perfect professional *marriage* because she had scored high in categories that were complementary to the ones where Robert had excelled. His top marks came in close-protection and threat neutralization (a term some joked was a euphemism for killing people). Upon graduation, Alex was assigned to the Miami Field Office, and for the next year and a half she and Robert worked very closely together, primarily handling personnel security investigations and high-threat security operations in Latin America and the Caribbean. Despite one particularly close call Peru, it was one of the best times of their lives together.

Robert remembered all of this fondly on this warm and sunny Tuesday afternoon as he turned his rental car off Interstate 95 and

onto West Hallandale Boulevard in Hollywood, Florida, heading east. It had been more than a year since he and Alex had been here, last time it was for a brief vacation, and that time the man he was coming to see today had also been on vacation, or at least taking a few days leave from his job, along with Ruth, his wife of twelve years.

Howell Vaughn was a man Robert had known for nearly two decades now. Someone he trusted completely with his life, had had it saved in more ways than one on more occasions than he could count when they were both younger and dumber. Howell—Howie—and Robert had met in Agency training back in late 1989 and had formed a fast friendship. Later, when agents in the field, they had teamed up on various assignments that bonded them even more as both men came to depend on the other for their survival under fire.

Howie Vaughn was now forty-three and held the rank of GS-14, a senior special agent with the Office of Security. His present assignment was as Area Security Officer—ASO—for the Miami Station of the Crime and Narcotics Center, that entity of the Agency's Directorate of Operations (recently renamed *National Clandestine Service*) which had primary responsibility for crafting analysis and supporting or conducting operations to counter illicit drug activities, transnational crime, and war crimes that threaten U.S. national security interests.

As Area Security Officer, Howie's job was fairly simply, at least it sounded that way on paper. He handled security for the station. What could be simpler? Well in actuality that job consisted not only of making sure that all of the sites belonging to the station were safe from hostile penetration, either physically or technically, but also that all personnel were adequately protected—made more difficult by their covert status—and that the precious data that was their reason for existing remained secure. The job was a daunting one and not one that many experienced operators in the Office of Security

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sought. Typical duty tours in the Agency were two and a half years now, but most ASO tours were less than eighteen months because of the stress associated with the job. Howie was on his third year as CNC/Miami-ASO, and there was no sign that he had any intention of leaving the job anytime soon. Apparently, the lanky Virginia native had discovered the secret to managing the ASO's job, but evidently he was not sharing it because most others were getting out as soon as their time was up. Not Howie though, and Robert was particularly grateful for that at this moment.

The Cuban restaurant Padrino's on East Hallandale Boulevard is a favorite of many locals and tourists alike. The food is first-class, generous portions for the price, but the atmosphere and interior are very close and familiar. It is not a large place, but always busy, and yet no matter how crowded the place is, one can usually get a table without a long wait.

Last year when Robert and Alex were down for their vacation, Howie and his wife Ruth had brought them to Padrino's and they had a great time. So when Robert had contacted Howie and told him he needed to see him, cryptically explaining the reason, Howie had agreed, but only if Robert treated him to lunch at Padrino's. And so now here he was, parking his rental in a space across the lot from the entrance and getting out, casually glancing around as traffic passed, pedestrians strolled, and life in the sunshine state ticked on at its accelerated pace. Of course, he was also checking for surveillance, hostile or otherwise. A hard habit to break, even after all these years of being away from the Agency. And in the present circumstances, a prudent precaution.

He went into the restaurant and the young Cuban woman who greeted him with a smile was very pretty and very friendly. Robert could feel his wedding band tightening around his finger, just his imagination. He smiled back at the woman and told her was

supposed to meet a friend for lunch, giving Howie's cover name, or at least the one he had chosen for this meeting.

The young woman smiled wider and told him that his friend had already arrived and was waiting for him at a table in the very back. Robert nodded, thinking to himself that of course Howie was at a table in the back. Probably with quick access to the rear exit and with an unobstructed view of most of the restaurant and the entrance, if possible.

The young Cuban woman escorted Robert to the table where his friend sat. Howie Vaughn rose to his full six feet four inches of height with a huge grin on his still youthful looking face, his brown hair starting to thin a bit up front. The two men shook hands warmly, trading the cover names they were using for the sake of the young woman and anyone else who was listening. There was a good-sized crowd in the restaurant today, but the table closest to theirs was empty at the moment.

Robert sat and the young woman told them that their waiter would be over shortly. They waited until she had moved from earshot before speaking again.

"I think I'm seeing a little more gray in that goatee there, son," Howie said, picking up his glass of water and taking a sip.

Robert smirked.

"I wasn't gonna say anything until that comment, but looks like you're getting a little light up above your forehead, my friend."

Howie chuckled, setting his glass down.

"It's good to see you," he said.

"You, too," Robert said. "Alex says hi to you and Ruth."

"Tell her Ruth says the same," the CIA man responded, eyes casually scanning the room for the fourth time since Robert had arrived. "How is Alex by the way?"

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“Smart, beautiful, and as tough as ever,” Robert replied, smiling, his eyes, too, covering the area of the restaurant within his visual range. “And Ruth?”

“Head of Mia-Tech now,” Howie told him.

Robert raised an eyebrow as he reached for the glass of water on his side of the table.

“Well, that means she’s a Fifteen now,” he said.

“Actually she had her Fifteen before this,” Howie said. “Got it about nine months ago. Thought I told you that. Must have told somebody else. Yeah, well anyway they gave her Mia-Tech at the beginning of last month. Two-year commitment. Which means I’m probably gonna be here at least that long.”

“Same slot?” Robert asked.

“Probably not,” he said. “Headquarters is already getting antsy about it. They don’t like to have officers looking idle. Probably try to slot me in as ³SAC/MFO when the current occupant retires at the end of the year.”

“That means you get your Fifteen then,” Robert said.

Howie smiled and took another sip of water.

“Perhaps. But you don’t care about such things as grade promotions now, do you? Head of your own security company, raking in all the big bucks. You and Alex were smart to get out when you did. This place just isn’t the same anymore, not like it was back when we came up. And a lot of the changes are not for the better either. You know, my twenty’s coming up in a couple of years. Might decide to do what you did. Or maybe I’ll come knocking on your door for a job.”

Robert smiled.

“Be glad to have you,” he said. “But is Ruth ready to hang it up? She’s got her twenty in already. And now she’s got Mia-Tech.”

³ Special Agent in Charge/Miami Field Office.

“Yeah,” Howie confided. “And that makes her a shoe-in for getting her SIS⁴, which is all well and good for her. She might even get to head OTS⁵ before it’s over. But I think I’m out of this madhouse in two years. Maybe three at the most.”

Both men were silent for several moments, still checking the room, and then their waiter came over. Neither of them had thought to glance at the menu and quickly did so now. Within a couple of minutes they had placed their orders and the waiter went off to deliver them to the kitchen.

“This thing you’re involved with now,” Howie said once they were alone again, radically changing the subject. “It’s a mess. And a very serious one. Which I’m sure you know. I’ve gone through everything we have on those particular people, including bios on the key players, as well as experienced *technicians* they’ve used in the past. Everything is on the flash drive I handed you when we shook hands. We shouldn’t discuss it here, but I promise you the brief is complete. Alex should be able to glean everything she needs from it. And, of course, if there are any additional questions, don’t hesitate to call. We’ll work something out so you won’t have to keep flying back here. I know you probably want to be closer to where the action is.”

Robert nodded, casually running his right hand across his pants pocket where he had dropped the micro flash drive.

“Thanks, bud,” he said as the waiter returned with their drink orders.

The CIA security man smiled too.

“What are friends for?” he replied, and then in the one foreign language they had in common: “*Und Sie geben verdammtes acht. Diese Mutterbumser spielen nicht durch irgendwelche Richtlinien, nicht sogar ihre Selbst.*”

⁴ Senior Intelligence Service (executive level for intelligence officers).

⁵ Office of Technical Services (CIA’s *Q* Branch).

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Robert nodded grimly, taking up his glass of iced tea, then replied in the same language.

Both men were laughing and talking of other things when the waiter returned with their food. They had a good meal, enjoyed each other's company for a while longer, and then left the restaurant together. Howie Vaughn got back into his government issued Ford, after lighting a cigarette—for he was a desperate chain-smoker and had only barely managed to make it through lunch without having to run outside to fire up a cancer stick—and headed back to Miami to finish out the rest of the work day at his office.

Robert returned to his rental car and made his way back to the airport for his six-fifty flight back to Charleston, Howie's flash drive now safely concealed in a specially designed false compartment inside his wallet. Just a small additional precaution. But it was small precautions like this one that made all the difference when things started going to hell, which was more often than one liked to believe.

Murphy's Law Robert thought, turning off the interstate at the exit ramp for Fort Lauderdale/Hollywood International Airport. Never underestimate Mr. Murphy. He didn't like that, and would take every opportunity to screw you if you didn't screw him first. Or at least take reasonable precautions.

Chapter 15

Cross Lanes, West Virginia

Alex had had a very busy day, and by seven-thirty Tuesday evening she was really feeling exhausted. The good thing was that her client hadn't left her house all day, spent most of her time in her home-office up on the second floor working on chapters for her latest book. The only times she was seen the entire day was when she came down for lunch and dinner, which she prepared herself, making enough for the agents on duty and the two uniformed officers outside. Apparently, in addition to being a brilliant legal scholar, the former federal jurist was also a gourmet cook, and this activity appeared to help take her mind off of some of her other problems. Chief among them, being a murder target for a grieving criminal madman.

Alex, on the other hand, had been in and out of the house in Cross Lanes several times during the day. With Robert gone she had taken over direct command of the detail, but that didn't put any extra responsibility or strain on her. In truth, when he was there she would still command the shift, supervising the agents and making sure that everything ran smoothly. However, at the beginning stage of any operation like the one they were running, it was necessary to establish liaison with local law enforcement. Let them know what was going on, alert them to any possible threats, find out what they knew, if anything, and to let them know that several heavily armed individuals would be operating in their jurisdiction. Usually Robert, as detail leader, handled this liaison. But he was away performing another necessary task, so the duty fell to Alex.

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She was well familiar with many contacts in most of the local police and sheriff's departments and getting in touch and arranging meetings was not a problem. It was just taking the time to drive over to the various departments, waiting until the person she needed to see was free from other meetings, and then patiently taking the time to explain the situation to each of them, followed up by getting any information they had to share. Sometimes the latter part was not exactly easy because some departments had a very strict policy about sharing information with non-law enforcement entities. Usually Robert was able to pry something from them, and Alex had this talent as well. She was aided, of course, by the fact that most of the contacts were male and she was a not unattractive female. Alex was not a woman prone to use her looks to get things that she wanted, not even when they were of vital importance. In fact, most of the time she played down her beauty, rarely wearing anything beyond basic makeup, and still dressing pretty much in the same fashion as she had when she and Robert met. Long skirts or dresses when she wore them—never when working—and comfortable, loose fitting pants and blouses most other times.

Still, she was a woman, and when it came to dealing with most men, especially cops, usually that was all it took. So she had flirted a little, laughed a little, touched a hand or an arm or two, and had walked away at the end of the day with whatever intelligence the cops had to offer.

Then she had a meeting with the local DEA resident, a guy named Regal. He had not really been interested in talking to her, but was ordered to by someone in Washington after a discreet phone call made by Debi Patterson to a friend of hers in the Department of Justice. Alex really didn't learn much more from Regal than she already knew, but the DEA man had grudgingly agreed to keep her in

the loop should anything of relevance to the ex-judge's safety come up.

Alex thanked him, gave him a business card with both her name and number and Robert's on it, then she drove back out to Cross Lanes to check on her team. That had been at six o'clock.

Now at seven thirty-five she was once again in Debi Patterson's living room sitting on one of the sofas, reading glasses perched low on her small nose, leaning forward over the coffee table and reading through her notes. In the kitchen out toward the back, Debi and Andie Pearth were cleaning up the dinner dishes and preparing snacks for the rest of the team if they got hungry later during the night. It seemed that despite her earlier reservations, Debi was becoming comfortable with having the agents at her home. It helped considerably that Andie was one of them. She just had a way with people. Which was one of the key reasons that Alex and Robert had decided to offer her a full-time position with CPS after that initial assignment ended.

Andie was a charming and engaging young woman with an easygoing and humorous manner. Most people took to her instantly, finding it somewhat hard to believe that this friendly and funny mother of two was actually a *bodyguard*, and a former soldier with multiple combat tours in the Middle East under her belt. That was in itself a testament to her skills as an operator because she kept that aspect of her personality pretty well concealed until it was necessary to be—as she often put it herself—*the evil bitch from hell*; or Fresno (Andie's hometown). Very quickly, when *the bitch* came out, all doubts about the fortitude of this young woman instantly evaporated.

Alex heard laughter coming from down the hall as she turned a page over and pushed her glasses back on her nose. Debi and Andie were getting on great, which was exactly what Alex and Robert had hoped for. If Debi felt close to Andie, she would be more apt to listen

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to her and to take her advice, which could prove very usual later on. All a part of the plan, and it seemed to be working beautifully.

Alex sat back and pulled off her glasses, glancing at her watch. If everything had gone as planned, Robert should be airborne and on his way back to West Virginia by now. He had called when she was in her meeting with DEA Agent Regal but she'd turned her phone off so as not to be disturbed. He'd left a cryptic message that told her his meeting with their friend and former colleague Howie Vaughn had gone well and that his plane was on time and he should make it back to Charleston on schedule. He'd call her when he landed at Yeager Airport before driving the less than two miles to their place on Kanawha Boulevard.

Robert's plane was scheduled to arrive at nine-thirty, and by then Alex planned on being at home waiting for him. No doubt they had a lot of things to discuss, and he would be carrying information that would probably be a great help to her in completing their threat profile and assessment. However, first she would take the time to welcome her husband back from his brief departure from her. It was a kind of ritual that they had developed over the years. When one of them went away, no matter for how long or short, when they returned—time permitting—a very special *welcome* was arranged by the one waiting at home.

Usually, they managed to find the time.

Alex was smiling when Andie and Debi walked in.

"How's it going, boss?" Andie asked, holding a mug of coffee in her left hand.

Alex glanced over at her fellow teammate, struck, not for the first time, by the fact that she and the younger woman looked enough alike that they could be sisters.

"Pretty good," she responded. "And for you?"

Andie grinned and took a sip of her coffee.

“Enough of this and half a pack of cigarettes and I’ll have no problems staying up the rest of the night. I was gonna go out and check on Tino and the others, see if he wants to come inside for a while and I’ll sit out in the drive.”

Alex nodded.

“All right. Ray’s gone for the day, too, so you’re the central com.”

Andie nodded, sipping more coffee.

“Roger that,” she said, then waved with her free hand and headed for the front door.

Debi Patterson walked into the living room and sat down on the sofa across the table from Alex. She was wearing jeans and a white button-down blouse this time, looking more relaxed than she probably felt.

“That young woman is amazing,” the client said. “You know she offered to teach me Arabic? She speaks it so fluently. It’s amazing.”

“Andie is something,” Alex agreed. “And she is quite good in Arabic. And French, too.”

“I know a little French,” Debi told her. “Took it in college about a hundred years ago. Do you speak any other languages?”

Alex considered how she should answer that question. She didn’t want to lie, but perhaps letting it be known that she actually spoke seven foreign languages with nearly a master’s level of proficiency in five of them would be too much like bragging. So Alex told her she spoke a couple. French and Italian.

This led to a brief conversation about romantic languages that Alex found a good diversion to the tedious things she had been working on before. By eight o’clock, Debi excused herself to go back upstairs to finish some work in her office. Alex told her that she would be leaving shortly and would see her in the morning.

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Before leaving the room, Debi told her that she should know the final details on Wednesday or Thursday about her trip to Dallas next week. It appeared that this event was a definite go and Debi was determined not to miss it. Also, it was possible that on Thursday she would have to go into Charleston to meet with her publisher, and that, too, could not be put aside.

Alex nodded, making mental notes. She'd talk it over with Robert when he came home. After the *welcome*, of course.

Alex was once again smiling as she packed up her things and left her client's house at eight-fifteen.

Chapter 16

At half past midnight Alex removed her reading glasses once more, glancing to her left and watching Robert as he sat next to her typing away at his laptop. She smiled. He was shirtless and she loved seeing him like that. Her man, all strong and vibrant, and so handsome.

They were sitting with their backs against pillows against the headboard of their bed, notes and flash drives and discs all around them, their laptop computers on their laps. They had already reviewed all the data collected since the start of their current assignment, and were now compiling as complete a threat profile as they could. This was actually Alex's area of expertise, but since Robert was a fairly quick typist, and he was not incompetent in the field of threat analysis, he was helping her. The sooner they were done the sooner they could both get some sleep.

Robert's plane had actually landed twenty minutes early and since he had no checked bags he was actually home by a few minutes past nine-thirty. Alex had been waiting for him in the front room as he opened the door, wearing nothing but her bathrobe and a smile. They barely made it up the stairs before passion and lust overtook them.

All too quickly, however, it was time to get back to work, and after a quick shower, they pulled out their computers and everything else and got down to it. Alex opened and read the files on the flash drive Robert had brought back from Florida while Robert reviewed her notes from the meetings with the cops and the DEA guy, Regal. Once they had both finished, they took some time to discuss

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everything and hash it out, then read it all again, followed by more discussion.

Then Alex took a few minutes of quiet and closed her eyes, allowing her mind to rapidly and thoroughly separate and consolidate everything she had read and been told, then she leaned forward, looked at Robert, and began to lay everything out for him as he took notes. When she was finished they divided up tasks and began to type the profile in silence, both clear on their respective responsibilities.

Robert typed around eighty-five words a minute and made an average of one mistake per ninety seconds. Alex made an average of two mistakes per ninety seconds, but typed an average of one hundred eight words per minute, meaning she completed her work before her husband.

Robert finished the paragraph he was working on and saved the file, then leaned against the two pillows behind his back and sighed deeply, glancing over at his wife, who had been staring at him for a little over a minute.

He smiled back. Alex had on an old blue T-shirt, her long hair hanging freely down around her shoulders and back. Robert loved it when she had her hair down, which was most of the time they were alone together. It got in the way sometimes during work so she most often wore it tied back or put up until after her shift. Robert leaned over and kissed her on the lips.

“I missed you today,” he said.

She grinned and put her hand on his arm.

“You were only gone for a few hours,” she told him. “But I missed you, too. Glad you made it back safely. And with some good info from Howie. He really came through.”

“Yeah,” Robert said, somewhat subdued. “Only thing is, I’m not sure how much this stuff will really help. All it actually tells us is most of the stuff that we already knew. A little bit more up-to-date

material, but not anything that's really going to help us stop an attack on Debi if it comes. Which it probably will."

"I know," Alex said, moving her hand down to his thigh and resting it there. "But every bit of data helps. I'd rather have too much information than too little. One particular piece of good data is the stuff on known hitters the Sandoval cartel has used before. Along with operating profiles, descriptions, and recent photographs in some cases."

"True," Robert admitted. "Only problem is, there are more than twenty of them. And to be honest, there are so many killers in the world these days that none of the ones on that list might be involved."

Alex was silent for a few moments, musing to herself.

"Very true," she said at last. "And you know something, baby."

"What?" he said, turning back to look at her.

"I'm wondering why there hasn't been a move already. The Mexicans drug gangs have not been known for their patience, in the past. And from everything we know about *The Bloody Fist*, foot-dragging is not routine. I mean, they moved on the other targets fairly soon after Sandoval's kid bought it. Why have they not gone after the judge who sentenced him? Seems like they would have hit her first, or shortly after this thing started."

"Been wondering that myself," Robert told her. "Doesn't make a whole lot of sense for her not to be on the list. At the top actually, since she had control of the trial from beginning to end and could have thrown the case out if she wanted, despite objections from Justice. Why haven't they tried to kill her yet? Can't be afraid of us. Not the Mexicans. And they could have gone after her before she hired us, while she was staying at her partner's house."

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“Might have had to do with the fact that she’s not on the bench anymore,” Alex offered.

Robert shook his head.

“Nah,” he said slowly. “It’s not like she’s off the map though. She writes books and articles and gives speeches all over the place. Plus she’s the senior partner of a major civil litigation firm, at least in this state. And she’s listed in the phone book in Cross Lanes. A simple internet search would be all that was required.”

“True,” Alex admitted. “So why not move on her before now? Send in a kill team, get it done. These folks have never been known to care about collateral damage. Especially when acting on orders directly from *el jefe*. His eldest son and first heir was murdered after all. He would want everyone he believed responsible killed quickly and brutally. But so far no move on the judge who sent Paulo away for life.”

“Conclusion?” Robert asked, putting his hand on top of Alex’s and squeezing gently.

Alex considered everything for a few moments, and then slowly nodded, meeting her husband’s gaze.

“They don’t want to kill her,” she said finally. “At least not right away.”

“I think you’re right,” Robert said. “Not right away. I believe the Don wants her to suffer first, and he wants to be there when she dies.”

“So he’s ordered her to be kidnapped?” Alex said.

“I think so,” Robert said. “Only thing that makes sense. You’re right, the standard way the Mexicans operate in these situations is to assemble a team of their hardest killers and send them after a target as soon as it’s located, no regard for civilian casualties, or even their own, as long as the principal target goes down. They haven’t done that this time. Only reason that makes sense is they

want to take her alive. Which doesn't bode well for anybody protecting her. They'll try to take out the bodyguards first then take her. Means in a sense our team will be the primary targets."

"Right," Alex said. "So we might need to alter the profile a little. Prepare to repel a hard hit designed to extract our client rather than kill her. And maybe we ought to accelerate our plan to get her to go into hiding, Robert. Perhaps we should get Andie to step things up a little."

Robert shook his head.

"No," he said. "Debi is not a dumb woman; she'd realize what was going on and flat out refuse. Not dumb, but really stubborn. Picked that up quick when we were interviewing her in Lincoln's office. No, have Andie keep charming her, gaining her trust. If it looks like something is about to happen, I'll exercise the option we already discussed with her. For right now, we just stay ready. I agree with you that the profile should be altered though. And make sure every member of the team keeps their body armor on and their heavier weapons handy."

Alex nodded, raising her hand from Robert's thigh, taking his hand, too, kissing it, and then slipping her glasses back on.

"I'll get started on the revisions," she told him. "You're finished with your part, right?"

Robert nodded, glancing at his computer screen.

"Yeah," he told her.

"Okay," Alex said. "I have the address of the office of Debi's publisher. Might as well get the routes done before we call it a night."

"Sure thing," Robert said, accessing his email file and sending his part of the profile to Alex's computer. "I'll get on it now. After we check in at the house tomorrow, we can go and run the routes. I take it she still has nothing planned for tomorrow?"

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“Nope,” Alex shook her head, now typing once more. “She says she plans to spend another day at home working on her book. Probably why she needs to see the publisher on Thursday.”

“Okay,” Robert said, opening a map program on his computer. “That’ll make protecting her tomorrow a little easier. As long as we don’t have to repel a massive attack. By the way, a thought just occurred to me. Since we’re preparing for a kidnap attempt, maybe we should concentrate on the contractors that have experience in that sort of thing in addition to killing.”

“Good idea,” Alex said, glancing briefly at Robert. “I’ll have the computer search that out through the databases Howie provided while I work on the main revisions. That might just narrow things down a bit. I’ll also set a search through my personal database of professional mercenaries who fit those parameters and see what pops out. See if there are any correlations, and maybe get a friend at Interpol to let us know if any of them have suddenly gone missing from their usual haunts.”

“Sounds good,” Robert said, now studying a map of Charleston. “By the way, what’s that address?”

Alex gave it to him.

After that, both fell silent and went about their respective tasks.

Sleep did not come until well after two in the morning, and did not last nearly as long as either of them would have liked, but some was better than none, and at least when they woke up Wednesday morning, they were in one another’s arms.

Chapter 17

Hugo Bock was in West Virginia now, arriving by plane late Tuesday evening at Yeager Airport, picking up a rental car at the Avis counter, then driving to the hotel that had been arranged for him in St. Albans, a small town about twelve miles west of Charleston proper. The hotel was not the most luxurious the German assassin had ever stayed in, it was called the *Rustic Motel*, but it was adequate for the task. Even so, right now he was really missing Paris, and the Bahamas for that matter. He smiled, remembering the young Dutch girl he had spent a little time with before leaving the island playground a couple of days ago. Early twenties, ash-blond hair...

Hugo used Wednesday to familiarize himself with his environment, driving all around Charleston, South Charleston, and even heading out to Cross Lanes, however he went nowhere near his target's residence. According to the brief he had been given by his client's representative in Nassau, the team of bodyguards that had been hired to protect Debra Patterson was supposed to be very good. Several members of the detail were ex-military, some cops, and the two leaders, a husband and wife team known as Chandler and Wells, were ex-CIA. This did not impress or frighten Hugo, he had spent too much of his life in this dangerous game and was a battle-seasoned pro in his own right, but he was not foolhardy either. No unnecessary risks. Besides, with the data that had been supplied by his client, and it was extensive, he already knew everything he needed to about the target's home, and her office, where he was told she rarely went. At present, Debra Patterson was supposed to be working on a book and

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would spend most of her time at her place in Cross Lanes, which probably pleased her protectors greatly as it was easier to protect a principal in a fixed location with limited access.

The good news for Hugo was that she had refused to go into hiding, despite objections from her bodyguards. If that had happened, getting to her would have been made much harder, if not impossible. But for the moment, he had a good chance of success.

It would have been better if his client had merely wanted the ex-judge dead, then Hugo could simply assemble a team of trained mercs and they'd hit the house, killing everyone inside and anyone who got in the way. Of course, for Hugo's own safety he probably would not participate directly in such an assault, leaving that to the mercenaries who would be well compensated for their risks. No, Hugo was not suicidal either. He knew that such a brazen attack would probably succeed in taking out the target and her bodyguards, but the chances were better than even that a significant number of casualties would be taken by the aggressors, especially given the training and experience of the protection team.

Hugo did not like heavy-handed attacks anyway; he preferred to operate more subtly. A single shot from a rifle a couple thousand yards away, a knife or silenced pistol up close, the occasional remote detonated explosive, and a few times, poison ingested in food or drink.

But those options were not open to him this time, because his client wanted the target kidnapped and then transported out of the country. The final destination was unknown to Hugo, but he was pretty sure he knew where. He did keep up with the news, had heard about the recent spate of deaths of American federal agents and prosecutors. He also knew about the death of the first-born son of the leader of Mexico's *El Sangriento Puño* Cartel, Fabio Paulo Sandoval, the *Don of Death*, as he was known in some circles. A totally ruthless

and vicious man who had clawed his way over a mountain of bodies and blood to the top of the most lucrative criminal enterprise in the world.

Debra Patterson had been a federal judge for almost seven years, and one of the last major cases she presided over was the one against Paulo Sandoval, and she had sent him down for life. Now that life was over. And assuredly the old man wanted revenge, had taken most of it by now, but for the woman who had been ultimately responsible for taking his son from him—at least in the eyes of the Don—he would want to watch her die in person, very slowly and very painfully, and probably by his own hands. Hugo Bock could just imagine what a mess that would be.

But that wasn't his end of things, and actually knowing the identity of his benefactor was not all that important, he had a contract and he would fulfill it, especially for the money he was being paid.

Late Wednesday evening, Hugo was back in his room at the Rustic motel, having dined on a surprisingly adequate meal at a place called the Rivers Edge Restaurant over on Ole Main Road about six miles away from his hotel in St. Albans. He was sitting on the bed, his shoes off, a pillow at his back, working at his laptop computer. Verification of the shipment of his supplies from Jean-Pierre had been emailed to the special disposable account he was using for this mission. The package would arrive on Thursday morning at the location specified, a shipping warehouse nearby arranged for him by his employers. As for the team of operators he had also requested, they would be in Charleston by tomorrow afternoon. Then, if all went according to plan, Hugo hoped to be carrying out his assignment by the weekend and leaving West Virginia for better environs, most probably returning to Europe where he felt more comfortable. And the women were far less inhibited by moral qualms when it came to sex.

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Hugo Bock closed down his computer around eleven and spent a half hour doing sets of pushups and situps, working up a light sweat, then he took a long, hot shower in the small bathroom connected to his sleeping room. After that he climbed in bed naked, his mind blank, and fell into a deep and dreamless sleep.

Chapter 18

Wally Holt had recently turned thirty-three and reflected to himself that at this stage of his life he was fairly comfortable. He was working a job that he truly loved with people he genuinely liked and trusted, and making a decent salary to boot. His personal life could be better, but for the most part, he was a happy man.

Wally was born in Southern California, always an overweight kid, it had followed him into adulthood. And to make matters worse, he wasn't that tall either, just under five-eight. But he was a tough and determined kid, and by the time he reached his early twenties, he had managed to lose enough weight to qualify for the police academy. His record of accomplishment in the academy was not very distinguished, but he graduated, and for the next four years he worked as a patrolman in the small Orange County department of Fountain Valley.

Nothing really exciting ever happened in Fountain Valley though, at least not during any shift Wally had worked, and after a while he became restless. He applied for positions in bigger departments within Orange County and even up in LA, but was turned down flat, which is pretty much what he expected. Nevertheless, the determined kid was now a determined man. So he kept on trying.

Further applications were sent to state and local departments throughout the western states, and even a few federal agencies, most notably the FBI and DEA. Unfortunately for Wally, his luck was not much better there either. He did get a few nibbles, an interview here

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and there, but always the end result was the same, Wallace Keegan Holt was not what they were looking for at that time.

Well the Fountain Valley Police Department was not what Wally Holt was looking for either. At least not after four years of working hard and never receiving any recognition for his efforts. He'd even taken the sergeant's exam and passed, but was told there were not enough slots open at that rank for him to be advanced. The department was just too small. When asked about a transfer into Investigations with a view toward becoming a detective, his lieutenant had smiled patiently and explained to Wally that he should simply content himself with being a patrolman for the rest of his career.

Absolutely the wrong thing to say to Wally Holt at that time in his life. Two weeks later he was a civilian. Unemployed, but happier than he had been in a long time. The problem was he couldn't stay unemployed for too long. His parents weren't doing all that well health-wise and he and his brother and sister had to help them out financially. Wally did not intend to let his siblings carry the burden on their own, so he quickly set out in search of work.

He had some friends in private security and they were able to give him a few jobs on some details they were working, mainly as a guard, but there was also some driving work. It required Wally to get a chauffeur's license and attend a private security drivers' training course at his own expense, but he saw it as a good investment so he used what little savings he had at his disposal and took the classes.

Within a year, he was living in LA full-time and had regular assignments with a decent size outfit that specialized in celebrity security. Because of his growing reputation as a good driver and a smart operator, Wally was frequently requested to drive principal vehicles on details being led by the firm's most seasoned supervisors and project managers. Eventually they sent him off to undergo extensive training in close-protection and advanced tactical driving,

much to Wally's delight. The courses were extremely difficult, and several of his peers did not make it all the way to completion, but Wally did, and once he finished, he returned to LA and found his services in very high demand.

Wally's life was starting to take shape the way he wanted it to at that point. At least as far as work went—he and his girlfriend had just broken up on account of her finding another guy while he was away training—but at least now he was finally comfortable in saying that quitting his job in Fountain Valley had probably been the smartest move he'd ever made. However, as is often the case (see *Mr. Murphy*), that was the moment when life decided to kick him in the teeth and something happened that dealt the fledgling protection agent a severe reverse.

The agency he was working for was sold to a Canadian firm, and within three months, half of the staff had been let go, including Wally. At the time, many of the other local firms were struggling and could not afford to take on so many agents as suddenly found themselves unemployed. There was the occasional contract job here and there, but nothing permanent that would keep the bills under control.

Wally had made some good contacts over the years but he still could not find anything beyond short-term work, and this frustrated him greatly, made him worry, and not just about his own future and needs. There was his family to consider, his mom and dad, his brother and sister, too, because their financial outlooks had taken a hit recently as well. Things were starting to look really dark for Wally, making him reconsider going back to Fountain Valley to beg for his old job back. But that's when life dealt him a leg up.

To this day he still remembered the call he got from the head instructor at the school in West Virginia where he had attended training. Wally had been sitting in the front room of his small

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Monterey Park apartment looking through the want ads online, and wondering how he was going to make the rent for next month. Then, out of the blue, he was offered a two-week job as local driver for a detail coming out of Charleston escorting a doctor who was involved in embryonic stem cell research. Research opposed by many individuals and groups, and as a result, the doctor had been receiving numerous death threats, some rather detailed and graphic. Wally didn't care about that part, threats he could handle, it's why he got paid. And what cheered him up and made him smile all the more was the amount of money Bill Rendale told him he'd be making for the job, more than on any previous assignment. Wally could now make his rent, and still help out his folks.

The job was for CPS, of course, and the detail was headed by Robert Chandler, with Alex Wells as advance agent and shift leader, and Ray Alvarez, Jim Paxon, and Andie Pearth completing the rest of the team. Wally first met Alex when she flew out to conduct the advance, picking her up at LAX. And right away, he knew he was dealing with a serious and professional operator. He was immediately on his best behavior, being as courteous, respectful, and helpful as he could. If this job worked out maybe they'd use him again when other things came up. At least he could hope.

The job ended without incident and Wally had not screwed up in any way that he could see. In fact, at the conclusion, both Robert and Alex had sat down to dinner with him and told him how impressed they had been with his services. They had each written separate letters of recommendation for him and told him that they would be happy to be listed among his references should he be so inclined. Wally was very pleased and thanked them, and then an impulse struck him, something that he would never consider doing after only knowing someone for such a short time, but with Robert

and Alex he felt a kind of kindred closeness, so he threw caution to the wind and went for it.

Wally asked if they would consider hiring him on full-time.

Alex and Robert thought about his question seriously for some time, then told him they would have to get back to him. At that time they were just getting their business going strongly and weren't really sure if they could afford to take on a new full-time agent, but they would give it due consideration. Wally was disappointed, of course, but had no reason to doubt them; he believed them to be honorable people. However, a part of him wasn't sure if he would ever hear from either of them again.

Two months later, Alex flew back to Los Angeles and told Wally that if he was still interested, they now had a position for him. However, he would have to relocate to West Virginia, and at his own expense. Wally did not hesitate for a minute. He really liked living in California, had for all of his life, but he sensed moving to Charleston would be a good change for him at that point in his life, and he was not proven wrong.

Now, nearly eighteen months later, Wally Holt was still on the payroll of CPS, making a steady income, getting regular advanced training free of charge (to him), and getting to do something that really mattered to him. Protect good people from bad people.

As the digital clock on the dash of the Cadillac Escalade he was sitting behind the wheel of advanced one more minute, Wally checked his rearview mirrors, then the street around him as he sat parked out in front of 4229 Fallam Drive in Charleston, approximately twenty-one miles from Judge Patterson's house in Cross Lanes. Actually, with the circuitous route they had taken to get here this morning, it was probably closer to forty-five miles, just to make sure no one was following them, perhaps setting up an ambush somewhere along the way. No predictable patterns, no straight trips

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on interstates, doubling back, going past, taking side streets, then major thoroughfares, all part of the vital survival tool known as countersurveillance, and Wally Holt was by now an accomplished master of this procedure.

It was eleven-fifty a.m. and Wally's stomach was growling. Probably shouldn't have skipped breakfast, but he had some energy bars in the pocket of his blazer. Maybe he'd eat one in another ten minutes or so to keep the hunger at bay because it might be a while before he got to have lunch.

Not much traffic, vehicular or pedestrian, on this quiet street as noon approached on a sunny and warmer Thursday morning. A lot of parked cars though. This was a residential neighborhood, mostly, but several of the houses had been bought and turned into small offices over the years, as had the one Wally was parked in front of. It was owned by the publisher of Debi Patterson's three best-selling books, and hopefully of the fourth.

Parked a couple of car lengths behind him was a dark green Ford Taurus, behind the wheel sat an ever alert Jim Paxon, also checking his mirrors and looking around the neighborhood. At irregular intervals a dark blue Taurus would circle the area, Gerry Conrad at the wheel, exercising his role as perimeter watcher and surveillance detector.

They were in regular contact with Robert and Alex, who were both inside the publishing house with the principal, as well as with Ray Alvarez who was still in Cross Lanes sitting in the command van at the end of Dalewood Drive, watching his monitors and keeping all agents linked through a single secure net.

Wally was reaching into his pocket for one of those energy bars when the shift leader's voice sounded in his earpiece. They were coming out. He'd have to eat later.

The engines of the Escalade and Taurus started simultaneously and Wally glanced to his right, seeing Alex emerge from the front of the house, dressed in a conservative brown pantsuit and a yellow button-down blouse. She also had on her customary aviator shades and her long hair was tied back in a ponytail. For a few moments she stood at the top of the steps on the porch, head slowly moving from side to side as she took in the entire area. She knew that Wally and the others already out there had been doing the same thing for the past two hours, and her actions were not a rebuke of them, but she would be derelict in her duties if she did not take the time to make sure for herself. That was, after all, her job.

Satisfied, she walked down the steps and headed for the rear passenger's door of the Escalade, the principal's car, opening it and then turning to face the house, eyes still searching the perimeter. A quick signal to the detail leader, and a minute later Robert and Debi Patterson were walking out the front door of the house, not exactly running, but moving at a brisk pace. Debi climbed in the back seat and Robert closed the door, then turned and nodded at Alex before climbing in the front passenger's seat next to Wally.

Alex was now in the front passenger's seat of the Taurus operated by Jim Paxon (the follow-up car). She was putting on her seatbelt when the *move out* command came from Robert. In her mind, she imagined that out there somewhere Gerry Conrad would be set up and waiting for them along the preplanned route that they set up yesterday afternoon. His job now was countersurveillance. Find out if anyone was following the detail, report it to the lead, and then take steps to *neutralize* it if so ordered. Gerry was an ex-marine and Alex knew how much he would enjoy that part of his job should the need arise.

As luck (and expert planning) had it, it was not necessary today, and in about ninety minutes the detail and their principal were

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arriving safely at the Cross Lanes residence. Once inside, Debi Patterson announced she was starving and would be preparing a large lunch for everyone, thanks to the grocery shopping Alex and Robert had done on her behalf while they were out running routes Wednesday afternoon.

Everyone ate in turns, and afterwards Debi said she was going upstairs to see about getting a little writing done. Before she went up, however, she turned to Robert and Alex and confirmed to them that she was going to Texas on Sunday afternoon and would be there until Tuesday. There was no room in her voice or expression for compromise, so Robert and Alex simply accepted what she said and waited until she had disappeared up the stairs before looking at each other and shaking their heads.

“Perfect,” Robert mumbled, walking into the now very familiar living room with his wife and partner.

“Yeah,” Alex said, moving over to one of the sofas and sitting down. “But we knew it was likely.”

Robert sat down next to her.

“Right,” he said. “And now I suppose we have to deal with it. Saturday you and Jim are heading to Dallas then.”

Alex nodded.

“All right. I’ll get all the particulars from her in a bit and then start looking online at the hotel and any other venues she plans to visit while there. That’s the good thing about computers and the internet these days; you can almost do all of your advance work without ever leaving home.”

“Not necessarily the best of developments,” Robert—a man, who despite his familiarity with it, was not the biggest fan of technology—said with a wry grin. “By the way, how’s that list of hostiles coming?”

“Oh yeah,” Alex said, reaching for the black shoulder bag on the floor next to the sofa. It contained, among other things, her laptop computer. “Got it narrowed down to six strong possibilities. Although that still doesn’t mean it has to be anyone of them.”

Robert waited until she booted up her computer, typed in her password, then accessed the relevant file. He leaned over and glanced at the screen.

“Giovanni Lupara, Italian. Viktor Zokass, Ukrainian. Enrique de le Main, Spanish. Henri Jocal, French, Hugo Bock, German. And Richard Klug, American.” Robert paused and frowned. “Richard Klug? Isn’t he the guy who shot Billy in Cartagena four years ago?”

Alex nodded dourly.

“Yeah,” she said. “And ever since, he’s never returned to this hemisphere. Works mostly in Europe and the Middle East. But I figure for the kind of money the cartel has to be offering, he’s worth considering. Plus my Interpol contact tells me that Klug hasn’t been seen in his usual haunts in the Mediterranean for more than a week. Usual pattern when he gets a job.”

“Could be that somebody finally put a bullet in his miserable head,” Robert offered.

Alex nodded slowly.

“That’s always possible, too,” she admitted. “My money would be on Billy if that were the case. And I would not blame him one bit.”

“Right,” Robert said. “Let’s open their files and have a look.”

So that is just what they spent the next few hours doing.

Chapter 19

Ray Alvarez grunted as he shifted uncomfortably in his chair in the back of the mobile command post van. It was parked two hundred yards down the road from the Patterson house at the end of the street in front of an empty lot of land that was apparently a local dumpsite. Bags of trash and loose debris were scattered about almost everywhere. Not as much as in some places Ray had seen during his time in back of this van on other assignments, but still odd for such an otherwise nice neighborhood.

The mobile command post had every modern toy of electronic surveillance and communications an operator could want. Robert and Alex had agreed that it was necessary to stay technically current, no matter the cost, and while Robert only understood the functions of about half the gizmos and thingamabobs in the van, he knew that both Ray and Alex were the experts on all of them. So he left the operation and overseeing of the equipment in their capable hands.

Ray had just completed a radio check with all posts after coming back from a bathroom break, relieved by Wally Holt. It was now five in the evening and he was conducting a sweep of the property with the cameras he'd placed a few days ago, pleased that everything seemed to be functioning normally. His boards showed that the motion detectors he'd put around the deeper perimeter behind the house were also functioning as they should, along with a few other augmented security devices of his own special design. The uniformed guards had been given specific instructions about not venturing into certain parts of the rear of the property outside the

fence, and thus far they had heeded those instructions. Which was good for their continued health.

Ray eased his headphones part way off his ears and stretched his arms above his head, yawning and groaning a little.

He was forty-two now, about twenty pounds overweight, and sitting around all day was really not good for him. Stiff legs, stiff back, and an ever-increasing gut that his wife was always on him to do something about. But he never really had the time. Lately he always seemed to be working long hours, which didn't bother him because that meant good pay—and his wife liked that—but it left him little time to really take care of himself and exercise. Of course, in truth, over the last decade since he'd left the Federal Bureau of Prisons, Ray Alvarez hadn't felt much like exercising. Had pretty much let himself go on the physical side.

For years as he labored long hours in one federal prison after another, the Texas native had been working steadily on a degree in computer graphics design and had hopes of breaking into that field full-time one day. He spent every spare dime he could afford on upgrading his computer whenever possible, and his cameras too because he was a very good and highly skilled photographer as well. When he wasn't working in the prisons or working on his degree, he made extra money taking wedding, graduation, and special occasion photographs. This took up a lot of his time, and cost a lot of money in the beginning to get started, having to buy all sorts of cameras and other equipment, but eventually the sideline started to present lucrative results. He was able to keep up with the bills from his family—wife plus four kids—and pay for his school courses, and still have enough left over to upgrade his equipment every now and then.

Work in the prison system started to take off for him as well. A transfer to the federal prison outside Richmond, Virginia had meant a promotion to lieutenant and a significant increase in pay. The only

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problem was that his wife and family were happy where they were at the time, Marion, Illinois, and they did not want to leave. However, because of the opportunity and the money, Ray and his wife decided it would be okay if he moved to Richmond and took the job. It was the best thing for the family. Ray hated doing it but in the end knew it was the right thing, so he went to Richmond alone and assumed the duties of shift supervising lieutenant in the prison's maximum-security wing.

He was still able to keep up with his classes because everything was conducted online, and in Richmond he found photography work on the side so he was able to continue earning additional funds, saving that for his personal needs while sending most of his salary back to his wife in Marion. It was not the happiest time of Ray's life because despite all of their problems—stemming mainly from the fact that *they* got pregnant and married way too young—he really loved his wife and missed being with his family. However, he comforted himself by understanding that the sacrifices he was making were in order to give his family better opportunities in the future. Which would be good for everyone, or at least that's what he hoped.

Then Ray was injured.

A riot staged by one of the most vicious Aryan gangs in the prison resulted in three days of unrest in which several officers were critically injured and ten prisoners were left dead. Ray had been supervising the transfer of a sick inmate to the infirmary because his sergeant had called in sick that day, and then all hell had broken loose and for a while, it looked as if the inmates might actually take over the prison. For more than a day, he and a squad of officers had been holed up in the infirmary with the medical staff and seven inmates who were actually sick. At one point, the perimeter was breached and during the resulting hand-to-hand combat, Ray's right leg was broken

in three places. Had it not been for the fact that he was in the infirmary with a doctor and two nurses, he might have lost the leg due to the severity of the damage. They managed to get it set and immobilized, and ten hours later a heavily armored Special Response Team (SRT) managed to fight their way in to rescue and evacuate the infirmary without any further loss of life.

Ray spent the next six months recovering, going through grueling rehabilitation several times a week, and eventually he made a near full recovery. He would always walk with a slight limp, made even more pronounced when he was tired, or sat, or stood for too long a period of time. Two things that were common occurrences in his current job.

Mr. Alvarez kicked out his right leg and massaged his thigh, thinking back to the riot, remembering how scared he was that he would never see his wife or children again. That's when he knew that he would have to leave the prison system. He could never again put himself in a situation like that. Which, when he considered what he was doing now, it seemed kind of ironic. Here he was working as a bodyguard for a woman who had pissed off the head of the most ruthless gang of thugs in the world. This thought actually made him smile for some unfathomable reason. Actually what made him smile was thinking about the circumstances under which he had come to work for Robert Chandler and Alex Wells in the first place.

After recovering from his injuries, Ray had informed his captain that he was giving his month's notice before leaving the Bureau of Prisons. This had taken the captain by surprise and he did everything in his power to try to convince Ray to rethink his decision, but Ray had been adamant, his mind already made up. His wife knew and approved the decision, and was quite glad that her husband had made it on his own. Truth was she had never been happy with his choice of professions, but it was a job and paid well, giving their

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family the stability it required. But the danger was something that Elena Alvarez had never been comfortable with, so when her husband told her he wanted to leave the job she was elated, even if it meant a temporary loss of the much-needed income. Ray was smart and had many talents, and Elena knew it would not be long before he found another job. Perhaps as a photographer because he was quite good, or maybe even in the graphics field. His degree was nearly complete and there were probably openings somewhere, he just had to find one. The family would be fine. Much better than they would have been if something had happened to the head of their family.

Well Ray's photography skills did earn him his next job; it just wasn't what he would have thought. No weddings or graduations or special events. Not unless you consider photographing a cheating husband or wife as a special event. A friend of his who had left the prison system a few years earlier was working as a private investigator in Springfield and he told Ray he could use some help in the area of photographic surveillance, if Ray was interested. Ray really wasn't, but with the bills beginning to pile up, he didn't feel he had much choice. Something to do for a little while until he got on his feet. The work wasn't really all that hard, just had to make sure not to get spotted or caught. A few close calls every now and then, but he always managed to deliver quality product and the clients were always happy. Well, as happy as they could be once their suspicions about their faithless spouses were confirmed in glossy, high-resolution prints.

The money was good and the work was steady, but Ray was definitely not having a good time doing it. He was nearly finished with his degree but thus far had been unable to find a job in the graphics field. His wife told him he'd just have to continue to try while he worked for the PI, and he knew she was right.

A year passed. Then one day the PI he was working for told him he had a contract job working for a couple of bodyguards from

West Virginia. They were going to be in Springfield escorting some civil rights activist who had pissed off some *good ole' boys* in Georgia a month before, and since then had received several nasty threats of violent death. They wanted local backup and had requested the services of a competent photographer to take pictures of the crowds that would be gathered at the speaker's venues. They needed high quality photographs because it was believed that the client was being stalked, and if they could spot a familiar face or two in the crowd, then they would be one step closer to identifying the threat to their client. Ray agreed to the job and that was how he met Robert and Alex.

So impressed were they with the quality of his work, they asked if he would accompany them to their next stop which was in Texas. Ray's PI friend was a little disappointed because no offer was extended to him, but he told Ray he should take the job if he wanted, and he did. He kind of liked the husband and wife bodyguard duo, admired their professional and personal relationships, and he'd get a free trip back to his home state out of the deal.

The job ended after a month and Ray had made a considerable amount of money, able for the first time in a while to get ahead of the family bills. He had enjoyed his time working for Robert and Alex and found that he enjoyed the work itself, thinking that maybe he might like to do more of it. And three weeks later Alex called him and offered another contract, which he accepted without hesitation.

Nearly three years later, here he sat, his degree in computer graphics obtained but gathering dust on the wall in his den at home, and he was a senior agent and technical support manager for Centurion Protective Services, Inc. He managed to convince his wife to move to Charleston about nine months after getting on full-time status. Elena had flown in for a long weekend and had fallen in love with the city. Ray had already found a house in South Charleston that

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he wanted to buy and was pleased to discover his wife loved it too. Within a month, they were signing papers and moving the family to in state. The rest was history.

Ray smiled again and reached back, adjusting the compact Glock-19 9mm pistol on his belt. He'd like to have taken it off but that was against standing orders, and Alex would literally kick his ass for violating them. This was an Omega Level Threat. That meant all agents were armed at all times when on shift, no matter how remote or secure they thought their post was. And they had their body armor on. Which was why he also wore the lightweight but ultra durable *Ready-Shield* vest under his shirt. Despite his gut, the design ensured a comfortable fit, so he didn't complain too much about having to wear it. Besides, if the cartel's boys showed up he'd probably be glad he was wearing it; and having the Glock close at hand. Not to mention the FN P90 5.7X28 caliber submachine gun mounted under the table where he sat, and the 12 gauge automatic shotgun on the floor next to the door.

Ray was about to cover his mouth and yawn when he saw a car on one of the monitors. The camera that displayed that view was the one he had managed to plant on a light pole almost directly across from Debi's house. He hit a button on his control panel and the camera instantly zoomed in, the picture clear and resolute on the monitor, and Ray relaxed.

The person behind the wheel of the car was familiar and welcome. Nyla Taylor, Director of Operations for Trenton Security Services, the company providing the uniformed guards for round-the-clock perimeter security. She was not alone, but the young man who sat in the passenger's seat beside her was wearing a company uniform.

Ray slipped his headset all the way back on and signaled the shift leader, letting her know of the approach of Nyla Taylor plus one.

Alex acknowledged the signal and thanked him.

Ray sat back and watched his monitors, adjusting the view of another one as Nyla parked on the street out in front of the house, right in front of the green Taurus that Jim Paxon was presently occupying. When Nyla got out she smiled and waved at Jim, who returned her wave. Ray smiled, too, zooming the camera in just a bit more. Nyla Taylor was quite an attractive mature woman, and although Ray would never seriously consider cheating on his wife, if he were ever going to, the Director of Operations at TSS would be among his first choices.

The young man in the Trenton uniform remained in the car as Nyla made her way to the front door of the house, but Ray's attention was not really on him, more focused on the nice round backside of the woman of whom he would never have carnal knowledge.

"Ah well," he sighed, leaning back in his chair. "A man can dream..."

Chapter 20

Alex opened the front door to Debi's house to admit Nyla Taylor, greeting her warmly and escorting her into the living room where Robert leaned over the coffee table zipping up his wife's laptop bag. Nyla grinned and whistled as he stood and turned.

"Your wife's a lucky woman," said the head of operations for the second largest uniformed security service in the state, and the best when it came to high-threat perimeter protection.

Robert smirked and walked over to her and they embraced, Alex standing off to the side and smirking at her husband.

"Not too tight, Nyla," Robert said. "Or Alex might shoot us both."

She squeezed him harder before letting go and looking back over her shoulder at Alex.

"Might be worth dying for, hon," she said.

Alex mockingly rolled her eyes and walked over to the table.

"I'd only cripple the both of you," she said. "Probably you more severely, Nyla; just as a warning to any other hussy out there who might want to make a move on *my* property."

They were all still laughing a few moments later when Wally Holt came from the back of the house, having just stopped inside for a bathroom break. He waved and kept on going out the front door. Robert, Alex, and Nyla sat, all three on the same sofa, Alex in the middle between them, just because.

"So how's it going," Nyla asked, crossing her long legs and smoothing out the crease in her designer trousers. She may have

worked in a tough business and was very tough in her own right, but Nyla Taylor was always the height of fashion. Robert and Alex didn't know how much her salary was at TSS, but whatever it was, most had to go into her wardrobe. She was always immaculate and trendy. Today being no exception.

"It's been going fine," Robert told her. "Your people have been on the ball and we have no complaints. Once again you have sent us nothing but the best."

Nyla smiled and brushed back a strand of her thick dark curly hair with her right hand. Alex knew her to be close to fifty, but she behaved like a much younger woman, and still managed to exude the authority and confidence of her position. For the most part Alex liked her, but she still had to watch her where Robert was concerned. Not that she had any doubts about her husband, she knew he loved her and trusted him implicitly, but Nyla was a different story. Everything about her manner suggested a predator mentality. She liked to hunt, capture, and collect. In her case, the primary target was men. No doubt, if a situation ever availed itself, she would take a shot at capturing Robert. She wouldn't get him, of course, but that wasn't the point. He was Alex's husband. Period!

"That's good to hear," Nyla said, looking past Alex at Robert. "I know how serious the threat is to the client, that's why I'm taking a direct interest in the operation. As a matter of fact, I brought a young man with me—he's out in the car right now going over the duty roster—who's going to be taking over as nighttime patrol supervisor. His name is Jeremy Butler, and you shouldn't let his age fool you. He is in his early twenties, but he's got five years experience in the Marine Corps, and he's really sharp, knows his stuff."

Alex silently wondered if she was sleeping with him. Nyla had a son in his twenties as well, but that probably wouldn't stop her.

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“I wanted to bring him out so he could have a look around before it got dark, introduce him to your people,” she continued, now looking at Alex. “And the two of you. He’ll be coming on at ten each night and working till eight. Ten hours, with overlap between night and morning shifts on the static posts.”

“Okay,” Alex said. “And we should tell you now that this weekend, starting Sunday, we’ll all be gone. The client has to go to Dallas—and please keep that information close. We’ll be back on Tuesday.”

“All right,” Nyla said, pulling a notepad and pen from the breast pocket of her suit jacket. “And I assume you want me to maintain coverage of the house?”

“Correct,” Alex told her, glancing over at Robert before continuing. “We want to make sure there are no nasty surprises when we get back. And while we’re gone, Nyla, you need to make sure your people stay sharp. This would be the perfect time for somebody to try and move against the house, infiltrate it and lie in wait. That might mean harming your people. Particularly those who would be on shift the day we returned. Which is another reason why we need to keep specific details about the trip secret. Can’t do anything about them knowing when we leave, especially if they’re watching, but we can keep our return date and time quiet.”

“I understand,” Nyla said, closing her notebook. “I’ll be discreet. Anything else you need from me or my people?”

Alex glanced over at Robert one more time and he was looking up at the ceiling, his eyes moving back forth as he thought.

“Right now I can’t think of anything,” Robert finally said. “We appear to have it all in hand. Thank you for everything thus far.”

Nyla smiled and put her notebook and pen away, glancing at her watch.

“I’d better go get Jeremy now and bring him inside for a quick meet,” she said, standing. “Then we need to go because I have a date tonight.”

Alex and Robert stood as well, Alex wondering if the date she had was with young Jeremy, but she kept this to herself, watching as the other woman walked out of the living room and headed for the front door.

Alex turned to Robert and looked up into his eyes.

“You seemed to enjoy that hug, Mr. Chandler,” she chided gently.

Robert grinned.

“I was being polite, love,” he said, reaching out and taking her hands in his. “And I know you’re not jealous of Nyla Taylor. You have no reason to be. Her butt’s too big for my tastes.”

Alex snickered and moved a step closer to him, glancing around to make sure no one was coming.

“Yeah,” she said in a whisper. “You like them small and tight... like mine.”

Robert was grinning when he leaned down and kissed his wife’s lips.

“Exactly right,” he said.

Nyla came back in the house a couple of minutes later with Jeremy Butler in tow, the picture of security perfection in a dark blue TSS uniform, complete with sergeant’s chevrons at his collar, and a Beretta nine millimeter pistol holstered at his right side. Introductions were made, followed by a little small talk. Jim Paxon came in to use the bathroom and was introduced to Butler before going off to do his business.

By six o’clock, Nyla and her young subordinate—who looked a lot younger than his twenty-four years—had departed and the day shift was fast winding down. Alex went up to check with Debi, getting

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all the information she had on the trip to Dallas, then she came back down to the living room and she and Robert went through it.

Night shift came on duty at seven, Tino Vega taking over the watch out front in the Taurus that was now backed into the driveway, the second Taurus and the Escalade now moved around back behind the garage, in which was parked Debi Patterson's personal vehicle, something she would not be requiring the use of until her protection detail ended. Whenever that would be.

Andie Pearth was in the living room receiving a briefing from Alex when Wally, Jim, and Gerry came in for change of shift. Robert took them to the side and went over a few details, and once Alex finished with Andie, she spoke to them for a few minutes, then dismissed them for the evening. Then she called Ray Alvarez on the communicator and told him to switch monitoring controls to the small setup he'd installed in the far corner of the living room and he, too, could call it a day after that.

Andie checked the monitoring system once the switch over had been done and verified that everything was in working order.

"Outstanding," Alex said, stifling a yawn. "Then I guess day shift is officially over. Andie, are you and Tino set for the night?"

The other woman walked over to where her bosses stood, nodding as she covered a yawn of her own.

"Yeah. We got snacks and all. Plus I'm sure Debi'll be down in a bit and we'll make dinner."

Alex stared at her for a moment.

"How's that going?" she asked in a quiet tone.

Andie glanced past her and looked out into the hallway for a quick second.

"Good," she told Alex. "I think she's starting to trust me a lot. Telling me little personal things. Even some things about her

daughter. Things I don't think she's really talked about with anyone since she died."

Alex nodded, glancing over at Robert.

"Okay," she told her. "Keep it up. As bad as this sounds, we might need to use that trust at some point in the future."

Andie smiled, nodding.

"Yeah," she said. "I know. A dirty job but it has to be done. Almost like I ended up working for the CIA after all."

Alex inclined her head and Robert uttered a half-hearted chuckle, glancing at his watch.

"Almost like," Robert said. "Anyway, we're going to go now. You and Tino have the show. Any problems—don't call us."

Andie grinned.

"Right," she said. "Just for that I'm gonna call you every five minutes when I hear the wind blowing too loud."

They said good night, leaving Andie to secure the house, then stopped by and spoke to Tino for a few minutes, waving to Ray as he drove by in the command van, heading home.

Next, they climbed into their SUV, parked just across the street, Alex at the wheel.

"You feel like stopping for dinner before we go home?" Robert asked, putting on his seatbelt.

"Did you have some place specific in mind?" Alex asked, slipping the gear selector into drive and checking her mirrors.

"How about Italian?" he suggested.

"Sounds good," Alex said, easing her foot off the brake. "And I know just the place you want to go."

Robert sat back in his seat, smiling smugly, knowing full well his wife was right. They knew each other so well.

Chapter 21

Late Thursday evening Hugo Bock was in the warehouse in South Charleston that had been provided by his benefactors. There he met with the leader of the team of mercenaries the flamboyant Jean-Pierre had arranged for him. The man seemed professional, capable and confident, and not overly arrogant. He also seemed comfortable with taking orders from Hugo, his ego firmly in check. This would make their working relationship more manageable if they didn't start out in a dick measuring contest.

He was American, obviously ex-military, probably Special Forces like Hugo himself, and probably loved killing as much as he did, too. Otherwise he'd be in another line of business.

The merc leader informed Hugo that the rest of his team was in town and keeping a low profile at their respective hotels around the area, waiting for a signal from him to assemble. He assured Hugo that each man was a top professional with years of experience and that he had worked with all of them before. Hugo accepted the man at his word, but he still wanted to meet the team before the mission's final phase was put in motion, just to make sure for himself.

The only problem was time, there wasn't much of it, not if he intended to maintain his original timetable, and his employer was getting pushy, insisting that Hugo move sooner rather than later. He didn't like that, but they were paying him a lot of money. Still...

Then, as the mercenary leader and the German killer were checking out the weapons and explosives that Jean-Pierre had sent, Hugo's secure cell phone rang. He excused himself, moved to the

other end of the warehouse, and took the call. It only lasted sixty-three seconds, but when Hugo returned to the merc commander, he was in deep contemplation. The other man was checking the breach of a silenced submachine gun and casually looked over at the German, waiting.

Finally, Hugo looked at him, a decision made.

“Change of plans, Logan,” he said. “Seems our target is going to Texas this weekend, Dallas to be precise. That means she’ll be away from a hardened environment, more vulnerable. I think we’re going to adjust our plans accordingly.”

Logan put the SMG down on the table.

“You want to do it in Dallas then,” he said. “Do you have the details of the target’s movement?”

“Being emailed to me as we speak,” Hugo confirmed. “We’ll go over that in a minute. First, get half of your team to Dallas right now. By the time they land we’ll have instructions for them.”

Logan nodded, reaching for his own cell phone.

Hugo leaned back against a table that contained an assortment of pistols and assault weapons, the beginnings of a secondary plan forming in the recesses of his mind. Part of him just wanted to stick to his original scheme, but the risks of failure were just too great. Of course, he could simply move the attack to coincide with the target’s departure from her house enroute to the airport. The problem there was her protection detail would be on full alert and expecting something to happen. There would be heightened precautions taken, perhaps even the assistance of local law enforcement.

No, it was best to wait until Dallas. The home-court advantage would be gone and they would not have the same support mechanisms they enjoyed now. And to be honest, Dallas had more airports and other routes of escape than Charleston. The only

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difficulty was he would have to change the point of extraction in order to get his target out of the country quickly once she was taken. No real problem there, though. Hugo knew Dallas fairly well, had operated there nearly a half dozen times before. He could arrange something on short notice.

The mercenary leader, Logan, finished his phone conversation and turned back to Hugo Bock.

“Five of my operators will be out on the next available flight,” he announced. “Probably won’t be till early morning though, considering Yeager is a small airport.”

Hugo nodded, glancing at his watch.

“Yes,” he said. “That will have to do. Let’s check my email and see what we have. We also need to arrange to have our weapons and other equipment transported to Dallas. I’ll arrange a charter. That way we can go with the weapons.”

Logan simply nodded, following the German down to the other end of the warehouse where his laptop was set up on a small wooden worktable. Hugo sat down in a rickety chair and raised the screen of his computer, pressing the ON button and bringing the machine out of sleep mode. He entered his password then accessed the email icon, typing in another password once the screen came up.

He *had* mail.

Opening the file using the decryption code that he had been given by his employer’s emissary in the Bahamas, Hugo Bock leaned forward and began to read, the tall, sandy haired mercenary leader leaning over his shoulder and reading along with him.

Chapter 22

Tino Vega shifted uncomfortably in the front seat of the dark blue Ford Taurus parked in the driveway of Debi Patterson's house in Cross Lanes. His back was acting up again and all this sitting around wasn't helping. He would have gotten out and walked around a bit, but it started raining about an hour ago and showed no signs of lightening up any time soon. In another thirty minutes, Andie Pearth would come out to relieve him and he'd go inside for an hour. It was midnight now, Friday, almost at the end of the first week of an assignment that promised to be quite long, and most probably very dangerous.

Tino sipped some of the lukewarm coffee that was the last of the thermos he'd brought with him. Not very good, but full of the caffeine he desperately needed right now. There was no way that he could afford to fall asleep. Not on this job of all jobs. And, as he reminded himself, he had only worked at CPS for six months now and was still on probation. It would be good to at least make it through probationary status before getting careless and killed on the job.

Tino was twenty-seven, married two years, and the father of a one-year-old baby boy who was the light of his father's heart. Tino smiled, thinking of his little boy tucked safely into his crib at home, not a care or worry in the world. And Gina, his wife, beautiful, strong, and ten times smarter than her husband would ever be. She was a Kanawha County school teacher. A nice, safe—most times—profession where she could do something she really believed in. Gina loved kids, was already hinting to Tino that she would like to have

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another in the not too distant future. She was a good mother, and a good teacher, and Tino loved her with everything in him. And they loved their son. The only thing they really disagreed on was Tino's choice of professions. Gina really hated what her husband did for a living, and at every possible opportunity she let him know this.

When they had met five years ago, Tino had been in the Coast Guard, assigned to a little known outfit called the *Maritime Safety and Security Team*. It was a highly sensitive and small unit, known only to very few who were not directly involved in its activities. And those activities involved, among other things, providing discreet protective services to highly classified sites from which the U.S. government conducted top secret research and testing of experimental systems that were being developed for future deployment by American military forces in combat overseas and coastal defense at home. Gina had known Tino was in the Coast Guard, that was no secret, but she believed he had an ordinary job somewhere in Personnel. As time went on, she began to suspect that his work involved more than he had initially let on, and one day when she had come over to his place to surprise him with breakfast before both had to go to work, she felt the gun underneath his jacket when she hugged him.

At first Tino had tried to play it off, pretended that the weapon was no big deal, it was time for him to qualify at the range again, he said. Even personnel people had to do that from time to time. But Gina could tell he was lying, and she demanded the truth.

Of course the truth was the one thing that he could not tell her, and not because he didn't trust her. He did, implicitly. However, Title 18 of the U.S. Criminal Code kept coming to his mind. In particular, sections 793, 794, and 798. Chapter Thirty-Six, if he remembered correctly. He was never that sure about the chapter number, but he knew the sections. They dealt with the specific

penalties for espionage and the unlawful dissemination of classified information. In other words, had he told Gina the exact truth, he'd have been guilty of several federal crimes and would still be in prison today. So he lied, mainly by omission and obfuscation, telling her a fairly convincing story, which she seemed to accept. After all, the U.S. was then at the beginning stages of its [now] unceasing *War on Terror* and the U.S. Coast Guard was at the forefront of that effort at home. Tino let Gina know that some of the work he was involved with required that he be armed, just as a precaution. Sometimes he was charged with the transportation of sensitive materials and his superiors wanted to make sure he had the means to protect himself should the need arise. Not entirely a lie and personal calamity avoided. For the most part.

Then, as was to be expected, Gina wanted to get married, and Tino had no serious objections, he loved her after all, and had stopped seeing all other women on the side after they'd been together about a year or so. The only thing was, he just couldn't see staying in the Coast Guard and trying to start a family, something he knew Gina really wanted. And besides, staying in the Guard meant traveling a lot. Permanent assignments, temporary duty, and in his particular area of specialization, he could be away from home for a very long period of time. Gina would not like that, and neither would he.

So when his second tour—two years this time—ended, Tino requested to muster out. There was a massive effort by his superiors to get him to stay on because of what was then going on in the world, and even a hint of a possible move to retain his services against his will because of his skill set⁶. However, in the end Tino got his freedom. Still, he did remain in the Reserve, which pleased not just his superiors. In truth, Tino loved being in the Coast Guard, and if he had not met Gina he might have made it a full-time career. But he

⁶ Commonly referred to as the *Stop-Loss* policy.

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had met Gina, and he never regretted that or leaving the service to be with her. And next came their son, Jorge.

They had been living in Maryland at the time, and when they got married that's where they decided to stay. Gina was working part-time as a substitute teacher at a local elementary school and Tino got a job working as a cab driver, intent on going back to school and pursuing a degree in business, mostly at Gina's urging. Life was not as good as it could have been, but they were together, and that was the important thing.

Before they reached the end of their first year as husband and wife, Gina announced she was pregnant. Both of them were completely happy, but a little frightened as well. They wanted a family desperately, dreamed of nothing but, however they knew their financial resources were limited, and only becoming more so with Tino's school bills. That was rectified at once by Tino deciding to drop out, despite his wife's protests. He told her that he could always go back later, once they were in a better financial position, and once they knew they could take care of their child.

Because of the impending increase in expenses, Tino started taking part-time work to make some extra money. He obtained a chauffeur's license and drove VIPs for a few clients from time to time when they came to town. Then one day a client asked if he might be interested in doing some bodyguard work, for pretty good money. Tino knew Gina would object, quite vociferously, so he didn't tell her, and started working as a bodyguard on the side, too.

A short time later, Jorge Tino Hernandez-Vega was born. Tino had never known he could love someone so much as he loved his newborn son, but he did, and he wanted to make sure that his boy had everything in life. The best of everything, no matter what his father had to do (legally, of course) to make it happen. The bodyguard jobs started coming in more regularly and so did the money, and that

started making Gina suspicious again, so she started snooping, and found his gun, a gun she did not even know he owned, and his security license.

A rip-roaring, full-blown fight ensued, lasting about a week. Gina wasn't nearly so mad as she was afraid for her husband, but she let her anger get the best of her and she did have a notorious Latin temper, which, oddly, was one of the things that had attracted Tino to her in the first place. Patiently, and respectfully, over the course of that week, Tino took his wife's wrath, knowing that he deserved it, and in the end he calmly explained to her exactly why he was not going to stop doing what he was doing. It was just too important to the family's stability right then. And despite her anger, she loved him even more. Still, she wanted to strangle him for deceiving her, and told him quite candidly that if he ever kept anything like this from her again, he was going to suffer the loss of his testicles by way of a very rusty paring knife. There had been humor on her lips, but not in her dark eyes. Tino had agreed then and there to never lie to her again, no matter what.

So, seven months ago when he received a reply to the résumé and cover-letter he had sent to Centurion Protective Services, he knew he had to tell his wife about it before he went over to have an interview. He told her that if he got the job he'd have to move—which meant they all had to move. To Tino's astonishment, Gina did not seem the least bit upset about the prospect of moving. She told him that she actually had cousins living in nearby Nitro (right next to Cross Lanes) and had spent quite a bit of time in the Kanawha River Valley when she was a child. Moving there would not bother her one bit, and she was sure she could find a job in one school system or another. Welcome news, now all Tino had to do was land the job, which, obviously, he had.

Precisely 0100 hours.

Principal Target

Andie Pearth was standing outside the door to the Taurus, a large blue umbrella above her head and a covered mug in her other hand. Tino smiled and rolled the window down halfway, small water droplets splashing inside the car.

“May I help you, ma’am?” he said with a wry grin.

“Yeah,” Andie said with a smile of her own. “Thought you might want to go pee and stretch your legs. Just not at the same time.”

Tino chuckled, nodding. He rolled up the window, collected his thermos and trash, then traded places with her.

“Be back in an hour,” he said, closing the door as Andie settled into the seat.

She rolled the window down a little.

“Take your time,” she told him. “We got till seven.”

Tino nodded, now standing under the umbrella. He then turned and headed for the front door, taking a casual glance around the perimeter. The TSS guard posted out front was in his car at the curb in front of the house just down the street, still with a clear view of the front and most of the west side of Debi’s house.

A streak of lightning flashed, followed by the sound of a loud thunderclap just as Tino stepped into the front room and shut the door.

Andie leaned back in the front seat of the Taurus, sipping her coffee, and looking out at the rain, her mind on her kids. Well, part of it was. Maybe twenty percent. She was always a mom, no matter what the circumstances. But she was also a bodyguard, and at the moment that meant most of her attention was on her job, protecting her client from the bad guys who would do her harm.

She turned on the radio, keeping the volume down low, and switched around until she found something she wanted to listen to,

Stellen Qxz

light jazz. She didn't know why, ordinarily she preferred rock, but tonight it was light jazz. Must be getting old, she thought, smiling.

“An old lady at thirty-three. Hardly.”

She sipped more coffee, listened to the music, and watched the rain some more.

Chapter 23

Debi Patterson was having trouble getting to sleep. Not really all that surprising when she considered the fact that she was living under the constant threat of death ordered by one of the most powerful men on the planet, and she had a small army of bodyguards surrounding her in her own home day and night. Oddly, by Tuesday evening Debi had gotten used to all of that, the threat, the bodyguards, made especially easy by the presence of Andie Pearth, a good-hearted and funny young woman who was teaching her Arabic. But tonight she was anxious and restless, unable to fall asleep.

Maybe she should not have stayed down in the living room talking and laughing with Andie till after midnight. But she had really enjoyed it. Andie was a card. Witty, intelligent, and it was still a little hard to believe that this young mother of two had actually served combat tours of duty in Iraq and Afghanistan, had actually been under fire, and had probably—although Debi had been careful not to ask—killed people. Despite having gone through all of that, and raising two young twins pretty much on her own, she seemed to be a well-adjusted and rounded person. She liked to cook, dance, and even knit, in addition to her skills as an expert marksman and master of three martial art forms. And there was the language thing. That really impressed Debi, and she was determined to learn at least a little conversational Arabic before the detail ended, and Debi hoped that would be sooner rather than later, even though she knew that was unlikely.

In all actuality, this might go on for a very long time, perhaps even years, until either Fabio Sandoval was dead, or she was. Not a cheery prospect. Debi was fifty-three and in reasonably good health, and she intended to live for quite a long time, *The Bloody Fist* cartel notwithstanding. Sandoval, she knew, was up into his seventies, and suspected that his life of crime and brutality, his numerous close calls with death over the years, had probably caused his health to deteriorate. He might not make it more than a few additional years. However, there was a younger son, Raul, who, Debi knew because of a briefing by Alex on Tuesday, basically ran the business. It was possible, likely even, that he might just carry on the vendetta after his father expired, assuming Debi had not been murdered before the old man died. But maybe the youngest Sandoval would be reasonable.

In a pig's eye, Debi thought as she rolled over onto her left side, trying to find comfort in her empty bed in the darkness of her bedroom. Raul Sandoval would be no better than his father. How could he be? He had been raised by the man, and at the side of his now deceased brother Paulo. No doubt, he blamed Debi just as much as his father did, and he would not rest either until she was dead, just like the others.

In a way, Debi thought in her more desperate moments, she wished that they had just gotten it over with when they were killing everyone else. Then she wouldn't have to live like this, a prisoner in her own home. Mostly though she did not think like that. She didn't want to be dead. Not ever actually, but certainly not now, not with so many things left that she needed to do. No, Debi could not die, or so she truly hoped. She had to live. She *wanted* to live.

Again, she shifted in the bed and adjusted the covers around her arms. Her mind began to wander for a bit and then she settled on the members of her protection team. They were all professionals, seemingly capable and confident in their jobs. The one thing she had

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noticed was different about the members of her CPS detail, as opposed to the marshals when they had protected her after the trial years earlier, was the fact that the CPS people didn't seem to take themselves all that seriously. Sure, they were serious people with a very serious job, but they knew how to laugh and make jokes, even bad jokes. Debi didn't feel so claustrophobic being around them. They made her feel safe and they kept her giggling, especially Andie Pearth, also Wally Holt, her daytime driver, on the rare occasion when she left the house these days. He was an ex-cop, Debi had discovered, out in California, she thought she remembered. Kind of on the chubby side for a cop, she thought, but she could tell from the way he moved that he knew how to handle himself if he had to. It was the look in his eyes, too, even when he was laughing, that told her a lot about the man.

And there was Robert Chandler, her bodyguard-in-chief, as she liked to think of him. No doubt about his capabilities. Robert looked the part of a professional bodyguard. Strong, kind of quiet, rarely smiled, and he *was* serious, although from time to time he had been known to crack a bad joke or two and make the others laugh. Debi was feeling a little flushed as she continued thinking about him. When she first laid eyes on him just last Monday, despite everything else going on at the time, she had found him very attractive, no way could she help herself, and why should she? After all, she was a woman, he was a man... and his wife carried a .40 caliber Glock, Debi reminded herself, smiling. Still, might be worth getting shot to get Robert Chandler's pants off.

Debi giggled and moaned, rolling onto her back.

It had been a while since she had dated anyone, or slept with anyone for that matter, and it was beginning to take a toll. Here she was at a quarter past one in the morning lying awake when she should be sleeping, and fantasizing about the man who was there to protect

her. And she an extremely well regarded former jurist of the federal bench, a highly respected member of the bar in several states. *Just one night with that beautiful black man*, she thought. *Just one night. That would be all you'd need Debi, old girl*, she thought again, feeling a familiar warmth in the middle of her stomach.

Of course, she knew that was not ever going to be possible. In addition to the fact that Alex Wells would object most steadfastly, probably to the point of bloodshed, Debi knew Robert was just too much of a professional to mix business with pleasure. And the hell of it was that she knew he really loved his wife, would never betray her because of that love, and the kind of man he was. The man wore his integrity like a permanent suit of clothes and she could see it, heard it in his voice that first day in Marvin Lincoln's office. He was an honest and straightforward man, bound by his own codes, unbreakable. And he was a man who loved only one woman. A very lucky woman at that.

But it did not mean Debi couldn't continue to fantasize, and dream, if she ever got to sleep. Once again, she shifted position; now back on her side, knees up in the fetal position. Come on, Debi, she thought, get a little sleep. You've got a lot of stuff to get done tomorrow, and plans to make before leaving for Dallas on Sunday. And speaking of Dallas, there was that speech to work on. After all, that was a key part of the reason she was going to Dallas in the first place.

All right, enough. Time to sleep.

And an hour in this bed with Robert Chandler would help that immensely, she mused to herself, chuckling in the darkness.

Sleep did not come easily or soon, but eventually it did come. The duration too short, but much appreciated.

Chapter 24

As was usually the case, Robert awoke before his wife this Friday morning a couple minutes after five. He never set an alarm clock anymore; he didn't need to. Robert's body was so attuned to the time that he could set his internal clock to wake him whenever he desired, no matter how tired he was. And the added bonus was the fact that he really didn't need more than four or five hours of sleep a night. It would probably catch up with him some day, hopefully years after he retired and had nothing to do other than sleep and make love with his wife all day, and not necessarily in that order.

Now he lay on his left side in the darkness, his eyes fully adjusted, watching as Alex still slept, also on her side and facing him. His night vision was very good and he had no trouble making out most of her features. In sleep, as in every waking moment, Alexandra Juline Wells was the most beautiful creature Robert had ever known, and every day he knew just how lucky a man he was, how lucky he was to have found Alex, and how lucky he was that she had fallen in love with him as well.

Often, he remembered that first day they had met on the campus of Samford University in Birmingham, the spring of 1988. An oral communication class, which had a certain irony to it, considering how much talking the two of them would do in the months that followed. Spring 1988, the beginning of Spring Term, which actually began in early February. He remembered first seeing her sitting on the opposite side of the room, talking to someone else, seemingly deeply engaged in conversation. At the time, he hadn't really noticed

her much beyond simply seeing her, and back then, Robert wasn't interested in much beyond becoming an Air Force officer, his whole reason for going to college in the first place. For the most part, he had managed to keep women out of his life, rarely dating, and never having a serious relationship. All that mattered to him was his future military career and just about everything he did was geared toward achieving that goal. This included the oral communication class he had to take at eight in the morning Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays that spring.

Unfortunately for Robert, and at the time he really had no clue what was to come, circumstances were maneuvering against him that would shatter any chance he had of getting the commission that was everything to him.

In fact, just a month and a half into that spring term, he was notified by his detachment commander that due to a shift in national defense policies, the career selections he had made were most likely not going to be available to him. There were three, ranked from highest to lowest in terms of personal desire, with a guarantee—sort of—that he would at least be able to get one. They were: Intelligence Officer, OSI⁷ Special Agent, and Security Police Officer. However, the colonel explained to young Robert that it was now unlikely that slots in either of those areas would be available for the class scheduled to graduate in May 1989, Robert's class. Furthermore, the only slots that could be guaranteed—sort of—were in the areas of Combat Weapons Control and Missile Launch Command, neither job had Robert even remotely considered previously. So naturally, he resisted signing a new contract, telling his colonel that he would hold out and hope for a slot to open up that he might actually want. Not what his C.O. wanted to hear, but the man wisely decided not to try to pressure him at that point.

⁷ Office of Special Investigations.

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For a little while Robert was allowed to hang in limbo without making a commitment, but then his commanding officer started getting pressure from his commanding officer about having uncommitted personnel on his roster, so he started putting pressure on Robert, which, at that time, was entirely the wrong tact to take. Robert was very upset that his chosen career path was being sabotaged. He knew he would make an outstanding Air Force officer, had actually been training for it all of his life. However, he did not want to be forced into something he did not want, despite all the promises from his colonel that eventually, maybe in four years time, he would be able to transfer into another field, one he liked better. But by then Robert really wasn't in the mood to listen to any more promises from Air Force brass. He wanted to serve, knew that the needs of the service usually came first, but there was just something unfair about the whole process he was going through, something that made him reconsider his career choices, the path he had selected for his life. And maybe being a military officer just wasn't the right fit for him after all.

So, halfway through his junior year, holding the rank of cadet major, Robert decided that it was time for a dramatic course change. He told his colonel that he would not be choosing a different career assignment and if the Air Force was not going to live up to its prior commitments to him, then he was not going to become an Air Force officer.

Now ordinarily a threat such as the one Robert made would be met with a simple reminder to the cadet in question that they had signed a binding contract following field training during the summer between their sophomore and junior years. A contract that committed them to four years service after graduation, either as a commissioned officer, or, should the cadet try to break the commitment, as an enlisted man, rank E3, airman first class.

However, since the contract had been broken by the Air Force first, such a threat would have had no merit, and both Robert and his colonel knew that. Efforts were made by other officers and some of Robert's friends in the detachment to get him to change his mind, but he would not, and so Robert turned in his uniforms and dropped out of AFROTC, thus closing the book on a very significant chapter of his life.

He should have been devastated, and to some extent, he was, but by this time, he and Alex Wells had become friends, and were getting closer, although neither of them knew how close at the time. When he told her what was going on between him and the Air Force, she had listened without judgment or criticism, encouraging him to do what he thought was best, unlike most of his other friends. Robert appreciated her very much, not knowing it at the time, but he was beginning to regard her opinion very highly. He was also beginning to care for this cute little eighteen-year-old freshman more than he had ever cared for any other person before.

At ten after five, Alex stirred and opened her eyes, yawning and raising her arms above her head as she stretched, arching her back, the T-shirt she slept in rising above her bellybutton and showing off her trim waist. She rubbed her eyes with the backs of her hands and then looked over at Robert.

"How long have you been staring at me in the dark?" she said in a slightly hoarse voice.

Robert grinned, leaning over to kiss her on the forehead.

"Not long," he replied. "I love watching you sleep though."

Alex shook her head, sitting up and adjusting the pillow behind her head, then lay back down.

"You're a sick man, Robert Chandler," she quipped.

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“And yet you married me,” he rejoined. “And continue to stay married to me after all these years. What does that say about you, dearheart?”

Alex smirked and reached out to touch her husband’s left arm.

“Takes a freak to love a freak, I suppose,” she said. “Are we running this morning?”

Robert momentarily glanced over at the window behind his right shoulder, then back at his wife.

“Still raining pretty heavily out there this morning,” he said. “And I just don’t feel like getting soaked today.”

“Fine by me,” Alex said, covering her mouth as she yawned. “So I guess we workout downstairs then?”

“Yeah,” Robert said then fell silent for a few moments. “Hey, babe, I was thinking.”

Alex grinned, moving closer to him.

“Always dangerous,” she said.

Robert smiled and put his hand on her stomach.

“Yeah, tell me about it. Actually what I was thinking is that instead of going tomorrow, you and Jim should leave for Dallas tonight. That way you have the full day tomorrow to do everything. I know you’ve looked over the hotel and secondary venue online and already talked with hotel management, but you’re still gonna need at least day’s worth of ground time to get everything done. So why not tonight?”

Alex thought for a few moments, slowly nodding.

“Yeah, makes sense I guess. And it shouldn’t interfere with coverage of the principal this weekend, having Jim and me gone. If Debi has any outside needs to take care of we can do that today, then she can stay in tomorrow, hopefully. And Wally’s sort of a third wheel

right now anyway, so he can step into Jim's slot, and still relieve Ray from time to time."

"Or I could," Robert said. "Not like I'll be doing a whole lot else. But we can work that out. We have enough people."

"Okay," Alex said. "I'll change our reservations this morning, and tell Jim. He's probably already packed, knowing him, but we'll probably need to let him go early so he can go home and get his things, and say good bye to Jennifer."

"Right," Robert said, slowly moving his hand up his wife's shirt. "And I can say good bye to you."

Alex grinned and turned on her side once more, raising her left leg and draping it across her husband's hip.

"You'll never be able to say good bye to me, Mr. Chandler. Not ever."

He put his arms around her and pulled her close, holding her tight.

"I sure as hell hope not," he whispered, his voice full of passion and emotion.

As it turned out, their *workout* this morning didn't take place downstairs, but it was both exhausting and satisfying. Not to mention, incredibly expressive.

Chapter 25

Washington, D.C.

While Alex Wells and Robert Chandler were just waking up and getting the day started in their home in Charleston, West Virginia, DEA Supervisory Special Agent Dan Cox was already at work in the command center of the International Narcotics Interdiction Task Force at DEA Headquarters in Washington, D.C. He had actually been there since three a.m., summoned by a call from the night duty officer to his home in Arlington, Virginia an hour earlier. A flash message from an undercover team he had working down in Durango, marked urgent. So Cox had quickly dressed and driven over to Headquarters to decode and read the message. When he did so the contents chilled his blood, and then he understood something that had been bothering him for quite a while.

After some thinking, Cox composed a coded response and sent it to Durango, requesting immediate action, knowing, of course, that immediate was a relative term. Undercover agents operating in hostile environments—and that was Mexico in spades at the moment—could not do anything fast because it would draw too much attention, and that could be fatal. Not the *good* kind of fatal either. The kind where you died quickly, maybe in your sleep after a full-course meal, an expensive bottle of wine, and several hours of lovemaking with the woman—or man—of your dreams. Nope, something a lot less pleasant. Not to mention excruciating and gruesome...

Cox would just have to hope his people could find a way to make good on his request in as timely a fashion as possible. In the

mean time there were other avenues he could pursue, quietly, off the record, a little friendly back-channel interagency liaison. But the first thing he had to do was report what he had learned to the Deputy Assistant AG who was overseeing his task force at Justice, Lani Jenkins. No doubt the prosecutor would want to know what he had learned, and probably pass it on to the ex-judge now living under constant threat in West Virginia, a threat he'd just found out was far more serious than previously believed, if that was even possible.

Too early to call, of course, most other sane people were still asleep, or just waking up. So Cox composed a report, giving the sparse but disturbing information he had just received from his undercover team regarding a plan by Ignacio Riva to have Debra Patterson abducted and brought to his boss, Don Fabio, down in Chihuahua, no doubt to be slowly tortured and eventually brutally murdered for the old man's revenge and pleasure. A chilling prospect, and even this hardened professional, who had witnessed far too many acts of violence and their aftermath over countless years, felt a shudder of revulsion as he considered it.

The information would have to be passed on to Patterson's security detail as well, but Jenkins could handle that. She was handing liaison between the Justice Department and Judge Patterson. And perhaps now the woman could be convinced to accept protection from the federal marshals. At least as a supplemental to her private force. It would be sensible, despite the possible risk of having a cartel agent assigned to the team. But then maybe that was not a risk worth taking, once he considered it.

What the hell, Cox thought, finishing the report and attaching it to an email. Not really his decision. He transmitted the email at five-thirty then glanced over at the full inbox on the right side of his desk. Not even six a.m. and his day was already in the crapper.

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Coffee first, he thought, standing and arching his back, glancing around the room and seeing the members of the night duty crew going quietly about their business, professionals all of them. Then an unpleasant thought occurred to him. *I wonder how many of them are on Don Fabio's payroll. How many of them were the Don's people?* Not an unreasonable question, but not one he really wanted an answer to either.

He went for the coffee, then came back and started working his way through the pile from his inbox. By the time day shift began at seven he hoped to have made a significant dent.

A man can dream anyway.

Chapter 26

Charleston, West Virginia

Immaculately attired and impeccably groomed as always, Gerry Conrad handily maneuvered the modified dark blue Ford Taurus west on Big Tyler Road in Cross Lanes, stopping at the intersection with Hopewell Drive and waiting in a moderate downpour for two cars to pass by, then taking the left and heading south. He was moving at a moderate rate of speed, not really going anywhere specific, just driving around Debi Patterson's neighborhood looking for anyone or anything out of place. His job was countersurveillance, and the primary aspect of that with which the former Marine corporal was currently concerned was hostile surveillance detection. Thus far, he had spotted none, today or any day since his assignment began on Monday, and that pleased all involved because the alternative was not an amusing thought to contemplate.

Still, somewhere on a deeply recessed level in his brain, a part of Gerry Conrad wouldn't mind a little intense hostile confrontation, to alleviate the boredom of routine. Sometimes he missed his days in the Marines, especially the two years he'd spent as a member of the Corps' elite FAST Company. FAST as in Fleet Antiterrorism Security Team. A highly specialized Marine (Department of the Navy) unit created in 1987 to provide advanced high-risk protective services for American naval forces—personnel, bases, and equipment all over the world—against the increasingly challenging threats posed by terrorism and sabotage.

Gerry had joined the Corps right out of high school because he had not been much of a student, his grades below average,

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although, as was soon apparent to his recruiting NCO, Gerry was quite a bright and naturally intelligent young man. The Corps could take him and make him stronger, give him a better life than he would have had had he stayed in Atlanta and hung out with the rest of his friends, a lot of them already deep in the drug supply trade and going to jail or dying in one drive-by after another. This was something Gerry's grandmother—who had largely raised him on her own since he was five—was determined would not happen to him. She gave her blessing to his decision to join the Marines and proudly attended his graduation from boot camp before his heading off to Parris Island, South Carolina for more intense combat infantry training.

Gerry really took to the Corps, feeling as if, for the first time in his life, that he actually belonged somewhere, had a real family besides just his grandma and a few cousins he really never knew all that well. He also had an opportunity to get a first-class education, learning things he really wanted to know about, not just the stuff they tried to force on him in school, things like poetry by people who'd been dead long before he was even conceived, or about politics, something that to this day Gerry still couldn't care less about.

No, now he learned about things like war, how to fight them and how to win them, about weapons, explosives, combat tactics, defense, offense, how to kill, how not to get killed, and his personal favorite, silent killing. *Swift, Silent, and Deadly*.

Gerry rapidly excelled to the top of his unit, and after three years in the infantry, including a deployment to Afghanistan in October 2001, he was selected to try out for FAST Company. Unfortunately, at that moment two things occurred that nearly devastated the young Marine. The first was an accident he suffered during a training exercise that left him with a broken leg and a fractured arm. It was not immediately clear whether he'd be able to continue his military career or be forced to take a medical discharge.

But Gerry was determined to make a full recovery, signed up for the most intensive physical rehabilitation available, and started working as hard as his doctors would allow in order to recover as soon as possible. However, that's when the second tragedy occurred.

His seventy-three year old grandmother suffered a massive stroke one day while cooking in her kitchen—one of her favorite things in the world to do—and had died almost immediately, essentially leaving Gerry all alone in the world, except for the Corps that is.

Granted a month's bereavement leave, Gerry went home to bury his grandmother (his *madear*) and to take care of other arrangements that needed to be made. He was still far from recovered from his injuries, but determined not to leave any loose ends. *Madear* had taught him well, *never put nothing off, boy, and don't leave no messes for somebody else to clean up for you*. Gerry saw to everything, even making sure that the house she had owned since before he was born was in good repair before sealing it up. One of his cousins had advised him that he should sell it and put the money in the bank—probably, Gerry suspected, because she wanted him to give her part of it—but he had refused, saying the house had always been in their family and he was not going to be the one to disrespect his *madear* by selling it.

When his leave ended, Gerry returned to rehab with increased determination, and worked even harder to heal. To everyone's astonishment, except for his, Gerry did recover in full, and was able to get a second try out for FAST Company, making the cut on his first attempt, and receiving a promotion from lance corporal to full corporal.

At that time, the *War on Terror* was in full swing and the military was gearing up to hunt down terrorists anywhere in the world, taking the fight to them as it were. Gerry was up for that,

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having nothing to hold him back anymore. His grandma was gone, and so was everyone else who had ever really meant anything to him. Might as well throw himself into his work. And in Gerry's mind, it was work that needed doing.

His unit was posted to the Med as part of an amphibious assault task force designated to conduct special operations against terrorist cells in Southern Europe, Northern Africa, and the Middle East. The task force itself was a main terrorist target and Gerry's FAST unit was always on full alert. Within the first month, they repelled six separate attacks on ships in their battle group, one by a suicide bomber on a speedboat that got to within forty yards before being blown out of the water by an M-60 machine gun wielded by Gerry Conrad himself. His first confirmed kill. It had not bothered him in the slightest. The person he'd killed was a terrorist, and what's more, he was trying to kill himself anyway, nothing Gerry could do but beat him to the punch, limiting the damage and loss of innocent life. He received a commendation from his unit C.O. and the skipper of the ship, as well as a meritorious service award from the Navy.

The awards didn't really mean much to Gerry; he was just doing his job, and wanted to keep doing it for as long as he could. It was the only thing that really made him feel alive. There were women, lots of them in fact, he was a very handsome young black man, as his grandmother used to tell him, and he smiled fondly each time he remembered that. But the women were just distractions, lovely, imaginative, but temporary companions, nothing more. He never met anyone that he thought seriously about settling down with, and didn't know if he would ever feel any different. In the Corps, he had a home and a purpose, and he enjoyed the work immensely.

Then he went to Iraq. Because of the deteriorating security situation in that theater of operations, the Pentagon decided to deploy specialized security units from every branch of the armed forces in an

effort to get control of the violence. Gerry's unit was deployed to Baghdad to secure what was known as the *Green Zone*, supposedly the most highly secure area in the whole country. However, despite this designation, there were routine bombings and other attacks in and near that area every day and many people had been killed, most innocent civilians who were caught in a bad situation not of their creation.

Within the first week of their assignment, Gerry's team had suffered three fatalities and four other casualties. The pace of the attacks was maddening, the violence unlike anything you could imagine unless you experienced it. There were things that could be done to minimize the damage and even stop some of the violence, and Gerry's platoon leader made some suggestions to higher ups in this regard. However, those suggestions were summarily dismissed, and for no good reason that Gerry could see, and more good people died. By the end of Gerry's seven months in Iraq, fully half of his team had been wounded, Gerry, too, though only slightly, and eleven men were dead. He had never been so disgusted in all of his life and was looking forward to transferring out, putting the whole *Iraq experience* behind him for good, maybe even transferring back to Feet Security Operations, doing something he knew how to do well.

However, the Pentagon had other plans. Gerry was coming up on reenlistment and had every intention of doing so, that is until he learned that his unit was scheduled to redeploy to Baghdad as soon as their rest and retraining period was up. And another unpleasant thing he learned was that the length of that R&R period, normally a full year for the Marines, was being cut to seven months because there simply weren't enough troops in the mix to allow for more time back home. This new policy would begin one month before Gerry's reenlistment deadline, which meant he had options.

Principal Target

After a long conversation with his immediate superior and the bird colonel in charge of operations for FAST Company—during which time Gerry was urged to *think of his country's needs and not his own*—Gerry decided to put in his request to separate from the Corps following his current tour of duty. That did not go over well with the brass, and he was actually kept in service six months past his separation deadline, *needs of the service*, of course. As a result, he did not have to redeploy to Iraq with his unit when they shipped out on schedule, which turned out to be fortuitous because immediately upon their return, the violence spiked and half a dozen unit members were killed.

Gerry remained stateside and served as an assistant advanced tactics instructor for new FAST recruits. It was hoped that with time he would change his mind and decide to reenlist for a full tour. This did not happen, though, and Gerry was eventually granted his discharge.

This was a little over a year ago. He didn't really have any plans, and had quite a bit of money saved up due to the hazard and other special pay he'd received while on overseas deployments, so he decided to do a bit of traveling, see some old friends, just hang out for a while. After about a month he found himself in Charleston, West Virginia looking up a former Army sergeant he'd met once in Saudi. They'd stayed in touch by email and the occasional phone call and he knew she was living there now and working as a bodyguard or something. His intention had simply been to say hello, see how she was doing, hell, maybe even have a hookup if she wasn't seeing anybody. Gerry thought Andie Pearth was kind of a flaky white chick, but she was cute, with a good sense of humor. Nice ass for a white girl, too. One thing was for sure, she liked to flirt, and Gerry thought that she might just be interested. He knew he was.

But instead of what he had expected—maybe even hoped—to find in Charleston, he received something totally unexpected, a job offer. When he'd emailed Andie that he was coming for a visit, she told Alex Wells about him, adding that she thought the recent ex-Marine might make a good addition to their team. Alex accessed Gerry's military records and had to admit she was impressed with what she saw, so she took it to Robert. They both agreed they should at least meet him while he was in town, and after Andie told Gerry, he said why not.

Two weeks later, Gerry was being trained as a close-protection specialist at Billy Rendale's school in Hurricane; his secondary specialty was countersurveillance, which he had already been well schooled in during his time with FAST Company.

And here he was now almost a year later, turning onto Dalewood Drive, scanning both sides of the street carefully as the windshield wipers continued to knock the falling rain off to the sides. It was a messy day, but at least he was inside a nice clean car.

He pressed the transmit button on his communicator.

"Centurion Seven to Control," he said, eyes still searching the street. "Perimeter sweep complete. One zero one zero one."

"That's clear, C-Seven," Ray Alvarez's voice sounded in Gerry's earpiece. "Control out."

Now he was passing the principal's house on the left, seeing Wally Holt sitting in the green Taurus parked by the curb. They waved at each other and he continued on, past the car containing a day shift uniformed guard. Everything status quo and all quiet on the Western Front.

He U-turned three houses down instead of going all the way to the end of the street where the command van was parked. Ray had that area covered and there was no need for him to patrol there. Really, Ray had this entire area covered with his cameras and other

Principal Target

junk, but having a human presence out and about was still the way to go for truly tight security. A camera could only record a possible threat and a sensor could sound the alarm, but only an operator could *confront and neutralize*. Something for which Mr. Conrad was most aptly suited.

Now he was heading back down Dalewood Drive, past Hopewell again, going east, checking the perimeter from a different route, and the rain was increasing again. But, as he had thought earlier, at least he was in a car.

Chapter 27

CIA Station: Crime and Narcotics Center/Miami (FL)

Howie Vaughn was in his office at nine-thirty Friday morning reading through dispatches and twxs from subordinate stations throughout the Latin American region. He had only arrived at work twenty minutes earlier, an hour plus later than he normally did. The reason for his being late this sunshiny South Florida day still had him smiling as he pored over the stack of reports he had to read.

His wife Ruth had awoken him this morning with that special look in her big brown eyes, and that had been all it took, everything else they had to do that day pushed aside, lost; at least for a little while. They both might have to work late this evening to make up for their tardiness this morning, but neither regretted it one bit. As a matter of fact, Howie was considering working through lunch so he could get finished early and be home waiting for Ruth when she got there. Then maybe they could pick up where they had left off this morning in the shower. And now he was beginning to blush, shaking his head as warmth spread through his chest.

There was a routine dispatch from the ASO in Belize. Howie shook his head again, now there was an assignment. Belize. The guy must have had something big on the Director to get a gig like that. Howie leaned back in his chair and crossed his long legs right over left, settling as he read.

Subject: Logan, Flynn, American mercenary known to hire out to various criminal syndicates in North and South America. Known resident for two years of the city of Punta Gorda on the southeast

Principal Target

coast of Belize. Three days ago, Subject Logan received a large cash transfer into a secret account he maintains in a private bank—verified through well-placed independent source— \$150,000, known standard retainer for his services. Following confirmation of the receipt of funds, Subject Logan disappeared from Punta Gorda. Inquiry sent out to all stations to be on the lookout for subject. Received confirmation from watcher unit in Atlanta, Georgia, USA last night that Subject Logan passed through Atlanta's Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport two days ago using false identification in the name of Andrew Salter. Due to a backlog in surveillance video review, information was not discovered until after Subject Logan had left jurisdiction. Not known at this time where Subject Logan went after his arrival in Atlanta. There is no further activity listed under the name of Salter, Andrew, and no further video record can be located at this time. Subject Logan's known specialties include tactical assault, tactical diversion, and covert surveillance. Routine pass on to all ASOs, copy to FBI and Homeland Security. No present warrants available.

End of Report.

Howie Vaughn frowned, rereading the report. On the surface, it was quite routine. A merc receiving payment to do a job and the Agency just passing on information. It would have been nice if they had been able to keep track of him though, in particular since he entered the US using false documents. However, since he was not a known member of any of the dozens of terrorist groups that the Agency was currently doing battle with in every quarter of the planet, Logan's tracking would be relegated to the sub-priority file.

Still, something about this bothered Howie. So after finishing with the rest of the dispatches on his desk, he decided to do a little

digging, turning on his desktop computer and accessing the classified files his division maintained on known contract mercenaries.

It didn't take long to find Flynn Logan's file. It was extensive, and quite colorful, a wide and varied career of death and carnage. Then something caught his eye that he'd almost overlooked, and it made his blood run cold. Under the *employment reference* section was listed three jobs that Logan was known to have done for the security boss of *El Sangriento Puño*, Ignacio Riva. Two terror bombings directed against bitter rivals of Don Fabio's, and the kidnapping of the daughter of a Guatemalan minister who had attempted to double-cross the Don, taking his money but refusing to allow drug shipments to travel unmolested through certain remote regions of Guatemala, as previously promised. It was reported that the girl was eventually returned to her father, after being repeatedly gang-raped for several weeks and horribly mutilated.

"Shit!" swore the CIA man, his mind now racing. "Damn. Damn, damn, and *goddamn!*"

Rubbing his chin with his left thumb, he considered all the possibilities, thinking about how close Atlanta was to Charleston, West Virginia, relatively speaking. A coincidence? In his business there was rarely any such thing.

"Shit!" he swore louder this time, then reached for his secure phone, dialing from memory a number to an office in Silver Spring, Maryland. The line rang four times before being picked up, the voice on the other end female, very rich and very sensual, with an old-fashioned North Carolina accent easily recognizable.

"It's me," Howie Vaughn said with a hint of urgency in his voice. "I need you to do me a favor..."

Chapter 28

Cross Lanes, West Virginia

At nine-fifty a.m., Jim Paxon, Robert Chandler, and Alex Wells were sitting in the living room of their client's Cross Lanes home discussing their upcoming trip to Dallas this weekend, more specifically, the advance trip that Alex and Jim were preparing to undertake. Jim was sitting in an armchair to the left of the sofa that Alex and Robert sat on, his Blackberry on his lap. Alex sat between Jim and Robert, leaning over the coffee table typing on her laptop, her glasses perched on the edge of her nose.

"All right," she said, still typing. "This is the place. The *W Dallas Victory Hotel*. At the corner of Victory Park Lane and Houston Street. A Starwood property, built within the last year, very luxurious accommodations. A suite has been reserved for Debi on the ninth floor, south corner. We were able to get the rest of the corner blocked for us, sleeping rooms, plus one that will be made into the command post. It will connect to Debi's suite."

Robert and Jim leaned over to look at the screen, which had a display of the layout of the hotel on it. Alex sat back and removed her glasses.

"I've already spoken with the hotel's Director of Operations," Alex continued. "She understands the requirements I've laid out, assuring me that they've handled many VIPs since the hotel opened last year. Also, the Director of Risk—that's what they call their security department, the Department of Risk. The director is a former Secret Service agent. Never worked the presidential detail, but he's spent time protecting dignitaries from all around the world. I've

explained the level of the threat to him and he's adding additional personnel to assist while we're there, several of them with full training in high-threat security situations."

"Don't you mean high-threat *risk* situations?" Jim grinned, typing on his Blackberry.

Alex cast as lopsided smirk his way.

"I'm surrounded by smart asses," she said, glancing over at Robert. "I'll bet you were going to say that."

Robert nodded.

"Thinking about it," he said. "Sounds like the hotel's got a good operation. What about the venue, this Mansion..?"

"The *Mansion on Turtle Creek*," Alex nodded, leaning forward once more and typing on the laptop keyboard. A few seconds later, the display changed. "Here it is. Actually used to be a mansion, still is really. Showplace of Dallas now. Combination fancy restaurant, luxury hotel, special meeting and dining facilities, and a few residences on property to boot. Only about six minutes or so from the hotel we'll be using. Spoke with the operations manager for the facility and he told me the room that has been reserved for Debi's presentation and dinner on Monday night is the FDR Suite." Alex paused and typed again, and the screen displayed an exquisitely decorated room. "Here it is, second floor overlooking the rear courtyard. Seats about twenty. Debi's party will only have twelve, including her."

"Do we have the names of everyone attending this meeting?" Jim asked.

"Affirmative," Alex said. "And I've already completed their backgrounds. Debi knows all but four personally. All of them are in the legal profession, some former judges like her. No surprises on the BIs."

"What is this group she's meeting with anyhow?" Jim asked.

Principal Target

“Not really relevant to you doing your job, Jim,” Robert told him gently but firmly, his tone brooking no further discussion on the matter.

Jim nodded, accepting the comment without judgment, knowing that if something was being kept from him by Robert and Alex, then he really didn’t need to know. He trusted them completely, and so far had had no reason to doubt that trust. So he went back to working on his Blackberry.

“Rental cars have been prearranged as well,” Alex went on. “I’ll double check once Jim and I arrive. Also, the charter is set. Direct flight from Yeager to Love Field. Jim and I will be on hand to greet you and get you all to the hotel.”

“Okay,” Robert nodded. “Local police?”

“The Director of Risk put me in touch with the deputy commander of the precinct which encompasses the hotel and surrounding area. We had a long talk and I explained our situation, with a certain amount of circumspection, of course, and they will be assigning extra patrols around the hotel. Additionally, I have his personal cell and home numbers. If we need something from the police he’s instructed me to call him directly, day or night.”

“Good,” Robert said. “And you’re leaving at four this afternoon, right?”

Alex glanced at him once more.

“Weather permitting,” she said, “yeah. It’s supposed to slack off around noon. We’ll see. And we still have to take Debi over to her office to meet with that client at one.”

“You two don’t have to worry about that,” Robert said. “The rest of us will handle it. You should go and get ready. I know you’re almost packed, but no sense in rushing around, and Jim probably wants to stop by Jennifer’s office and see her.”

Jim looked up and nodded.

“Yeah,” he said. “And I need to go by the store and pick up one more item.”

“Okay,” Robert said. “So why don’t the two of you go ahead and take off. The rest of us can handle it from here.”

Alex looked at her husband for a moment, nodding slowly.

“All right, if you’re sure.”

“I am.”

Alex nodded once more, then leaned over and cleared her computer screen, powering down the unit.

“I’m gonna go up and check with Debi before I go,” she said, standing.

Robert and Jim both stood.

“All right,” Robert said. “See you in a bit.”

Alex stepped past Jim and headed out into the foyer and the staircase that led up to the second floor. Jim finished up with his Blackberry and put it back into the holder on his belt, pulling his jacket across it.

Robert stared at him for a long moment then glanced out toward the staircase that his wife had just ascended. When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper, but there was order and command in it.

“Jim,” he said.

“Sir?” Jim said.

“I need a favor.”

“Of course, sir.”

“Alex is one of the strongest, smartest, and toughest people I have ever known, and I know she can take care of herself. However, she is my wife. This is probably a sexist thing to say, but it’s the husband in me saying it. The professional in me knows better.”

Principal Target

“You don’t have to say it, Robert,” Jim said, staring directly into the other man’s eyes, absolutely no trace of humor in his own. “I will watch out for her..”

Robert stared back at him for quite some time before nodding.

“Thank you,” he said simply.

“You’re welcome,” Jim replied, and before he could say anything more, Alex came back downstairs.

“Well we’re all set there,” she announced, leaning down and picking up her laptop case. “Debi can’t think of anything else I should know. The lead person for her group will be in Dallas tomorrow night and knows to contact me when she gets to the hotel. Name’s Sally Quinn, used to be a judge, too. So with that, I think Jim and I are done here.”

Robert glanced at Jim again and the other man instantly got the message, excusing himself and going out into the foyer.

Alex grinned, setting her case back on the coffee table.

“Are we gonna say *good bye* now?” she asked.

Robert reached out and took her in his arms.

“Yep,” he told her, then kissed her gently on the lips. Alex raised her arms and put them around his neck, squeezing him tightly against her as their kiss became deeper and more passionate. When they pulled away nearly two minutes later, both were breathless.

“God I love you, woman,” Robert said in a hoarse whisper, staring intensely into his wife’s brown eyes. “And you better be very careful, too. Don’t want anything to happen to you, or that sexy little bod of yours..”

“I will be,” she assured him, staring back into his eyes. “And I love you, too, Robert. By the way, did you give Jim *The Talk*?”

Robert smiled again.

“I could pretend I didn’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. “But that would probably be insulting. So yeah, we had a few words.”

Alex grinned and kissed him again.

“And I love you for that, too, Mr. Chandler. I’ll also keep an eye on Jim for his wife’s sake.”

“Good,” Robert said, leaning down and nuzzling the right side of her neck. “I’m sure she’ll appreciate that. And now you should get out of here before I can’t control my natural urges where you’re concerned.”

Alex grinned, kissed him once more, and then pulled away, reclaiming her laptop case from the coffee table.

“I’ll call you when I leave for the airport, and before taking off.”

Robert nodded.

“And once you land at DFW,” he said.

“Of course,” she said, reaching out and squeezing his hand briefly, then backing out of the room. “I love you, Robert.”

“Love you, too, sweetheart,” he said, and then his wife passed from sight. He resisted the urge to go over to the window and watch her and Jim walk down the drive and across the street to Jim’s car. He would take her home, leaving their SUV in Cross Lanes with Robert. Then Jim would head over to his own place to finish packing and run his errands. Later, they would meet up at the airport to catch their flight to Dallas.

Robert paced the living room a few times, hands in pockets, then pulled his right one out and checked the time on the cheap stainless steel Casio he usually wore when working. There was still time to kill.

Principal Target

He would sit down and pull out his own laptop and review the operation thus far, having another look at the profiles Alex had compiled on potential assassins that the cartel might have hired.

The computer had just booted up and was asking for a password when his cell phone rang. Robert checked the display and saw that the number was blocked. He thought about letting it go to voicemail, then thought better of that idea.

“Robert Chandler,” he answered.

“Hello, Robert Chandler,” said a voice from the past, one with a sensual North Carolina accent. “How the hell are you, baby?”

Chapter 29

Washington, D.C.

Friday morning, Lani Jenkins had a meeting with her boss, the Executive Assistant U.S. Attorney General in charge of DOJ's Criminal Division. Standard for every Friday, lasting from eight-thirty till eleven-thirty, time enough for each of the assistant and deputy assistant AGs in the division to review their cases for the Executive Assistant AG and to get feedback, workout problems, and to receive new cases assignments. There was never a moment to relax in the United States Department of Justice, not if you were ambitious and looking to excel. Which Lani Jenkins was and was.

As a consequence of being away from her office this Friday morning, she did not get a chance to check her email, which meant she did not see the report from Dan Cox regarding the information he had received from his undercover agents in Mexico. Also meaning that she would not be able to pass on the warning to Debi Patterson and her security detail until after lunch when she would most likely have the first opportunity to check her email.

But like all high-powered and busy people, Lani Jenkins has a top-drawer executive assistant. In her case, Nina Sabetella, a bright and upwardly mobile twenty-four year old Vassar grad in her first year at Georgetown Law. Nina did all the things that a good personal assistant always did for her boss, opened her mail and reviewed it for anything important, prioritizing it, and making notes if need be for her boss' attention. She also did the same with her email, having her boss' password as well as enjoying her complete trust.

Principal Target

So it was Ms. Sabetella who first read the email from the DEA man at eight forty-five that morning after she had tidied up all of the rest of her boss' little details. She sat at Lani Jenkins' much larger and nicer desk, accessing the official email account and reviewing the inbox of about twenty messages. The one from Dan Cox was number seventeen. Nina read it carefully twice, then sat thinking for a few minutes. There was no way that she could erase the message because at some point Jenkins and Cox would talk, and the subject of the email was bound to come up. No doubt Cox would be calling her at some point very soon to discuss it. And if it did not appear in her inbox, she might become suspicious of her executive assistant, the only person, as far as she knew, who possessed her *secret* password. *No, Nina, that would just be asking for trouble*, she thought. So the message would remain intact, marked for Jenkins' urgent attention, as would be expected.

She completed her search of the rest of her boss' messages, making sure all that seemed important were properly highlighted, then closed the account and put the computer in standby mode. Then the twenty-four year old petite brunette of mixed Italian and Mexican descent stood and went over to the door of the office, peering outside to see if anyone had come in while she was away from her desk. No one had, so she shut and locked the door, then went back over to the desk where she had left her purse, opening it and removing the small disposable cell phone she had been instructed to always keep with her for emergencies.

The number she dialed was contained only in her memory, another disposable cell phone. The phone rang three times before being answered by a man who spoke English with a very thick accent. Nina effortlessly switched into fluent Mexican Spanish and quickly began to explain why she had called, then hung up without waiting for a reply.

Her heart was racing slightly as she shut off the phone and dropped it back in her purse. As soon as she could, she would dispose of the phone, as previously instructed. It was designed to be used only once and then discarded, making it practically impossible to trace back to its original owner. At least in theory that was how it was supposed to work.

Nina took a few moments and caught her breath. She didn't know why she was always so nervous when she did things like this. After all, no one would suspect her of a thing, least of all Lani Jenkins. The woman adored her young protégé, had chosen to mentor her, and was even looking forward to the day when Nina would graduate law school and come to work in the Justice Department as a young prosecutor.

Nina smiled as she thought about that. The grandniece of the head of the *El Sangriento Puño* actually working inside the *gringo* Justice Department. And maybe one day helping to put the enemies of Don Fabio behind bars. Wouldn't that be something.

She was completely calm as she reentered her own office, put her purse away, then sat at her desk and began to get on with her work for the day.

Chapter 30

Cross Lanes, West Virginia

It did stop raining by noon, but remained cloudy and a bit breezy. The perfect weather in which to move a client around, Robert thought. Gloomy but suitable visibility. Everyone else thought he was nuts, but that really didn't matter. He was the detail leader.

He had decided to pull Ray from the command van and use him to assist in transporting Debi to her office in downtown Charleston. The uniforms at the house should be able to handle the place on their own for a couple of hours, and Nyla Taylor had promised to have her patrol vehicle stop by twice an hour instead of once for the rest of the day.

They left the house at eleven fifty-five, Debi dressed in a navy blue skirt suit with light gray blouse and sensible shoes. Under her shirt she was also wearing a specially designed chest cover manufactured by the *Ready-Shield* Corporation that purported to stop 230 grain .45 caliber bullets at point-blank range, something that Robert nor any member of his team had ever personally verified, and did not look forward to, seeing as how they all wore similar protective devices under their clothing. Some things you just have to take the manufacturer's word on, until you find evidence to the contrary. Of course, by then you'd probably be dead.

Debi climbed into the back of the Escalade as it was parked in the driveway, front end facing the street. Robert climbed in the front passenger's seat, Wally at the wheel. When they pulled out of the drive, Ray Alvarez, at the wheel of the green Taurus parked at the curb, pulled out behind them.

Gerry Conrad was sitting in the dark blue Taurus parked in the front lot of the *Christian Family Academy* out on Big Tyler Road just a few blocks away, his engine running, his eyes watching everything, searching for any hint of trouble. This was the first checkpoint that they had set up. Gerry would sit and watch as the principal and follow up cars passed, checking to see if anyone was following them. If he determined that they were free of a tail, he would then take back routes at as fast a pace as prudence would allow, setting up at the next checkpoint, and repeat the process again. There were five checkpoints allotted for this movement, and Gerry had at least two alternate routes planned to reach each of them quickly. And with the rain having now subsided, it would make his work that much easier.

The Escalade passed by, Wally at the wheel not even glancing over toward the academy, and right on his tail, slightly to the left of the rear bumper, Ray at the wheel of the other Taurus. He, too, didn't look over at Gerry.

Two minutes later, Gerry was satisfied that no one had followed the principal from her house to the first checkpoint. Now he had about seven minutes to get into position for the second checkpoint. He put the car in gear and pulled out of the lot, heading in the opposite direction back down Big Tyler Road.

Chapter 31

Charleston, West Virginia

At two p.m. the sun was out and it was starting to warm up. Debi Patterson was upstairs in her office meeting with the client that Marvin Lincoln called and said was insisting on meeting with her before signing contracts that needed to be signed in order to close one of the largest civil cases their firm had been handling for the better part of the last year. Ray Alvarez was standing post outside Debi's office door and Gerry Conrad was wandering through the main offices acting as internal rover. Ordinarily Robert would have remained upstairs himself, leaving Gerry to patrol the perimeter, but at the moment he had an appointment to keep and had to risk not having a perimeter rover for a while. Wally Holt was sitting in the parking lot at the wheel of the principal vehicle and Robert inclined his head slightly as he stepped around the side of the building and walked over to the gray Chevy Malibu parked in the second visitors' space. Wally frowned, watching as his boss got into the car, but he didn't raise the alarm. Whatever was going on, Robert seemed to be in control, but when did he not?

"Hello, Mr. Chandler," said the very attractive young black woman behind the wheel of the Malibu. She had on a black pantsuit and turquoise blouse, opened at the neck, and the perfume she wore had a light, pleasing fragrance that awakened a memory somewhere in the back of Robert's mind. And just as quickly, it was gone.

Robert smiled, glancing around the parking lot.

"Hello," he said. "Danielle, is it?"

The young woman nodded, her manner and expression calm, but he could tell she was a little nervous. Youth, he thought, remembering when he had been her age, and very new to the job as she was now.

“Yes, sir. I was told to come here and deliver a package to you, Mr. Chandler.”

“Yes, Danielle,” Robert said, trying not to laugh, imagining himself just like her eighteen years ago as a newly minted special agent of the Office of Security at the CIA. “I’m aware of that. Senior ASAC/WFO sent you, right?”

“Yes, sir,” Danielle said, turning and looking up into his eyes for the first time. “That is correct. I was told to give you the package, let you read the contents, and then take the package back. I was told that you have a photographic memory.”

“Not exactly,” Robert told her. “But I can memorize quickly. Where’s the package?”

“The glove compartment,” she indicated with her right hand.

Robert nodded, opening the glove compartment and finding it empty save for a folded manila envelope that bore no markings. He opened the envelope in silence and began to scan the pages, his face blank, expressionless, as his mind began to absorb the information contained within. Ten minutes of silent reading, then Robert looked up, glancing around again, and over to Danielle.

“Thank you,” he said to her. “And tell your boss thank you for me, too.”

“I will, sir,” Danielle replied, reaching out her hand for the envelope.

Robert replaced the pages in the envelope and then handed it to the young agent.

“If you don’t mind my asking, how long have you been assigned to WFO?”

Principal Target

Danielle seriously considered her answer for several long moments before responding, no doubt remembering all those security briefings she had received on operational secrecy and *need-to-know*. Then he could see her start to smile, and she looked at him once more.

“Six months, sir,” she said. “Ever since I graduated OS School at Tech-I and Stafford.”

Robert nodded.

“Whole career ahead of you,” he said. “Good luck then. And you couldn’t hope to have a better boss than Rea. She’s the best. By the way, if you really want to get on her good side, call her *Rea Ann*, she just loves that.”

Danielle giggled, taking the envelope and folding it once again, stuffing it into the inside pocket of her jacket.

“No she does not, sir,” she replied. “She says she’ll shoot anyone who calls her that. And I’ve seen the woman shoot.”

“So have I,” Robert admitted, but not thinking about the training that he had gone through with the woman in question nearly two decades ago. He was remembering real-world experiences where he and Special Agent Rea Ann Bracken—now Senior Assistant Special Agent in Charge/Washington Field Office—had had to shoot their way out of more than one bad situation. “Thanks again, Danielle. And if you call me *sir* again, I may have to kill you myself.”

Danielle chuckled then, wetting her perfect full lips with the tip of her tongue.

“Okay... Robert. It was good to meet you.”

“Likewise,” he replied, once again all business. “Good bye.”

Robert exited the car and headed back into the building, not bothering to glance in Wally’s direction. He wasn’t totally lost in thought, aware enough of what was going on around him, but presently his mind was still trying to digest everything he had just

read in the report that had been sent to him by Howie Vaughn in Miami, via Rea Bracken in Washington. Quite possibly, they now had the name of the person who had been hired to move against Debi Patterson. A mercenary named Flynn Logan, last seen in Atlanta a couple of days ago using false papers. That meant he could be in town by now, and most likely was.

The name wasn't on Alex's list of possibles and that bothered Robert mildly. Alex had never been wrong before, at least never failing to ensnare the *potential* in the wider net of suspicion. But there was a first time for everything. Assuming that Mr. Logan was indeed the man selected by the cartel and was in or on his way to Charleston.

Time to go on full alert, everybody on duty at the house for the rest of the weekend, sleeping in shifts. Debi had two spare rooms and had offered their use earlier. Now they would have to take her up on that offer.

When he returned to the top floor office, Debi and Marvin Lincoln were just wrapping up with their client. He sent Gerry back downstairs to pick up his perimeter patrol, then took Ray aside as they stood waiting for their client to finish talking with her partner and her client. He explained the situation to his senior agent and his decision to pull in everybody tonight. Ray nodded without protest, like the pro he was, still watching the doorway to the corridor entrance of the principal's office suite.

A few minutes later, Marvin Lincoln escorted the client out of the office and Debi turned to Robert, shaking her head.

"Sometimes clients can be such children," she said with a hint of a grin. "But I'm sure you don't know anything about that."

Robert said nothing, smiling slightly.

Principal Target

“Right,” Debi said. “Good response. I’ll be ready to go in just a few minutes, boys, just let me go and make some notes and put the file away.”

“Sure thing,” Robert said, listening through his earpiece as Gerry Conrad reported the resumption of his perimeter patrol.

The phone on Debi’s assistant’s desk rang and she picked it up, speaking briefly into the receiver before glancing at her boss.

“It’s Lani Jenkins,” the assistant said. “She says she needs to talk to you urgently and that you weren’t answering at home or on your cell.”

Debi smiled.

“That’s because I’m not at home and my cell was turned off for the meeting. I’ll take it in my office. Tell her to hold on for a minute.”

Then Debi winked at Robert and Ray and went into her office, closing the door behind her.

“You hang here,” Robert said to Ray. “I’m gonna go walk the floor and check out in the hall.”

Ray nodded, moving back in front of the door to Debi’s office, hands clasped in front of him, expression sober.

The assistant’s phone rang again as Robert left the office, and he heard her answer, but did not hear what she said. Probably telling whomever that her boss was on another call and would they like to leave a message. Of course, that is assuming the call was even for Debi. She was not known for spending a lot of time in her office, but Lani Jenkins had thought to try to contact her here after failing to get her at home or on the cell. Maybe somebody else tried the same thing.

Or maybe the call was for the assistant.

Stellen Qxz

Didn't really matter, Robert pondered. Unless, of course, it was Flynn Logan calling to establish his target's whereabouts. Now that was a cheery thought.

Probably misplaced, but maybe not.

We'll find out shortly, he thought, then walked to the front of the office suite and had a slow look around, seeing many busy young people, a few middle aged, and none of them apparently armed or possessing hostile intent toward his principal. Or so he hoped.

Again, we'll find out shortly, he thought grimly.

Chapter 32

Cross Lanes, West Virginia

Robert waited until Tino and Andie reported for night shift at a quarter to seven before gathering everyone into the dining room of Debi's house, the principal included because this affected her the most. Day shift already knew they were not going home tonight, and advanced precautions had already been taken to prepare for this likelihood. Each agent brought an overnight bag with two days worth of clothing with them to each shift, knowing that something might occur that made it impossible for them to leave, as had happened today.

Everyone else was sitting around the table, Debi having prepared a platter of cold sandwiches and chips and sodas for them to snack on. Robert stood at one end of the table, facing everyone, his jacket off, the heavily starched white dress shirt he wore still reasonably crisp after nearly twelve hours of wear.

"Now as I indicated, there is no absolute confirmation that this Logan fellow is the man the cartel hired to come after Debi, but it is highly suspicious that he gets a retainer from an unknown benefactor and then is next seen in Atlanta with false documents. And then there's the information that the DEA passed on this afternoon about the commission from Fabio Sandoval himself—via his security chief—to kidnap Debi and bring her back to Mexico. When you factor that in with the knowledge that Flynn Logan has worked for the cartel at least three times that can be confirmed—one of those jobs being a kidnapping—it seems more than just coincidental. And because of that, I have decided to keep everyone

here tonight. We'll be leaving Sunday anyway and I'll give everyone a chance to go home and get what they need to before then, in turn. For the moment, I'd just feel better if we were all together. Any questions?"

Wally Holt raised his hand.

"Yeah, Wally?"

"Two bedrooms and four of us from day shift gotta sleep," he said. "We gonna be getting to know one another real well or what?"

Everyone chuckled, even Robert.

"We'll work that out," he said. "Actually, Ray can bunk out in the van. It's got a fold-down cot."

The tech specialist nodded wryly.

"Not very comfortable," he remarked. "But it'll do."

"One problem solved," Gerry said.

"Two problems solved," Robert told him. "I won't be sleeping much and can probably just stretch out on the living room sofa."

Debi Patterson had to fight very hard at that moment not to offer to share her bed with him. A hospitable gesture to be sure, but probably one he would be reluctant to take her up on. Too bad.

"Anything else?" Robert asked.

"Yeah," Andie said, a curious glint in her eyes. "This information about the kidnap plan came from DEA undercover agents. Where'd we get the stuff on this Logan character?"

Wally Holt stared over at Robert, an almost imperceptible grin on his lips.

"Other sources, Andie," Robert replied.

She looked back at him for a few moments then nodded.

"Oh," she said. "Secret stuff again. Sometimes I almost forget what you used to do for a living."

Principal Target

“I’ve always done the same thing for a living, young lady,” Robert replied deadpan. “Make the world safe for democracy, little babies, cute puppies, and pretty flowers.”

Once again, everyone burst into laughter. Debi was watching Robert very intently at that moment, feeling something near frenetic growing deeply within her. God this man was driving her crazy, and he did not even know it.

“Okay folks,” the detail leader said in a firm tone. “The next few days are going to be a bit of a strain. We’ll just have to make the best of it. Now we need to get everybody back on post, and let the uniformed guys get something to eat. Andie, Tino, go ahead and finish your sandwiches, Ray and I will cover outside till you’re done.”

Andie nodded, reaching back and rubbing the fresh nicotine patch on the right side of her neck. It had been two days since she had decided to try to quit smoking yet again. Everyone, especially her son James, hoped this time would mean success, but Robert wasn’t sure. The way she rubbed that patch hinted at her desire to be free of it. And maybe trying to quit in the middle of an assignment wasn’t the best of ideas. Of course, if there was trouble, the chances were good that the bad guys would really been in for the unleashing of hell if they faced Andie right now.

Bright side to everything.

Robert and Ray got their jackets and walked toward the hallway leading down to the front door, leaving everyone else to finish their sandwiches.

Unbeknownst to Robert, at that very moment he was also being lashed to a four-poster bed with silk scarves, completely naked, and ravished mercilessly by an insatiable fifty-three year old former federal judge. Well at least that’s what was going on in the mind of the fifty-three year old former federal judge.

Andie caught her eye and both women smiled at one another. She wondered if Andie had any clue what was going through her mind. Probably not. Being a highly skilled attorney, Debi Patterson was as skilled as a poker player in the art of not showing her feelings. Or so she hoped.

Maybe a cold shower would help.

Or maybe she could come downstairs tonight while Robert was dozing on the couch and pretend she was sleepwalking. Now that would be something.

Oh, awfully sorry, sir, did I accidentally slip and fall on top of you while I was sleepwalking naked? Oh, terribly sorry. Say, while I'm here, mind if we have a go?

Yeah, probably not.

Now she was blushing. Great. Luckily for her, Gerry Conrad had just told a joke and everyone was laughing, not paying her any attention, and she could cover her redness with laughter. Too bad she had no idea what the hell she was laughing about.

Chapter 33

Durango, Mexico

There were two men dying slowly and painfully. Their names were Ramon Garza and Eddie Vasquez. Ostensibly, they were small time smugglers from Argentina, and over the past year, had found themselves getting closer and closer to elements within Mexico with direct connections to the major drug cartels, starting out doing low-level jobs on the periphery, and then getting a little more action. The money was good and the access guaranteed them a certain level of protection because the local police were reluctant to go after people who had ties to the cartels, even peripheral ones.

At least it had previously guaranteed that certain level of safety. No longer. And it was not the police who were killing these two men. It was one of their prime benefactors, *El Jefe Seguridad* of the Chihuahua cartel, Ignacio Riva himself.

Within two hours of Nina Sabetella's phone call to the second disposable cell phone, the information she had relayed had found its way all the way down to Chihuahua, and to the ears of Ignacio Riva. This information, though not particularly specific, confirmed for Riva a suspicion that he had been harboring for quite some time. A suspicion that there was a spy or spies somewhere close in Don Fabio's operation. And like any good security boss, Riva had quietly and deliberately set out to identify this spy or spies and to destroy them. To that end, he had begun to carefully compartmentalize information, add in some disinformation, and made sure he knew exactly who possessed which particular tidbits of data. The phone call

from the young girl in Washington had sealed the fates of the two men being tortured to death right now.

It had been no slip that he had let them overhear small details about the Don's desire to kidnap the federal judge who had sent his son to his fate in prison. He knew that it was just the kind of information that a spy would feel compelled to report to his superiors right away. And he had been correct, his suspicions about the two Argentine smugglers having grown significantly since he learned earlier in the month that they had not in fact executed a man who was known to have ripped them off. Standard procedure in these matters was a brutal show of force to ensure that such things did not happen again. And supposedly the two men had killed the thief, with witnesses to the act, but apparently the whole thing had been a part of some elaborate ruse designed to make the men appear to be something they were not. Which could only mean one thing in Riva's mind, they were not really the criminals they pretended to be. Most likely police or federal agents, maybe even on the payroll of the Americans.

Today the two men were confirmed as undercover operatives of the American Drug Enforcement Administration. So now they were paying for their treachery, as would all of the so-called *witnesses* who had vouched for their alleged brutal deeds.

Ignacio Riva did not enjoy all aspects of his work, least of all this facet of it; however, he knew how important it was to send messages, particularly to law enforcement. Therefore, he stood calmly and watched as the two men died little by little, begging for their lives, begging for the pain to stop, and knowing that the men who were inflicting it were absolute experts at keeping a person alive for an excruciatingly long time.

Principal Target

Riva sighed passively as one of the two men screamed hideously, blood splattering from his ruined belly as the flesh was flayed.

Lessons must be taught and messages must be sent. A brief image entered his mind at that moment and he was seeing not the two men, but a woman staked out and being slowly ripped apart by razor sharp machetes, or perhaps even feral dogs, and Don Fabio with a ringside seat watching the brutal spectacle with a smile of delight on his lips.

Yes, soon it would be the American woman's turn to suffer this fate. And after that, Ignacio Riva was going on vacation. He'd been working very hard lately and needed to get away. Perhaps to Europe, maybe even the Far East. Very far away from Mexico. And away from all of this.

At least for a little while anyway.

Chapter 34

Dallas, Texas

By eleven Saturday morning, Alex Wells had already been working for six hours, unable to sleep past four a.m. She climbed out of the very comfortable king-sized bed in her room on the ninth floor of the W Dallas Victory Hotel once she realized she wouldn't be able to go back to sleep, and went over to the desk where her laptop set, powered down in sleep mode. The machine could sleep just fine, unlike its master.

Before the sun had started to come up, Alex had reviewed all of her notes, rechecked the floor plans of the hotel she had received from the security supervisor on duty when she and Jim had checked in last night—actually he wasn't called a supervisor, but a *talent coach*—and studied a map of the immediate area surrounding the hotel all the way over to the *Mansion on Turtle Creek* and out to Love Field where the principal would be brought in on Sunday evening by charter plane. She even studied several alternate routes to the closest medical facility with the capacity to treat level-one traumas—Baylor University Medical Center on Junius Street.

She also reviewed her threat file again. She'd called Robert when they landed and he told her about the two developments regarding the threat posed to their client. The first was the information from the DEA, which confirmed their earlier suspicion that it was the intention of the cartel to abduct and not outright murder Debi, taking her back to Don Fabio Sandoval in Mexico in order to be put to death by the man's own hands, no doubt.

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The second piece of information came from their friend Howie Vaughn at the Miami Station of the CIA's Crime and Narcotics Center. Flynn Logan, known mercenary with previous ties to the Mexicans, had even done at least one confirmed kidnapping. Robert had told her how the Agency had recorded the retainer in Logan's bank account and his subsequent disappearance from Belize, then brief reappearance under an alias in Atlanta a few days ago, before being lost once more.

Alex essentially agreed that it was too strong a coincidence to ignore, Logan receiving a payment then showing up in the US under a false name. However, after reviewing his record—supplied by an acquaintance in FBI Counterintelligence who still owed her a lot of favors from the old days—she just found it hard to believe that Logan would be given such a responsibility as the move against Debi. Sure, he had done a kidnapping once before. But it was one thing to kidnap somebody—even a minister's daughter—in Guatemala, but quite something else to do that in America. Then have the skills it would take to get her out of the country and down to Mexico while a massive manhunt was underway, as surely would be the case after Debi was taken and her bodyguards slain. This required a level of special expertise and cunning that Alex just didn't see even remotely hinted at in Logan's file.

He was a blunt instrument, and a very good one, but somehow she just could not see Flynn Logan being picked for this job, and she had told this to Robert during their third conversation last night, just before she climbed into bed at midnight and tried to go to sleep.

Robert had listened, and knew better than to dismiss his wife's analysis out of hand. As he had thought before, it was not like her to miss a potential hostile in her profiles, usually nailing the right suspect in the top three or five. Flynn Logan had been nowhere on

her radar in the assessment she had compiled and her reasoning in picking the six individuals in question was valid and sound. And since that time, she had narrowed the list down to three likely suspects. When she received the FBI file on Logan, Alex went back over her own assessment, carefully considering all factors, and still came to the same conclusion. Therefore, she told Robert that she saw no reason to alter her thinking. She admitted that Logan might be a part of the hostile team, but not the leader. At least not ultimately. She even surmised that perhaps he was a decoy, allowed to show up on the radar to mislead them into thinking that he was the main opposition when he really wasn't.

Possible, Robert also admitted, but told her that that kind of thinking just led to more paranoia and circular reasoning, something they both always tried to avoid. In the end, it was decided that it didn't really matter, whatever happened they would deal with it, as they always had.

The Director of Risk for the W, Jeff Rodman, a forty-nine year old graying Texas native who had thirteen years under his belt with the U.S. Secret Service, had agreed to meet Alex and Jim for breakfast at eight Saturday morning, and then take them on a personal tour of the hotel, as well as introduce them to key staff. The Director of Operations, Connie Guillermo, also joined them, and by ten o'clock, they had met everyone of relevance from front desk to housekeeping. They were also let into the suite Debi Patterson would be staying in when she arrived tomorrow, as well as the other rooms the detail would use, verifying that the locks had been removed from the hotel master and transferred to a set of special masters that Alex was personally handed by Risk Director Rodman himself. Jim and Alex looked through all the rooms, paying particular attention to the locks on the doors and windows, verifying that the door which adjoined Debi's suite to the room that would be the command post would open

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unobstructed, and they also received a personal assurance from the head housekeeper that all of her people understood they would not be allowed to enter any of the rooms without an escort from a member of the security detail.

When that was done Alex had gone back to her room and made more notes, then called the room of Sally Quinn, a criminal litigation specialist from Los Angeles and former federal judge, and the person organizing the event for which their client was coming to Dallas. Ms. Quinn had arrived late last night and called Alex briefly to let her know she was in the hotel, but then told her that she was not feeling all that well and would prefer to get some rest and they could meet on Saturday, probably late in the day. When Alex spoke to her just before eleven, the woman told her she was feeling somewhat better but still wanted to rest and perhaps they could meet for dinner later that night. Alex said that would be fine with her, then went back to working on her computer.

She had sent Jim Paxon over to the Mansion on Turtle Creek to let him advance that venue and report back to her. Jim was a capable and competent operator and she saw no reason not to give him some room and let him handle some things on his own. Also, she decided, his being an ex-cop and all, to let him handle police liaison, too. The Dallas Police lieutenant she had spoken to from the local precinct had given her the name of the sergeant who would be in command of field operations for the watch this Saturday morning and had advised him to expect a call from Alex. She gave Jim the name and number and told him to call and set up a meeting. Jim seemed happy to have the responsibility and trust, but he was a little reluctant to leave Alex alone, remembering his conversation with Robert before leaving Charleston.

Sensing this, Alex had smiled and touched his arm gently, then told him to get his ass in gear and do what *she* had told him to

do. He knew she was well capable of taking care of herself, had seen her in action under fire before, but he also knew the threat they were up against, and there was a small part of him that was just a tiny bit chauvinistic. Still, Alex was leader of their advance detail and had given him a direct order. He was an ex-cop, trained to obey the chain-of-command. So he went and did what he had been told to do.

Alex yawned and leaned back in the chair, stretching her arms above her head. Now she was getting sleepy. Depending on how things went over the next couple of hours—the primary and backup vehicles were being delivered to the hotel at one and she had to check them out and sign for them, then they would be secured under guard in the VIP section of the hotel’s parking deck across the street—she might just lie down and take a nap. But for right now, she still had some things to take care of. First though she would stand up and stretch her legs.

Her room, like the hotel itself, was luxurious, everything classy and real, right down to the bottle of Cabernet Sauvignon that set on a low table near the large picture window. Not complimentary, of course, but you could drink it if you wanted to pay the extra ninety-five bucks (special hotel discount), which Alex did not. Actually, she rarely drank alcohol, usually only on special occasions, and then only a glass of wine or champagne at the most. When she was in college she drank a lot more, but so did everybody in college. Everybody that is, except for Robert Chandler. He didn’t drink at all, never had, and although when they met, and later started dating, he never objected to her or any of their other friends drinking around him, little by little Alex had started to cut back, till finally she’d have the occasional beer or glass of wine, and those occasions became even rarer as time went by.

Alex was standing at the window now looking down at the apartment complex across North Houston Street. It was sunny and

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very warm this late Saturday morning and lots of people were out and about, mostly dressed in light clothing, some shorts and sandals here and there, some with kids, others with dogs, some on bikes, everybody getting on with their lives, enjoying their weekend. And here she was working. She didn't really mind, though it would have been better if Robert had been with her. Everything was better when Robert was with her.

Old memories were triggered then and as she leaned her head against the cool window glass, her mind wandered back nearly two decades in time, thinking about other Saturdays, and how she and Robert had spent them together...

After that day in the library at Samford when they kissed for the first time, everything had changed for Robert and Alex, and would never be the same again; and they didn't want it any other way. They continued to meet up in the fourth floor Special Collections section of the library every school day, but didn't get much studying done. Neither of them had ever really dated seriously and didn't have much experience kissing, something that was blatantly obvious to both of them in the beginning.

However, in a very short time they managed to teach and learn from one other and experienced the most delightfully romantic encounters anyone has ever had in a college library.

This went on for six months, carrying straight through the summer and their return for fall classes in 1988 when Robert was a senior and Alex a sophomore. By this time, they were deeply in love and anxious to see and be with one another every moment they were apart. It became sort of a game to see who could get out of class the quickest for lunch break and then get up to the fourth floor of the library. Whoever got there first would sit and pretend to be disinterested when the other arrived, but that feigned disinterest never lasted for long, and they would embrace fiercely as they moved

into the far corner near the back, and would kiss deeply, passionately, and intently for as long as they could.

From the beginning, they both had to fight hard to resist the primal urges that swooned deep within each of their young bodies. And although Robert had not known this at the time, Alex had to wrestle with her passions just as strongly as he had to in order to keep them under control. She had wanted him in every conceivable way from the first moment they kissed, actually for quite a while prior to that, and when they started to become intimate, those feelings only intensified.

Despite Robert's best efforts to control himself and not seem too eager, always being the perfect gentleman, Alex could tell that he was physically aroused by her, and that only sought to increase her desire for him, and a little mischievous urge to drive him nuts.

She wished he would make the first move, to touch her in a more intimate way than he had thus far, but she knew he would not. Robert would never do anything even remotely or seemingly inappropriate, no matter how much his body might want him to. So it would be up to Alex to initiate. So be it, she thought, gathering her courage.

It was a Thursday afternoon, a week before Thanksgiving, and they were in their special place in the library once more, both pleased with having aced a couple of tests that they needed to do well on for their respective majors. They had arrived in the library at the same time late in the afternoon, lots of other students scrambling to get term papers finished before the break next week. Alex and Robert had already finished their work, and with the tests out of the way, they had a bit of time to relax. The best way they could think of to do that was retire to their *secret place* for some quality *face-time*, as Alex liked to put it.

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They had been kissing for about ten minutes, laughing as they always did, talking about inane things, anything that would make the other giggle, then Alex looked into Robert's dark brown eyes, smiling at her, and suddenly her eyes became serious. She reached for his left hand as it rested on her waist, taking it and pulling it up to her right breast. Robert's eyes became serious at that moment, too, but only for an instant. He smiled once again then kissed her intensely, holding her tightly against his body.

The weekend after Thanksgiving, they slept together for the first time, at a hotel just down the road from the campus, late on Saturday afternoon. It was the first time for both of them, something that had not been previously discussed, but had not surprised either of them as they revealed this secret to one another on that afternoon upon entering the room, sitting on the bed, holding hands, and talking. Robert was probably more nervous, and a little embarrassed to make his admission. Being a guy and twenty-one, and never having been with a woman. Alex, nineteen, didn't find it the least bit odd, knowing Robert as she did, and she made a joke about *the blind leading the blind* that had made him laugh—as she intended—and instantaneously eased the tension of the moment.

Following that first special encounter, Robert and Alex both knew there would be others, many others, many, *many* others. At first, they would steal away to her dorm room on campus—because Robert still lived at home with his parents—whenever they could. However, that was not the safest prospect because Samford University was a very conservative Southern Baptist institution, and while there were many a liberal minded student and faculty member there at the time, there were also the sticks-in-the-mud (aka *stuck-up prudes*). Samford had an absolute zero-tolerance policy against men and women entering each other's dorms, any student caught violating this policy could face a severe suspension, possibly even an expulsion.

Even so, at least half of the student body was violating this policy on a regular basis. In fact, Alex's suitemate regularly had her boyfriend over to the dorm and had told Alex if she ever felt like doing the same, it was fine with her. However, until she met Robert, Alex had no intention of doing any such thing.

Eventually, a number of guys were busted sneaking out of some of the female dorm rooms and campus security was instructed to make more regular patrols of the area. This, of course, did not halt the activity altogether, but it did suffice to dampen it down a bit, and because Robert and Alex were prudent and smart, they decided it would be best not to tempt fate.

So they started going to the hotel down from the school. It was a Courtyard by Marriott, not very cheap, but Robert had a part-time job and low expenses because he did live with his parents, so he could afford the cost of the room, usually on the weekend, beginning on Saturday morning. Robert would always go to the hotel around eight and check in, then call Alex at her dorm and tell her the room number. Then, an hour later, she would show up with her overnight bag and they would spend the rest of the day making love, sometimes going out briefly for lunch, sometimes ordering pizza or Chinese to be delivered, and sometimes skipping food altogether.

This went on practically every weekend right up until Robert graduated the following May. Saturday became the couple's favorite day of the week, and even later, after Robert entered on duty with the Agency and was assigned to Miami Field Office, Alex came and visited sometimes on the weekends, and they still had their Saturdays.

After Alex moved down to be with him before they got married, they both made sure they kept as many of their Saturdays free as possible, and probably made love more than the law would have allowed had the law known about them. Or cared.

Principal Target

Actually, even now, when time permits, Robert and Alex spend many of their Saturdays naked, chasing one another all over their house, and doing deliciously naughty things to one other...

Alex was grinning now, and she wasn't sleepy anymore. Actually, she was libidinous and wishing Robert was with her now more than ever. She reached back and took her long, straight hair in both hands and was about to run her fingers through her scalp when her cell phone rang. It was Jim.

"Hello?" she answered, and then listened as he reported what he had learned at the Mansion.

Chapter 35

Hugo Bock was a happy and satisfied man. Although revised and taking longer to execute than originally allotted for, his plan for the abduction and transportation of Debra Patterson to her fate was heading toward a successful conclusion and he was about to be several million dollars richer.

As it turned out, Dallas was a much better location for such an operation because it was larger, better transport facilities, and closer to the southern border. There were also more members of the criminal underworld he could look to in order to facilitate his needs, and he knew they were reliable because he had worked with them before. Flynn Logan was also turning out to be quite an asset as well, everything Jean-Pierre had promised he would be, and his men seemed confident and professional for the most part. Since their arrival in Dallas, they had very discreetly gone about organizing according to Hugo's plan, preparing everything in detail. A team was also in place, rotating shifts, keeping an eye on the hotel where the target would be staying from Sunday night until Tuesday afternoon, or at least that was her plan; Hugo had other plans.

According to the watchers, two members of the target's protection detail had checked into the hotel on Friday night, Alexandra Wells and James Paxon. Hugo had expected this. The advance team. They would make sure everything was arranged before their principal arrived, all security needs met, everything checking out according to their specifications before their principal would be allowed on the property.

Principal Target

Upon hearing of the arrival of the advance team, Hugo had ordered Logan to tell his watchers to keep a very low profile because he did not want to risk tipping off the opposition that they were under surveillance. He advised them that Alexandra Wells had been a CIA agent for eight years and was probably quite good at detecting surveillance, so his men should take that into account. Logan said he would pass the information along, but had confidence in the abilities of his men.

Well that was fine and good, Hugo had said, but he did not want anyone underestimating the opposition because the leader of the team was a woman. During his time, Hugo Bock had worked with many professional operators who were women, and a number of them had proved to be quite cunning and deadly. According to the background brief he had received on the members of the protection detail, this Wells woman was quite adept at her chosen profession, with many successful operations to her credit, and a few recorded kills. She was not a person to be underestimated in the least.

With all planning details taken care of for the day and nothing else to do, Hugo had gone back to the hotel he was staying in on Dallas Parkway, just north of Love Field, the Westin Dallas Galleria. He was a bit restless and even a little anxious, used to going somewhere quickly and getting the job done and then leaving, usually with a dead body or two left behind. This time the job had required more, and the money was good so he hadn't complained, but he just didn't like all of this sitting back and waiting around. He promised himself that this would be the last job he did that didn't involve straightforward killing. No matter what money he was offered in the future, nothing but assassination work for the rest of his career. Much simpler that way, largely because when he was killing people he usually did it alone, without the need for a large team. Occasionally there was the need for a countersurveillance team, maybe one for

diversion, but usually he did the job by himself, and preferred it that way.

Hugo had a suite on the top floor of the hotel, and after a long hot shower, he stood naked at the large picture window with a glass of chilled champagne in his left hand, staring down on the city. The sun was starting to go down and the fading glow backlit him in the darkened room, but since the windows were tinted on the other side, no one looking from any of the windows of the other buildings that lined the parkway could see inside. Not that Hugo cared, he was proud of his body, and he knew he looked good naked.

There was still dampness in his shoulder length hair when he ran a hand through it. He liked the feel of his luxurious hair when it was wet, and the rogue look it gave him when he looked into the mirror.

There was a knock at the door and he smiled, putting the glass down on the table next to the window and picking up the fluffy bathrobe the hotel provided for its guests. The German killer padded slowly across the carpeted floor to the door, paused briefly to look through the peephole, and then unlocked the door.

Standing in the corridor wearing a simple black dress was a very attractive young woman with ash-blond hair. She smiled and came into the room once Hugo stepped aside, introducing herself as *Madeleine* after the door was shut. Hugo smiled. He knew her name was not really Madeleine, but that is the name he had requested she use when he arranged this assignation with the young woman's employer earlier in the afternoon. Madeleine was his favorite name, the name of his favorite teacher in school, a beautiful Jewish girl from Bavaria that young Hugo had had a desperate crush on when he was ten.

Due to youth and circumstance, Hugo had never been afforded the opportunity to express his feelings to the *real* Madeleine,

Principal Target

and over the years as he was growing up he began to have many erotic fantasies involving his teacher—former teacher by the time he was twelve because she transferred away and Hugo never saw her again.

When he took his first girl to bed—actually a bed of hay in a barn on his family’s farm outside Augsburg—it was not the face of the girl beneath him he had seen during that all too brief encounter, it was the face of *his* Madeleine, with the ash-blond hair. And later, as he had other girls and then women, still the only face he saw, the only body he ever imagined himself being inside, belonged to Madeleine, simply no other woman would ever do. To Hugo she was the symbol of female perfection. And now, as he bought the services of women, many women, his requirements were always the same. Hair color, eye color—chocolate brown—body type, age, and name.

Hugo offered the prostitute a glass of champagne, which she accepted with a smile, and he stood watching her, feeling the stirrings deep within his body. And then suddenly, loins burning, he was taking the glass from her hand, roughly pushing her down on the bed, and removing his robe...

Madeleine left the room two hours later, a bit bruised and battered, but with a hefty fee in her purse. Something about the eyes of the man with the slight German accent had told her from the beginning that he would be rough, and demand *certain* things, but she had been assured by her boss that she would be well compensated for her trouble. Which was good because she probably would not be able to work for the rest of the weekend.

Hugo took another long shower when he was alone again, and as he stood under the hot water, his mind filled with the images of his young teacher from thirty years ago. That is the only way he could see her, as the young woman she had been. Twenty-four and perfect forever.

Stellen Qxz

Also on his mind was the job at hand. Not long now and he would complete his contract, leaving quite a few bodies behind for the authorities to deal with, but then death was his business.

And business was always good.

Chapter 36

Jim Paxon returned to the W Dallas Victory Hotel at five p.m. and reported in to Alex, giving her full details of his activities since they had last spoken, then she took him across to the parking deck and showed him the vehicles that they would be using while in Dallas. The primary was a black Ford Excursion, armored, modified suspension, everything necessary to provide the protection required as well as the comfort most clients usually expected. Additionally there were two modified Ford Taurus sedans—Robert’s vehicle of choice—and a Chevy Suburban with an enlarged storage compartment that would be used to transport gear and for additional backup. Alex explained her plan for getting all four of the vehicles over to Love Field before the rest of the team arrived with the client tomorrow afternoon, then they went back over to the hotel and spent a half hour going over all their notes, Alex typing them up in report form for transmission to Robert via email later that night.

At a quarter after six, Alex told Jim he could take the rest of the evening off, but stay available in case something came up. She had dinner planned for seven-thirty in the restaurant on the sixteenth floor with Sally Quinn to discuss the event itself, and they would all probably go over to the Mansion tomorrow to review everything together.

“That’s fine,” Jim said, walking to the door of Alex’s room. “By the way, the security manager’s name is Helen King and she said she’ll be there from eleven until four tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” Alex said. “I’ll see if I can arrange for Sally to be ready to go over there between those times. Thanks again, and good work today, Jim.”

He turned at the door and smiled.

“Thanks, boss. And if you need me for anything else...”

Alex nodded as he reached back and opened the door.

“I’ll call. Have a good night. And don’t forget to call your wife.”

Jim grinned.

“Not likely,” he said. “I don’t call her and she’ll call me. Then I’m in real trouble.”

They both laughed, and Jim left, closing the door behind him. Alex went over and turned the deadbolt and slid the latch into place. Security at the W was excellent, but Alex was always the prudent security agent, never taking anything for granted. Which is why she had made it to age thirty-eight without dying.

She walked into the bathroom and turned on the tap in the sink, glancing at her reflection in the mirror, and thinking about the hotel’s name once again. It made her smile. The “W”.

At first she had wondered if perhaps the name—despite it being a national chain—was in honor of the current White House occupant, this being Texas and all, but she knew this was not the case. Thank the universe for that. Alex didn’t know if she’d be able to stay there if she had to run across pictures of and dedications to that man all over the place.

She sighed with a bit of melancholy, and a little anger. Alex was a lifelong republican, as were her parents. When she grew up in the ’80’s Ronald Regan was president and it was a great time to be an American—at least in her view. The country was strong and it was respected, and hell, it was *winning* the Cold War. But now... now nothing could be farther from the truth. America’s image around the

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world was lower than Cuba's, and its once all-powerful military was stretched to the breaking point—beyond it by some estimates—fighting wars it did not want to fight and should never have been sent to fight, and all at the whims and because of the stupidity of the man some called *W*. How the hell could he be his father's son? Maybe he wasn't...

The first presidential election in which Alex was able to vote was in 1988—coincidentally the first time Robert was old enough as well—and she remembered how excited she had been, a member of the Young Republicans at Samford University, working in campaign offices, helping to organize get-out-the-vote efforts, and she loved every minute of it, knowing that the successor to Reagan would be someone nearly as great, a man with a long track record, proven experience, and the right temperament and intelligence to see the country and the world through some pretty rough times. And, of course, he was elected, due in a small part, no doubt, to the efforts of one *young republican* in Birmingham, Alabama.

But now, all these years later... everything was a mess. And it made her angry, very angry, but she could do little about it, which frustrated her even more. She was not yet at the same point as her husband: *8Politicians, fuck 'em all, the long, the short, and the tall!* A line he had read a few years ago in a Victor O'Reilly novel. Robert had given up on politics altogether, believing that the process and everyone involved with it had become too corrupt to ever change things for the better, and Alex had to admit it did seem that way when she watched the news, read the papers and periodicals these days, but she just couldn't give up. Not yet anyway. There was a presidential election in less than two years, and maybe there was a chance for someone to emerge, republican or democrat—although she hoped it would be a republican—and maybe the country could be led out of the

⁸ From *Games of the Hangman* by Victor O'Reilly.

desperate position that it was in now. Right itself and return to its greatness. To contemplate otherwise was simply unthinkable for her.

She sighed again, splashing water on her face, drying it with a towel.

“Maybe you’re being naive, Alex,” she said in a low whisper. “Maybe Robert is right. He usually is you know.”

The room telephone rang and she went to pick it up. The Maitre D from the hotel’s restaurant, just calling to verify her reservation. Alex confirmed and thanked the man, then hung up and went over to the closet to take out the clothes she would wear tonight.

Chapter 37

Sally Quinn was a sixty-one year old black woman who had grown up in a tough neighborhood in South Central Los Angeles, but had not let that hold her back. She struggled hard to graduate from high school and got a scholarship to UCLA, then went on to law school after that, graduating near the top of her class. Then, after working for a few years as a public defender, she switched over to the DA's side and became a prosecutor.

She was a rising star in the LA County DA's Office and came to the attention of a lot of powerful people within the legal community, and eventually one of those people approached her and asked if she would be interested in joining the Justice Department. No fool, and recognizing a good opportunity when she saw one, Sally took the offer, moved to Washington, D.C., and never looked back. Over the years following her appointment she took on many high-powered positions within DOJ, and was a part of several major headline grabbing prosecutions, most notably that of the reputed head of the *Five Families* in New York City, which she personally managed as U.S. Attorney for the Southern District. Her reward for bringing that one in was a presidential lifetime appointment to the federal bench, a crowning achievement for a poor black woman from *The Hood* who was just a couple years past fifty. And Sally took to her new job with vigor and determination, her intention to apply the law as the founders had intended, not allowing her personal opinions or political pressures to guide her. She was good, well respected by both

sides, and even when she didn't rule the way one group or the other wanted her to, they still respected her judgment.

Then September 2001 came and everything changed. In Sally's learned and well-reasoned opinion, people went nuts, let their fear take over their common sense and let the government go too far in taking away their rights to privacy and personal freedoms. Many people gave in to the notion that the only way for them to achieve safety was to surrender their rights and liberty to the government, to agree to allow themselves to be spied upon and investigated without proper legislative or judicial oversight, or any oversight for that matter. As a judge and a lover of the law—not to mention her country—Sally saw this as a disaster in the making, and it was not long before she and some of her likeminded colleagues on the bench were proven correct.

She wrote letters, essays, and articles for various publications warning about the dire situation she saw looming if people did not start to stand up and make their elected leaders accountable to them once more. However, she was largely dismissed as reactionary and unpatriotic, even a left-wing liberal, which was a laugh because Sally had been a fairly conservative republican for most of her adult life, but she could not stomach what she saw happening right before her very eyes, and not while she was wearing the robe of a federal judge. It was simply a bridge too far, and she would do everything in her power on the bench to fight it.

But by 2005, Judge Quinn could no longer remain on the bench. She could not be fired because her appointment was lifetime, but rumors began to circulate about someone in the Justice Department starting a not-so discreet investigation into Sally's personal and professional lives, looking for anything that could be used to discredit her, show that she was unfit to be a judge, and then

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maybe have her impeached, the only way, other than death, that a federal judge can be removed from office.

Upon learning of this *investigation*, she launched a formal complaint with the Inspector General's Office at the DOJ but was met with shrugs of ignorance and protests of innocence, however someone did whisper to her that if she had nothing to hide, she should not worry about a little scrutiny. After all, the country was *at war*, everyone had to expect a little loss of their privacy for the *greater good* of protecting the nation.

Infuriated and feeling totally betrayed by a system that she had supported and worked so hard to better all of her adult life, Sally Quinn resigned from the bench, thus giving her opponents precisely what they wanted, or at least seeming to do so. She was no longer on the bench, but she was far from prepared to quit and let the bastards win.

Being an ex-federal judge does give a person a lot of clout in some circles, and Sally intended to use that clout in those circles and others. For a couple of years before she resigned, Sally had been in regular contact with other judges, prosecutors, and constitutional law experts, many of whom didn't agree on much, but all of whom did agree that the federal government was going too far in their so-called efforts to protect the citizens of the United States. This became most evident to many of them following the revelations about the post-9-11 domestic surveillance operations that the NSA had been conducting at the behest of the president. Operations taking place without approval from lawmakers or with the securing of warrants from any federal judge, including the eleven judges who sit on the ultra secret FISA (Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act) Court. A body that had, up until the current administration, only been known to turn down five requests for warrants from the government since its inception in the late 1970s. In the wake of these revelations, several prominent federal

judges and some prosecutors resigned in open protest. And Sally immediately contacted all of them.

When they were all still on the bench or otherwise on the federal payroll, they could do little more than talk privately, sometimes meeting in small groups, but now that they were free from their responsibilities as judges and prosecutors, they were free to organize, and that is exactly what they had done. The *National Society for Freedom and Justice*. Sally Quinn was its first president, popularly elected by the fifty-one members. One of the main aims of the Society, and Sally herself, was to find ways to get people to listen to what they had to say, to present logical and factual arguments that effectively countered the propaganda and scare tactics often successfully used by the other side. What they really needed was someone who could speak to people with passion and intelligence and in such a way as not to intimidate, anger, or bore them.

Debi Patterson and Sally Quinn had never met while they both served on the bench, but Sally had read a few of Debi's opinions and was quite impressed with the younger jurist's logic and reasoning. About six months earlier, a friend of hers had given her the second book Debi had published entitled *What Price Freedom?* Sally was riveted from the first chapter and had read the whole thing in a weekend. In four hundred thirty-eight pages, the author had organized and presented one of the strongest cases Sally had ever seen for reversing the dangerous trend that was taking place in the American judicial and political systems at the moment, a trend that the author—and many, many others—saw leading straight to disaster in a few short years.

Excited, Sally presented the book to the other members of the Society and told them she believed that they might just have found the woman they were looking for to be their spokesperson. When the others read the book, most of them agreed with Sally, suggesting that

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she try to contact the author, Debra Patterson, and see if she would be interested in talking with them.

The first meeting was five months ago, and Debi had been receptive to Sally's offer, agreeing to meet with some other members of the Society, and even give a couple of speeches about some of the things in her book, but she wasn't sure she wanted to join the Society full-time. Sally took Debi up on her offer, and additional meetings were held. Soon, Debi found herself becoming more and more involved with the group's activities and not minding. Though starkly different in many respects, they all seemed to be of the same mentality when it came to the issue of the erosion of civil liberties and the rise in the power of the federal government, in particular that of the intelligence and security services of the executive branch.

Then last month there was yet another shocking revelation, this one involving the ⁹FBI's admitted misuse of the *Patriot Act* to obtain records on citizens who weren't even suspected of being involved in any criminal or terrorist activity. That was the last straw for Debi. She agreed with the overarching sentiment of the rest of the group, more had to be done at once to motivate people, in particular lawmakers, to put a halt to the executive power grab and abuse before everybody woke up one day and discovered they really were living in a police state. An idea that most people still could not seriously see as a possibility, but to students of history, in particular legal scholars who are probably more likely to see the signs before anyone else, it was a very real and serious possibility, and not that far off either if the trend held. So Debi agreed to become an official member of the National Society for Freedom and Justice, and she was coming to Dallas on

⁹ FBI Director Robert Mueller made the admission himself in 2007, putting the number somewhere around 2000 times that agents misused the so-called USA Patriot Act.

Sunday to meet with the leadership council and to formally accept the job as their spokesperson.

The only problem was the current death sentence she was living under, and as Sally Quinn had dinner with Alexandra Wells in the restaurant on the 16th floor of the W Hotel in Dallas Saturday night, the former federal judge was highly suspicious of the timing of everything. Alex told her that, while she wouldn't put anything past the current administration, it was highly unlikely that they could have, or even would have, organized the murder of Fabio Sandoval's son in order to get him angry enough to come after the judge who had sentenced him. She doubted if the administration even knew or cared about Debi Patterson, especially since they seemed to have so many critics these days, what was one more?

Reluctantly, Sally seemed to accept this and concentrated on the grilled chicken salad she had ordered. Alex was having a veggie dish that was surprisingly good, something she had not expected to find in Texas. She would have to let Robert know and perhaps they could have a meal there together before they left, if time permitted. They had both become vegetarians in the past five years and sometimes when on the road it was hard to find good places to eat, but they usually managed.

"Well I am concerned about Debi's safety, naturally," Sally Quinn said, looking up from her plate. "However, the work she is going to be doing for us really is very important. I don't want this to sound uncaring, but I hope it will not interfere with her new position."

It did sound uncaring to Alex, but she could also understand where the woman was coming from. She told her that they would just have to see, a lot of things depending on each other, whether or not a move would be made, if it was successful, which Alex didn't mention, and whether or not they could convince Debi to drop out of sight for a while. In all honesty, Alex didn't care one way or the other about

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Debi's new job. She did agree that the work was important, even necessary, but her only concern was with keeping her client alive. Nothing else mattered, and while she didn't exactly tell the other woman this in so many words, the clues were there quite plainly for a very bright lawyer like her to see.

Sally Quinn really didn't like Alex Wells, and she didn't try to disguise her feelings either. *Good, thought Alex, because you're not my principal, which means if somebody does make a move while you're anywhere near us, I don't have to save your life!*

When they finished eating, Sally said that she would be able to go over to the Mansion on Turtle Creek in the morning at eleven for the tour because she was feeling much better now and the meal had helped. Alex left the restaurant with her and they got on the elevator together, Alex stopping at the ninth floor and leaving Sally Quinn to continue on down by herself.

In her room, Alex took off her jacket and hung it up in the closet before going into the bedroom and pulling her Glock and Fobus paddle holster from her belt, dropping them on the bed. She stretched her arms above her head and yawned loudly.

"Christ I'm tired," she said to the empty room. Standing staring at the curtains covering the window, she let her mind wander for a few minutes, making sure that nothing had been forgotten. She couldn't think of anything, but in order to make sure, she went over to the desk and sat down in front of her laptop, which was resting in sleep mode. Powered up, Alex accessed her notes and looked at all checklists. Everything was up to date. Now she was satisfied.

Mostly.

Standing once again, she went back to the closet and took down two hangers. Once she had removed and hung up her clothes she went into the bathroom and took a quick hot shower, then came back into the bedroom and climbed under the covers naked. It was

ten after ten in Dallas, ten after eleven in Charleston. Late, but not too late. She knew Robert would be awake and waiting for her call.

Clutching her cell phone in her left hand, she reached out and turned off the bedside lamp with her right, then pressed the illuminated speed-dial button designated for Robert's cell number. The line rang twice before the deep and rich voice belonging to the light of Alex's life answered.

"*Dirty deeds done dirt cheap,*" Robert said in a straight voice. "Emphasis on the *dirty...*"

Alex giggled, moving her right hand behind her neck and gently massaging the flesh there.

"Hi, babe," she said.

Chapter 38

There were many things that Robert Chandler did not like, but the one he did not like the most is the one that he found himself having to do quite frequently on account of his job. That thing that he doesn't like to do is fly. Completely opposite from his wife, Alex loves to fly, always had from the time she was a little girl. Which explained why she eventually got a private pilot's license and became fully certified in the operation of several different types of light fixed-wing aircraft, could probably even fly the one that Robert found himself on this afternoon, the Cessna Citation Business Jet, model number something, something or other.

The only thing that appealed to Robert about the concept of flying was that it didn't take you days to reach your destination from great distances, but that was simply cold comfort to him and he was quite happy when the pilot announced they were on final approach to Love Field in Dallas. Everyone was belted in and the private flight attendant who was included in the package with the pilots and the plane came through the small cabin and collected any remaining items those onboard wanted to discard.

Robert checked his watch; they were about ten minutes early. Good. He was wearing a pair of noise-eliminating headphones and they were plugged into the same communications console as the one the pilots had access to, this so that he could receive an abort code from Alex in the event something went wrong on the ground before they arrived, or the *all's clear* if everything as okay. Two minutes ago the all's clear signal came through and Robert had relaxed a bit,

hearing his wife's voice through the static, recognizing the proper code sequence they'd agreed upon. Now all they had to do was land safely. Then the knot in his stomach would loosen, but only a little, after all, they were still in the middle of a high-risk protection detail, their client facing a grave threat.

Robert had a window seat on the left side of the plane at the front and the aisle seat next to him was empty. On the other side sat Debi Patterson on the aisle with Andie Pearth next to her. Both women were talking about horseback riding of all things and seemingly oblivious to all else around them. In the case of Andie, Robert knew better. He had watched her often enough to know that even when she seemed not to be paying attention to things around her, she always knew exactly what was going on everywhere.

He glanced out the window and saw the ground coming up fast, but not too fast, and then they touched down. Now he turned on his two-way personal communicator and removed the headphones, slipping a small wireless earpiece with attached mini-microphone into his left ear.

"Centurion One to Centurion Two," he said into microphone. "Report status, please."

The rest of the team members on the plane started turning on their communicators and putting their earpieces in place. Most of them had done so by the time Alex replied: "*Condition purple, status green. Clear to approach the hangar.*"

"Acknowledged, C-Two," Robert said. "The pilot already has the instructions. See you shortly. C-One out."

Robert removed his seatbelt and stood, leaning back and steadying himself against the forward bulkhead to keep his balance as the plane continued to move. The flight attendant looked at him as if she wanted to say something, but elected to keep it to herself. That was the difference working for a private charter as opposed to an

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airline, the rules could not be as strictly enforced because the passengers on this plane were directly paying her salary and could make future employment very difficult for her. So she kept her mouth shut as the handsome bald man in the dark gray suit, whom she assumed to be the man in charge, started giving instructions.

“All right everyone,” Robert said. “As discussed earlier, we’re going into a private hangar on the east side of the property. Once we’ve come to a complete stop and the hangar doors are secured, the door to the plane will be opened and I’ll go down first. Alex will tell us where the vehicles are positioned. The primary and secondary cars will be inside the hangar. Perhaps even the equipment transport vehicle. The CS car will most likely be outside already. Gerry, once I check with Alex, you’ll come down and go to where she tells you the CS car is then take off. There will be a GPS in it with everything marked, including prearranged checkpoints. Do the perimeter, then hold at your first mark until ordered to proceed further.”

Gerry nodded, slipping a fresh piece of spearmint gum in his mouth.

“Roger that,” he said from his seat two rows behind Robert’s.

Robert looked to the back of the cabin to where Wally Holt sat on the left side of the plane.

“Wally, since Jim knows the routes and the hotel’s location, he’ll be the primary driver for the trip to the hotel. You’ll take secondary. Once we get settled and there’s time, you can go out and drive around, check the maps and the GPS, get acclimated.”

Wally nodded.

“No sweat, boss,” he said.

“Tino,” he said to the youngest member of the team sitting in the row directly behind Debi and Andie. “You’re in the transport vehicle. Alex said it’s a Chevy Suburban with plenty of room. You and Ray are going to load up our gear and take it over to the hotel.

Shouldn't take long, and since we're in a secured hangar, you'll probably get it done before we leave. Then the two of you can take the fastest route to the hotel, and be in place when we get there. Alex already has room keys for everybody and we'll get those passed out. CP is adjoining Debi's suite. Opposite side room to the principal's suite is Andie's. That's on the end of the hall. We've got all the rooms in the area, and the stairwell is right there. Alex tells me that hotel security has surveillance cameras in the stairwells on each floor, and due to our presence over the next few days, they will be increasing the number of officers they have on patrol and monitoring the cameras. Any questions so far?"

"Are we gonna post at night while we're here, too?" Andie asked.

"Yes," Robert said as the plane rolled over a bump and he had to grab the bulkhead behind him to maintain his balance. "And we'll go over that later. Hotel security will be providing a guard at night, but one of our people will need to be there, too. Ray, Alex has also arranged for you to meet with whoever is in charge of technical security at the hotel so you can get the codes to tap into their surveillance system so we can monitor all the cameras through our command post. We're also gonna install a couple of micro cameras in the corridor outside our rooms. Our night agent can sit in the CP and monitor everything. Probably gonna have you and Tino split up the night shift into six hour bits, okay?"

She nodded.

"Fine with me," she said. "Whatever you need."

"All right," Robert continued. "If there's nothing else... Okay, I'll go in the principal vehicle with Debi. Alex will be in the follow-up car with Wally. And, Andie, I think I'm gonna put you in there, too, all right?"

She nodded.

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“Okay,” Robert said, glancing out the window as the Cessna entered the hangar. “Almost showtime. Everybody get ready. I don’t expect trouble, but I always *expect* trouble. So P90s at the ready, please.”

And then every agent lifted the briefcases at their feet to their laps and opened them, revealing compact FN P90 submachine guns. Now the flight attendant was very glad she had not objected to Robert’s standing up while the plane was still in motion. For he leaned down and also picked up a briefcase, opening it and taking out his own SMG, handling the compact weapon with a cold casualness that told her he was quite comfortable with it, and probably quite good at using it, too.

The plane stopped and they waited. A minute later Alex gave the next clear signal.

Robert glanced around briefly then raised his weapon to the ready position, barrel pointed downward, finger safely off the trigger. He caught the flight attendant’s anxious eyes.

“Open the door, please, Carolyn,” he said in a calm voice. “And then, please, move back out of the way quickly.”

Nodding, more than a little nervous, Carolyn McCormick, age 26, undid her seatbelt and rose to do exactly what the handsome bald man with the hideous looking weapon in his hands told her to do.

Chapter 39

Alex was at the base of the staircase that had been rolled into place by the ground attendant she had personally cleared to work inside the hangar, one of only three. She had a P90 of her own on a sling across her chest, looking up as the door to the plane opened and the flight attendant, looking a little terrified, quickly moved back out of the way. A moment later, there was Robert. She nodded, unable to totally suppress the smile she felt rising.

He nodded back, glanced around, seeing Jim Paxon standing by a black Ford Excursion off to the side, a dark blue Ford Taurus behind it. Jim also had an SMG held at the ready, and he was watching the rest of the hangar, paying particular attention to the rollup doors at the front.

Robert started down the stairs, and when he glanced to his left, saw the Suburban parked against the back wall, also dark blue.

“Good flight?” Alex asked with a bit of a smirk on her lips, knowing how much her husband did not like to fly.

He returned her smirk, still glancing around, eyes lingering on the ground crewman for a few moments before moving on.

“Any flight that ends with me still being alive is a good flight,” he told her. “Any problems to report on your end?”

Alex shook her head.

“Everything’s on schedule. Although this Sally Quinn is a bit of a bitch, but beyond that, everything else is fine. The hotel is great, the staff really on top of everything, we’ve got excellent cooperation from the local cops, too, Jim handled that liaison, and the staff at the

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Mansion on Turtle Creek was very accommodating. It's a pretty neat place, too, Robert. Really elegant. Quinn was a little miffed she couldn't get her group booked into rooms there, but apparently several other events going on at the moment and there weren't enough rooms in the hotel. But the W is nice, too. Even charming. With excellent security. Oh, by the way, not that you'll be interested, but the American Airlines Center is right across the street from the hotel and they have NBA basketball games and other things going on there all the time."

Robert nodded.

"You're right, that doesn't interest me even a little," he said, winking. "Is the CS vehicle outside?"

"Yep," she told him. "Just outside the front door. There's a vetted guard watching it. Kind of cute, too. Gerry will like her."

"I'm sure," Robert grinned. "If she's female. Centurions Six, Seven, and Eight, come down please," the detail leader said into his communicator.

A few moments later Wally Holt, Gerry Conrad, and Tino Vega were coming down the stairs, SMGs held ready, eyes on the move, and assembling around their leaders at the base of the staircase. The ground attendant suddenly looked even more apprehensive than he had before, and he moved farther away, checking the opposite side of the plane for no other reason than wanting to appear to have something else to do.

Alex handed out keys and gave a quick briefing. Then Gerry went to his car outside the hangar while Wally walked over to the Taurus behind the Excursion, waving at Jim as he did so, and Tino Vega walked toward the back of the plane, leaning down and signaling to the attendant on the other side, telling him to come over and open the cargo door.

“Okay,” Robert said, looking at Alex and slipping the sling for his weapon over his head, letting the SMG hang freely at his back. “Let’s get Debi out here and into the car. There’s a bathroom in here, right?”

“Sure,” Alex nodded. “Right back there.”

“Good,” he said. “She might want to make a stop first. Actually, so do I. Since I never go on planes.”

Alex grinned and poked him lightly in the stomach.

“Bravest man I know and you’re afraid of something as safe as flying,” she teased.

“Not the flying part so much,” he said earnestly. “It’s the crashing and burning that makes my palms sweat.” Then he glanced around one more time and turned back toward the plane. “C-Three, come on down and give Eight a hand with the luggage and equipment, please. C-Five, when Three comes out, bring the principal down next.”

Two acknowledgements, and a few moments later, Ray Alvarez was walking down the stairs, his P90 slung across one shoulder and his computer bag across the other.

“All this shit I’m carrying these days,” he muttered. “I ought to be building muscles like Hercules.”

Alex and Robert chuckled as Ray walked toward the Suburban at the back of the plane and put his stuff on the front passenger’s seat. Then he pulled off his suit jacket and put it in there as well before going over to the cargo port of the Cessna and helping Tino and the attendant unload.

Andie Pearth stepped out of the plane next, her SMG slung across her right shoulder, her hand around the grip, index finger along the trigger guard, her eyes professional, sharp, and serious. Debi Patterson was behind her wearing jeans, a sweater, sneakers, and a light jacket, and carrying a shoulder bag across her left arm with

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a briefcase in her right hand. She looked tired, but managed a smile when she saw Alex.

“Hey, lady. Been enjoying the Lonestar State?”

Alex smiled at her.

“As much as I could,” she said. “If you’d like to stop by the rest room first...”

Debi’s eyes widened and she nodded.

“Actually I would, please.”

“All right,” Alex told her. “Right this way.”

Alex escorted their principal over to the bathroom, Andie bringing up the rear, and Robert walked over to the Excursion and leaned in the passenger’s window.

“How’s it going?” he said to Jim.

“Five-by-five, boss,” Jim replied with a grin. “Nobody’s shot at us yet.”

“I know,” Robert replied sardonically. “Kind of disappointing, isn’t it?”

Both men chuckled and spent a few minutes talking, but then Jim inclined his head as he looked in the rearview mirror and saw Debi coming out of the restroom. Robert stood and turned, walking back and opening the rear door of the principal vehicle.

“Ready to go when you are,” Debi said.

“It’ll be just a bit longer,” Robert told her, then shut the door. “See if anybody else has to go to the bathroom, Alex. Then once they’ve got the gear loaded up, we’ll take off.”

“Okay,” Alex said, then stopped as she heard Gerry reporting in from the perimeter. “Copy that, C-Seven. Maintain your position until you hear from One or me. Two out.”

Robert nodded and started off toward the bathroom. Andie walked over and leaned against the back passenger’s door of the

follow-up car, hand still on the grip of her P90, relaxed but not totally relaxed. Ready.

No one else had to go to the bathroom. The luggage and gear were now loaded into the Suburban. Robert was back as well.

“The Suburban leaves first,” he announced. “Two minutes later we pull out with the principal.”

“Acknowledged,” Alex said, then started speaking into her communicator, issuing orders.

Robert nodded when she finished, then walked over to the control panel that opened the rollup doors. Alex and Andie both raised their weapons to the ready, safeties off. Then up went the doors.

Chapter 40

Alex had been right in Robert's estimation; the W Dallas Victory was a very nice hotel, although he thought the big **W** out front in the circular driveway was a bit much. Since Alex had the room keys already and they knew where they were going, Debi didn't have to stop by the desk and they took her right around to the private elevator where the *talent coach* from *Risk* was waiting with one of his officers. It was a little after seven p.m. and the lobby area was crowded now with people coming in to visit the specialty clubs and bars on the upper floors of the hotel, but Risk had cleared a path and designated the private elevator for exclusive use of the Patterson detail for this evening.

Ray and Tino were already at the hotel when the main party arrived and all the equipment and luggage had already been taken up to the ninth floor and secured in the command post. Ray remained upstairs to begin setting up while Tino came down and greeted them. Alex, Robert, and Andie escorted Debi up to her suite, finding another Risk officer posted just off the private elevator.

The suite was luxurious, with every amenity, and for the price, Robert thought it should have. Ray was in the corridor when they arrived and told Robert he had done a quick sweep of the suite and found it clear of electronic eavesdropping devices or anything dangerous. Debi had a look around her rooms while Robert and Ray sorted out the luggage in the command post next door, then Robert brought Debi's over.

“I want to unpack and freshen up a bit,” Debi said after dropping her suitcase and other items on the plush sofa in the front room. “Then I want to call Sally and see if she wants to get together for dinner or something.”

Alex stepped farther into the suite.

“She told me to give you her room number,” Alex said to her. “And if you felt up to it, you might care to dine with her in the restaurant on the 16th floor. She has a reservation for eight-thirty.”

Debi checked her watch.

“That sounds good to me. I’ll call her. Will that present any problems for you?”

Robert looked at Alex and she shook her head.

“No, I’ve already checked the place out. Actually I ate there with her last night. We can post our people close by. Only two ways in and out.”

“All right then,” Debi said, kicking off her shoes. “I’ll call her and let her know we’ll meet in the restaurant at eight-thirty.”

“All right,” Robert said. “The door to the right leads to the command post next door. The door on the other side will be open at all times so if you need to you can just open your door and step through without having to go out into the hall. You can leave your door closed. There will be someone in the CP day and night. Also, for the moment, we’re going to post someone at your door in the hallway. For the moment that will be Andie. You need anything else right now?”

Debi smiled and shook her head.

“No. Only a nice hot shower and then a good meal.”

“Well you’ll get the good meal,” Alex told her. “The food in the restaurant is first class.”

“Okay,” Robert said, moving toward the door to the hallway. “We’ll see you in a bit.”

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Out in the hall Robert told Andie to stay posted on the door until everybody else arrived and then they'd have a quick meeting and get everyone assigned to their sleeping rooms.

In the command post Ray Alvarez was in his rolled up shirtsleeves, Glock pushed far back on his right hip, looking a bit haggard as he knelt down on the floor trying to connect what appeared to be a coaxial cable to the back of a monitor.

"How's it coming?" Alex asked, walking over and taking a look at the keyboard setup on the large desk that had been placed in the center of the room after the king-sized bed and the rest of the regular furniture was removed at her request. "Are you gonna be able to piggyback the signals from the hotel?"

Ray looked up from what he was doing, a weary expression on his face.

"Probably. Just got a few adjustments to make, and once I get this cable in place I should know more. The hotel has brand new and state-of-the-art equipment, so it shouldn't be too much of a hassle to connect everything. Just a matter of imputing the right codes, which I got from hotel Security's tech guy as soon as I got here."

"Risk," Alex chided with a raised finger. "They call themselves *Risk* here."

"Yeah," Robert smirked. "And they call their shift supervisors *talent coaches*. A creative bunch to be sure. When the others have secured the vehicles in the deck they'll be coming over. We'll have a quick briefing then send two up to the restaurant. Ray, I want communications up and running first thing."

"No problem," Ray said, standing and arching his back, moaning a little. "Already got us tied in. We should be good citywide now. I take it you're going to go out and look at this Mansion place later on?"

"Yeah," Robert said. "Thought I'd take a look at it tonight."

“Good,” Ray said, turning the monitor he had been working on around and pressing the ON button. “Then we’ll give it a test when you’re out. This thing looks like it’s working fine. I’ll start imputing the codes into the system and finish the rest of the connections after that. Should be fully operational before the night’s over with.”

“All right,” Robert said, and then turned when he heard movement in the hallway. “Come on in, guys,” he said to Jim, Gerry, Wally, and Tino. “And tell Andie to step down here as well. Ray, did you put that stickup in place yet?”

“Sure did,” Ray said, moving behind the desk and typing in some quick commands on his computer keyboard. “Did that right after I swept the suite. Should have the hallway outside there coming up on the monitor I just connected. And there it is.”

“Excellent,” Robert said, moving farther into the command post as the rest of the team started to come in. “Then everybody come in and shut the door. Find a seat somewhere or lean on a wall.”

After having the other furniture removed from the room, Alex had had the hotel staff bring in five additional chairs. That meant there were now six chairs in the room so everyone had a seat except Robert and Alex. She leaned on the wall behind the desk where she could watch Ray work and keep an eye on the small bank of monitors to the right. Robert stood on the left side of the desk and faced the bulk of the team, removing his suit jacket and folding it across his left arm.

“Okay everybody, I know you’re probably tired from plane ride and all, plus the extra hour we picked up by moving west, but we’ve still got some work to do tonight. Our client is having dinner in the restaurant upstairs at eight-thirty, a dinner meeting actually. One other person in attendance. We’re going to have to cover her there naturally. Alex will tell whoever we assign where to post. Probably just two agents though. Ray’s gonna be busy setting up in here for

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most of the night. Wally and Gerry, you guys need to get out and check out the area, in particular the venue, the Mansion on Turtle Creek. I know you've got programmed GPS devices, but there is no substitute for actual on-the-ground knowledge. Tino, you need to go as well. Alex is going to take me over so I can have a look around. We don't have to go as a group. Alex and I will take one car and the other three of you can take the Suburban."

Robert looked over at Alex and she nodded, pushing off the wall.

"Guess that means Andie and Jim have the restaurant tonight," she said. "Not too hard a place to cover, and one can relieve the other for quick bite. I'll take you up and show you the place. The table has already been selected, and the Maître D understands our needs. You won't have any problems there. I'll get you two posted, and when Debi is ready to come up, Robert and I will escort her, then leave it with you, okay?"

Both agents nodded.

"Not a problem," Jim said.

Andie said nothing.

"Room assignments next," Alex said, reaching into her right jacket pocket and pulling out a thick folded over envelope. It contained plastic cardkeys with names taped across them. Alex passed them out to everyone, and then took a second set of cardkeys from her other pocket, holding them up for all to see.

"Okay folks, these are master keys. They open everything in this building. *Every thing*. They are labeled and will be signed out to everyone who receives one, and if one of them is lost, it's going to cost us quite a bit of money because the hotel will have to manually rekey all of its locks. So..."

"*Don't lose them!*" said everyone in unison.

“Correct,” Alex said, then leaned over and picked up a logbook from the desk. “Everyone signs then I issue the keys. The numbers on the log correspond to the order of the keys in my hand. Whoever signs first gets the first key, and so on.”

Three minutes later, everyone had a master cardkey.

“All right,” Robert said, checking his watch. “Everybody can grab their stuff out of the corner there and take it to their rooms. Take a quick fifteen and then report back. Jim and Andie, Alex will take you upstairs and get you posted. The other three of you can just get the Suburban and go. First, have a walk around the hotel though, get familiar with it. Then you can head out. By the way, when you get about mile from the hotel start checking in with Ray. I want to make sure the communications net is functioning properly. If you would, before you come back, go at least ten, twelve miles away and test the signal.”

“Will do,” Wally said, walking over to the corner where the luggage was piled and picked up his suitcase and shoulder bag, he, like the others, still had his SMG briefcase in his hand.

Once everyone left the room, Alex looked at Robert and inclined her head toward the door. He nodded, slipping his jacket back on and going over, picking up his garment bag, too, then following her out into the hall and across the way to the room they would be sharing.

“Not bad,” Robert said, kicking the door shut behind him, moving over and setting his things on the bed. “Too bad we’re not here on vacation.”

Alex nodded, removing her jacket and tossing it on the bed.

“Vacation?” she remarked with a chuckle, walking toward him. “What’s that?”

“Tell me about it,” Robert said, once again removing his jacket and tossing it on the bed, too. “Maybe when this job is over,

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whenever that is, we can see about taking one. Some place exotic, with no cell or internet service.”

Alex stopped very close to her husband, staring up into his eyes.

“That might be a good idea,” she said. “Of course, we could just stay at home and not work. Shut off all the phones and computers. Maybe spend all our time reading, eating, and making love.”

Grinning, Robert put his arms around his wife and kissed her.

“Now I have to admit that I like that a lot, Mrs. Chandler,” he said.

Alex’s eyes widened in surprise and she put her hands on his shoulders.

“Did you just call me, *Mrs. Chandler*? You bump your head on the plane or something?”

Robert chuckled and kissed her again.

“Nope,” he said. “Just slipped out for some reason or other. I knew it was coming, just didn’t do anything to stop it.”

Alex shook her head, smiling.

“Sixteen years and you’ve never called me that. Never wanted me to call myself that, and I would not have minded, you know. Actually sounds kind of nice when you say it. I could...”

Robert shook his head and kissed her again.

“I love you just the way you are, Alexandra Wells,” he said.

She kissed the tip of his nose.

“Ditto,” she said, staring deeply into his eyes. She wanted to say something else, but decided against it for now.

Neither of them wanted to, but after a minute, they had to pull away and get ready to go back to work.

Robert quickly unpacked his things while Alex sat down at the desk and powered up her laptop. She wanted to check her email and

find out if any more information had come in from an Interpol contact that might just help her narrow down her list of potential suspects even more, because the more she thought about it, the more she was convinced that her suspicions regarding Flynn Logan were correct. He might be involved, but he was not the mastermind.

Of that, *Mrs. Chandler* was almost one hundred percent certain.

She smiled, remembering what the sound of her husband calling her that felt like. Odd, it had been years since they had last discussed the issue, all the reasons why Robert had been so insistent on her keeping her birth name. But now he was the one who had made the slip. Perhaps it was time to revisit the subject.

She smiled again, remembering the ending to their last conversation on the subject three or four years ago. Robert saying that if she changed her last name to Chandler then he'd change his to Wells.

"Ready?" Robert said, startling Alex a little as she checked her email box, finding several messages, but none to do with what she was interested in at the moment. She turned and found him wearing his suit jacket once again, and holding hers.

She nodded, closing her mailbox and powering down her computer.

"Sure thing," she said, standing. "Let's go."

Chapter 41

Monday morning Robert woke up at four-thirty, having only gone to bed at midnight after mapping out and marking routes and alternatives with Alex when they got back to the hotel. The email that Alex had been waiting for from her Interpol contact also came in while they were out and the information it contained was enough for Alex to fine-tune her threat analysis. With that, she was now able to tell Robert who she believed to be the most likely candidate for the cartel's point man in the operation to kidnap Debi Patterson and spirit her off to Mexico to face execution by Fabio Sandoval.

Robert read both the information from Interpol and Alex's analysis twice, and then told her he thought her logic was sound, of course, and that she was probably right. Still, he quizzed her for a half hour just to see if he could poke any holes in her reasoning, which he could not. Updated threat assessments would go out to the rest of the team Monday morning, along with route information and assignments.

When Robert came out of the bathroom at five o'clock, face and head freshly shaved and skin still damp from the shower, Alex was sitting up in bed with the lamp on, the sheet covering her bare chest. Robert had a towel around his waist and was using a hand towel to dry his scalp.

"You could have woken me," Alex said as she arched her back and stretched. "I could have *done* your back."

Robert walked into the room smiling, stopping at the foot of the bed.

“If you had done that we’d still be in the shower,” he told her. “And I doubt it would have been my back that would have held your interest, missy. Besides, you needed the extra rest. I’m done in the bathroom if you want in.”

She nodded, sitting up and letting the covers fall down to her waist. Robert stared down at his wife’s chest, grinning lecherously as he always did. Alex could never comprehend why it was he loved her breasts so much. They were small, in her opinion the smallest in the world, but Robert had always been obsessed with them. He loved kissing them, stroking them, teasing her nipples with his tongue, driving her mad. He could spend hours stimulating them if she let him, and sometimes she did, and she loved it too. Would have loved to do just that right now, block everything else out and spend the whole day in bed with the man she loved and lusted after. Unfortunately, right now neither of them had time to play. Work to be done.

She pushed the covers off of her legs and rolled out of bed, standing and walking around to kiss her husband on the cheek and then quickly going into the bathroom and shutting the door before either of them got any other ideas.

Robert sighed and walked over to the closet to get out his clothes, resisting the almost overwhelming urge to follow Alex into the bathroom and...

At eight-thirty Debi had a breakfast meeting with Sally Quinn and two other members of her group in a private room on the second floor of the hotel. Jim and Gerry were assigned to escort her down and then stand post in the hall until the conclusion, scheduled for some time around ten.

Wally was in the command post with Ray when Alex and Robert came back from checking with Gerry and Jim to make sure everything was going smoothly with breakfast. Ray was sitting at the

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big desk and Wally was leaning on the front end. He stood up when Robert and Alex came in.

“Hey, Wally,” Alex said, moving behind the desk and glancing down at the monitors. “Sleep well?”

“Sure did,” said the husky ex-cop. “Got some really comfortable beds in this place.”

“Yeah,” Ray said, glancing up, an ironic smirk on his face. “And those five minutes I got to spend in mine was real comfortable.”

“Some people complain about everything,” Robert said sardonically. “Tino and Andie aren’t scheduled to come on till noon, correct?”

“Yeah,” Ray said, glancing down at the schedule printout next to his laptop keyboard.

“Okay,” Robert said. “After breakfast is done Debi and Sally Quinn are going to be meeting in Debi’s suite to discuss some things. It’ll be easier to cover her then. Post Jim outside the door.”

Alex nodded, glancing over at him.

“Okay. What time should I head over to the Mansion?”

“That’s what I’ve been thinking about. Let’s make it after lunch, just in case some things change. Maybe leave around two. The dinner is set for eight fifteen, and at some point Debi will be giving her presentation, scheduled to last an hour, and this thing could go on till, what, ten-thirty or eleven?”

“Scheduled to end at ten,” Alex said. “But that isn’t necessarily firm.”

“Yeah,” Robert said. “And the drinks reception starts at seven-fifteen. She wants to be there for that, so we’ll leave here around a quarter after six and take the scenic route. In addition to the security precaution, Debi has expressed an interest in seeing some of the city while she’s here, so this will give her the opportunity. Since we aren’t scheduled to fly out until four tomorrow afternoon, I figured

we might take her on a little tour for a few hours before heading back to the airport. We'll just have to see how it goes."

"Sure," Alex said, glancing back at the monitors. "So if nothing changes, the only person not coming to the venue tonight is Ray here."

Ray glanced up, a mock expression of hurt on his brown face.

"Yeah, that's right," he said. "Keep the Mexican out of the Mansion, make sure he don't steal nothing."

Robert chuckled, as did Wally and Alex, and Alex patted Ray on the shoulder.

"I'm sure Tino would see that differently," Robert said. "But then that's why he's going and you aren't. That and the fact that you're the command post guy and the command post is here. Actually, now that I think about it, Tino's Cuban. Oh well..."

Grinning, Ray nodded then started working at his keyboard.

"Wally," Robert said. "When they get finished downstairs, you and Gerry head out for a while, check the perimeter up to five miles out. Let us know how it looks."

"Will do," Wally said. "And while we're out, maybe we'll stop for lunch at this place we saw down on Houston Street last night, right next to Hooters."

"You mean you guys don't want to eat at Hooters?" Alex said with a raised eyebrow. "I'm shocked."

Wally was smiling, debating on whether or not he should say what he was thinking, then just went for it.

"Well the place is called *Dick's Last Resort*."

And everybody laughed.

"Maybe I'll go out for lunch today," Ray said.

"No you will not," Alex said. "You're much too mature for a place like that."

"No I'm not," Ray rejoined.

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“Absolutely you’re not,” Robert said. “But you’re still not going. Let us know how the food is, Wally. Alex, come on, let’s go walk the hotel. If you need us...”

Ray nodded, glancing over at Wally Holt, grinning.

“I’ll call you,” he replied, then started working at his computer again.

Chapter 42

Hugo Bock looked up from his laptop computer. Flynn Logan walked into the small office he was using at the back of the second floor of the cramped warehouse on the southeast side of Dallas that was their base of operations. Logan was dressed in casual clothes, clean-shaven, well groomed, his appearance very different from what it usually was when he was working. But tonight's mission called for it.

"Is everyone in place?" Hugo asked. "And the little diversion for the police set and ready to go as well?"

Logan nodded, looking down at the German assassin with practiced disinterest.

"Yes," said the mercenary leader. "That is taken care of. The surveillance teams have been pulled off, as per your orders. We know where they are going and when, and approximately when they will be returning. The teams are in their holding positions now, awaiting final instructions."

"Good," Hugo said, staring up at Logan. "And once we have the woman, she is to be brought to the airfield immediately. It is ironic that we'll be using the same one that her detail brought her in through and was planning on taking her out from tomorrow. Unfortunately for them, most, if not all of them, will be dead in a few hours, and their client will be our package."

"And the contingency is still Love Field?" Logan asked.

"Affirmative," Hugo confirmed. "Should it be necessary, although if your men are as good as you claim, it should not."

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Logan didn't flinch, but in his mind he saw himself snapping this repulsive, longhaired German prick's neck. Unprofessional, yes, but probably very satisfying.

"My men are the best, Black," he said in a monotone, using Hugo's cover name. "But only a fool would not have a contingency. You are certain they will fall back to the airfield if they escape the ambush?"

"It is logical," Hugo said arrogantly. "Standard procedure for bodyguards in situations like that is to get their protectees to safety as quickly as possible. In a strange environment that means leaving the area. Their plane is the fastest route available. And it is still at Love Field, correct?"

"Yes," Logan confirmed. "That is what my contact at the airport told me."

"Well then there you have it. Should they escape the initial ambush, the backup team and I will stop them, and by then, the rest of you should arrive to mop up. But let us hope that will not be necessary. Remember, Logan, the woman must not be harmed, otherwise we don't get paid. But anybody else, bodyguards, cops, civilians, they are free-fire targets. Am I clear?"

The mercenary leader nodded slowly, his contempt for this man still rising, but he was being paid a good price to do a job, and he would do it, but one day he would dearly love it if someone paid him to kill this smart-assed fucking Nazi reject.

"Good then," Hugo said checking his watch, then turning back to his laptop on the desk. "It's time for you to go, Logan. And good luck. Let me know when you're in position. I'll be shutting things down here shortly and heading to the airfield."

Logan nodded, then turned and left the office.

Hugo smiled in grim satisfaction. He was that much closer to receiving quite a robust paycheck, and satisfying the wishes of a most

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powerful and vengeful client. A man he truly did not want to disappoint. Not if he wanted to live long enough to enjoy that paycheck.

Chapter 43

“C-Four, report.”

“Four here, boss,” came the sound of Jim Paxon’s voice over the secured communications network the detail was using. “Five and I are in position outside the entrance to the principal’s venue. No one in or out so far except the servers who have been cleared. Over.”

“Acknowledged,” Alex said as she leaned against the back of the Excursion. It was parked in the semi-secluded driveway off to the west side of the Mansion on Turtle Creek just down the street from the Dallas National Bank. The time was now a quarter to nine and the sun had completely disappeared in the last thirty minutes, but the exterior was well lit by streetlamps and there were very few shadowy places that could not be seen by the naked eye. It was also very warm here in Dallas tonight and Alex wiped the back of her left hand across her forehead, feeling the dampness when she took it away.

Wally was pacing back and forth around the principal vehicle and the follow-up car parked behind it. His job was to remain with the vehicles, keeping an eye out for anything suspicious, and be ready to make a fast exit should the situation call for it. And he was ready, while at the same time hoping it wouldn’t be necessary. Just the same, his P90 was stashed between the front seats of the Excursion, fully loaded and ready to go, and his Glock-29 10mm was under his suit jacket on his right side, in a similar state of readiness.

“C-Seven, report,” Alex spoke into her transmitter.

“Seven here, Two,” Gerry Conrad’s voice responded through her earpiece. “Just completing Circuit Echo and turning for Circuit Bravo. Nothing suspicious to report so far. 2271.50.”

“Acknowledged, Seven,” Alex responded. “2271.50. Received. C-Eight, report.”

“Eight here,” replied Tino Vega from his post in the rear courtyard just below the windows that looked out from the FDR Suite where Debi Patterson and the members of the leadership council of the National Society for Freedom and Justice were having their dinner and meeting. “All’s quiet on the Eastern Front. And it’s pretty back here. These people spend a lot of money on their landscaping I’ll bet.”

Alex smiled.

“No doubt,” she said. “Try not to let the pretty flowers distract you, though. By the way, do you need a break?”

“Negative,” Tino said. “C-One just stopped by and gave me a quick one.”

“Acknowledged,” Alex said. “Centurion Two out.”

She was about to make another radio check but stopped when she saw Robert walking around the west corner of the mansion, heading her way.

“Centurion One to Centurion Two,” Robert said out loud as he approached. “This place is bigger than it looks. Probably walked a mile by now. I just went to all the posts, they’re fine. Wally, you need a break?”

Wally glanced at his watch, thought a second, nodded.

“I guess I could go use the john. If you don’t mind?”

“I always mind when one of my agents lets his or her bodily functions get in the way of their job,” Robert deadpanned. “But I’ll let it slide this time.”

Wally grinned.

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“Thanks. Back in a minute.”

Robert glanced around and so did Alex.

“Tino is right,” Alex said. “This scenery is really quite impressive. Actually the whole place is gorgeous. Probably does cost a fortune to maintain.”

“Yeah,” Robert agreed. “Which is why it’s so expensive to stay here, eat here, and probably go to the bathroom here. And speaking of which, do you need to go to the bathroom or anything?”

Alex shook her head and started walking back and forth along the side of the Excursion and to the Taurus just as Wally had done.

“Nope, I’m fine. You?”

“Me, too. When Wally comes back I think I’ll go stick my head inside the FDR and see how things are progressing.”

“All right,” Alex said. “Then I’ll go make the rounds.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Robert said. “And tomorrow we should be back at home by this time. Then we should talk about how we’re going to arrange coverage for the next couple of weeks. Our people are going to need at least a day off at some point, and since this is probably going to last for a while, we’re probably going to have to find ways to shorten shifts from time to time, too. It’ll depend on what Debi has to do when we get back to Charleston. I get the feeling that she isn’t going to be willing to stay cooped up in her house all day once she gets the book done.”

“You’re right,” Alex said, stopping her pacing and facing him. “I can tell she’s already getting restless. This time away from home is doing her good, but in another week or so she isn’t going to be so willing to stay in that house all the time. Andie says the same.”

Robert nodded. They were silent for a few minutes, both taking turns walking back and forth around the vehicles. Then Wally came back and resumed his post and the two lead agents departed. Alex walked around the side toward the rear courtyard while Robert

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went in through the front entrance and down the corridor to the staircase that led to the second floor, passing crowds of finely attired men and women who stood around with drinks in their hands, laughing, talking, and generally have a pleasant time.

It was good not to have responsibilities.

Sometimes Robert wished he knew what that was like.

Chapter 44

It was eleven-thirty when the Wally maneuvered the Excursion off of the Woodall Rodgers Freeway and onto Continental Avenue, trailed closely by the follow-up Taurus with Tino at the wheel and Andie riding shotgun. Robert was in the front passenger's seat of the Excursion next to Wally, Debi Patterson in the backseat, exhausted, but happy, very content with the way the evening had gone, and, Robert suspected, with a lot of expensive alcohol inside her. That was all right though; the only thing she had to do tonight was sleep. There had been talk about a brunch tomorrow morning before Sally Quinn and some of the others left town, but that was up in the air. Everybody who left the FDR Suite appeared to have imbibed quite liberally, none seemed fit to drive. Robert was glad he only had to be concerned about the safety of one of them.

Now they were on North Houston Street, just a few blocks from the hotel. Once Debi was settled in, he and Alex would decide how to post up for the night. Somebody had to be awake, and since Andie and Tino didn't come on till noon, it would most likely be one of them. Or Robert might do it himself. It was only a few hours. And he could catch a nap once Ray came on duty in the CP at six. Yeah, that might just be the way to go, let everybody else get some rest and be reasonably fresh for tomorrow and the trip back home.

Robert covered his mouth as he yawned, suddenly realizing just how tired he was, however, he had pushed himself to stay awake for long periods of time before, and knew he could do it tonight if he had to. Just a matter of will.

“C-One to C-Two,” Robert spoke into his communicator as they stopped for the red light at the intersection with Lamar Street. “We’re one out.”

“Acknowledged, One,” Alex answered through the earpiece. “In position and waiting to receive you.”

Robert smiled, picturing his wife standing outside the North Houston Street entrance to the hotel, SMG briefcase in her left hand, looking cool and casual in a navy blue pantsuit, white blouse, and black shoes. Cute as a button, too. Not to mention sexy as...

“Understood,” he replied. “See you shortly. Out.”

The light took a long time to change and Robert turned slightly in his seat and noticed his principal was dozing against the passenger’s side door, mouth slightly open, even drooling a little. Yep, lots of alcohol. Brunch was probably out; hangover cures on the menu instead.

The light changed and Wally pressed down on the accelerator, ten seconds later they could see the rear of the hotel. Traffic was very light on the one-way street, only two other vehicles in the two lanes off to the right. Robert glanced at them casually, his own SMG briefcase across his lap, thumb lightly touching the release button.

They saw Alex standing near the curb, right index finger pointing to the precise spot where she wanted the primary vehicle to stop, just as the book says an advance agent is supposed to. Robert released his seatbelt before Wally stopped the SUV, turning around and looking over the top of his seat and seeing Debi sit up.

“We’re here,” he told her, glancing through the rear window and observing the follow-up car as it came to a stop, still out in the street, blocking any other car from coming up beside the primary.

Debi covered her mouth to yawn.

“God, I dozed off,” she said, her speech a little slurred. “What time is it?”

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“Still before midnight,” Robert told her. “Just hang in here a bit and we’ll get you inside and up to your room. You’ll be getting out on the other side since that’s the curb. Just a minute.”

Debi nodded and Robert turned back around and opened his door, climbing out. Andie climbed out of the follow-up car as well, holding her briefcase down by her side, eyes scanning up and down the street, watching other approaching cars, and a couple on the opposite side of the street strolling arm-in-arm, apparently oblivious to everyone but each other. Tino and Wally remained behind the wheels of their respective vehicles, ready to move out the instant trouble occurred.

After a quick look around, Robert turned and walked around the back side of the Excursion and up onto the curb where Alex stood.

“I’ve got one of the hotel guards standing by at the private elevator,” she told him. “Holding it for us. Can she walk on her own? She looked kind of tipsy when I saw her last.”

“She dozed off on the ride over,” Robert whispered. “But she’s up now. Probably could use a little assistance. We’ll let Andie be her crutch.”

Alex smiled and reached for the rear driver’s side door, opening it. Robert signaled Andie to come over, which she did. He stepped back toward the building, scanning the street from north to south, also keeping an eye on the progress of that young couple as they slowly progressed up the street toward the intersection with Wichita. They were laughing and holding onto each other, playing around. Young and in love. But would it last? Only the universe knew, and maybe not.

Andie held out her left arm and Debi clutched onto it as she climbed down from the back of the armored SUV, and she promptly stumbled so Andie had to hand her briefcase off to Alex and get a hold of the other woman to steady her. Robert was about to walk over to

Stellen Qxz

help when Gerry Conrad's voice suddenly sounded urgently over the net.

“Protocol Two! Protocol Two! Hostiles on Moody Street heading your way fast! Dark colored Lincoln! Say again...”

The transmission halted in mid-sentence and in the distance they could hear automatic weapons fire. The perfect punctuation to the announcement of a Protocol Two: *Hostiles inside the perimeter; cover and evacuate the principal!*

Chapter 45

The instant the first Protocol Two was issued, the members of the detail sprang into action. However, it was already too late by then because members of the assault team who were already in position closer by were springing into action as well.

A large black van blew through the intersection at Wichita and North Houston and came to a dead stop, blocking off the street as the sliding side door opened to reveal dark clad figures with automatic weapons jumping out and opening fire. And coming up behind them on North Houston was another van. It turned sideways in the middle of the street and its doors opened as well, deploying a similar group of weapon-carrying attackers, also firing quick, controlled salvos.

The first thing Robert did after hearing Gerry's warning was to depress the button on the handle of his briefcase, releasing the case from the P90 submachine gun inside. This was right before the first van pulled out into the Wichita-North Houston intersection. When the door on the van rolled back and the first man jumped out, armed with an SMG of his own, a Heckler & Koch MP5K, Robert was already aimed in and shot the hostile with a quick burst to the center of the chest, knocking him backwards into the second man who was jumping down from the van.

Alex's first move was to drop Andie's briefcase on the ground and quickly release the P90 from her own, turning to the south and confronting the second van, returning the fire from the attackers in that direction. While this was going on, Andie shoved a startled and now totally awake and frightened Debi Patterson into the back of the

Excursion, pushing her down on the floor and jumping in on top of her, shielding the principal's body with her own.

Outside, Alex had dropped to one knee and had just knocked down a second attacker with a short burst from her weapon. Two were standing now, crouching actually, and pouring fire in her direction, causing her to flatten on the ground as bullets sailed over her head and slammed into the concrete of the building, shattering the glass doors a few feet away.

Tino had ducked down when the van first pulled up, and was still partially down, but he managed to shift the Taurus into reverse and now pressed down hard on the accelerator, swerving the wheel to the left and plowing straight toward the van. He narrowly missed one of the attackers, but hit the van hard on the rear bumper, shoving it several feet toward the opposite curb.

This momentary distraction caused both remaining shooters from that van to have to adjust their positions, and now they were exposed. Alex remained in the prone position, but managed to fire off half of her weapon's her fifty round magazine, cutting them both down.

Robert was engaged with two hostiles of his own, already having taking out two, kneeling at the front bumper of the Excursion, firing controlled bursts between quick breaths. Both attackers had retreated to the front side of their van and were firing from cover. Robert sensed movement to his right and saw Alex approaching in his peripheral vision. She stooped to pick up Andie's case, quickly extracting the weapon inside and slinging it across her back, then moved over and knelt behind Robert.

"We need to get out of here now!" Robert told her, ducking back as several rounds bounced off the front of the armored vehicle they hid behind. "There could be a lot more on the way. Gerry was engaged with somebody out there when he called."

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Gun fire from the rear caused both of them to duck down even lower and Alex spun around in time to see Tino spraying the cab of the van back there with a sustained burst from his SMG, then he ducked down behind the front of the Taurus as somebody fired from the other side of the street. The young man who had been walking with the young woman. Not an innocent couple after all, although his female acquaintance was lying on her stomach on the ground with her hands covering her ears. Maybe she was an innocent. Or a very bad assassin.

Alex eased down to the back of the Excursion as more rounds from the van on Wichita Street slammed into the armored plating on the passenger's side. The man across the street had a pistol in his hands, using the classic Weaver stance. He was concentrating on Tino's position and didn't notice Alex take aim, and then he was down. Dead actually, because one of her 5.7x28 mm rounds punched right through his throat and cleanly severed his trachea.

One of the men from the van in front of Robert's position ran out and knelt down, firing under the Excursion, rounds bouncing off the concrete and impacting the side of the vehicle. Before Robert could adjust his position and fire at the first man, the second man maneuvered around back of the van and started firing. Wally yelled from inside the SUV for Robert to watch out, and acting with lightning reflexes, honed through years of surviving in situations just like this one, Robert managed to push off and dive out of the line of fire before the first rounds struck his former position.

As Robert hit the wall and bounced off the building, his first thought was that Alex had been several feet behind him, and his heart went cold. But he had a higher priority right now: getting his client out of harm's way. That was job one and every member of the team knew that, especially Alex. So he pushed thoughts of his wife out of

his mind, rolled over twice, then aimed and fired quickly at the shooter before he could adjust his position.

More auto fire sounded from the opposite side of the Excursion, but this time there were no impacts against the vehicle. Robert glanced back to where he had last seen Alex and didn't see her there, nor did he see her body lying on the sidewalk. An encouraging sign. Then more weapons fire erupted.

Robert cautiously moved toward the front of the primary vehicle, keeping an eye on the men who were down in the street, glancing all around, checking the balconies of the apartments across the street, looking down the darkened side streets. On the other side of the SUV lay the first man who had run out from the front of the van, he was down, bleeding from the neck.

"Alex!" Robert called in a controlled but urgent voice.

"Back side of the primary!" she called back, her voice matching his. "I got the guy in the street!"

"Tino!" he called.

"Covering the van back here, boss!" shouted the Coast Guard tactical vet. "I think at least one of them is still alive!"

"Escape route *Charlie!*" Robert said into his communicator, slinging his SMG over his left shoulder and moving out in front of the primary vehicle. "*Everybody!* C-Three, get the cops here now and stay behind to deal with them. Don't leave the CP till they arrive though. Don't know how many hostiles remain..."

Tires screeching from the east side of Wichita, a black Lincoln coming in hot and fast.

Robert dropped where he stood at the front of the primary vehicle and drew his sidearm as the Lincoln came to a stop a few feet from the front bumper of the attackers' van, the passenger's door opening before the tires stopped spinning. Automatic fire came from off to his right rear and he realized Alex had opened fire on the

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driver's side of the car, killing the driver. The passenger had an assault rifle, looked like a modified M-4 tactical system with special optics, and he braced it on the hood and started firing. One round just missed Robert's shoulder and he ducked lower, then forward, sprawling on his stomach, firing his Glock as he hit the ground, expending half a magazine of .45 caliber high-velocity hollow points in the direction of the Lincoln. The man behind the car ducked down momentarily, but then came back up and started firing again.

Robert rolled out into the street and continued to fire, but he couldn't aim well and none of his shots hit the mark.

Alex worked her way back to the curb side and took to the building, keeping low. She had dropped her own P90 and was now using Andie's, taking a deep breath to keep her nerves under control. No matter how much you practiced, no matter how good you thought you were, you never knew for sure until you were in the middle of a shit storm how you would perform. And that's precisely where the CPS detail found itself right now, in the middle of a Grade-A, Category-5 shit storm.

More screeching tires, these coming from the wrong direction down North Houston toward the intersection with Wichita. Alex dropped flat and took aim as headlights illuminated her position, but then she held her fire, recognizing the Taurus driven by Gerry Conrad. It was moving at full speed and showing no signs of stopping, and did not stop until after it had slammed into the passenger's front side of the Lincoln, and into the man holding the modified M-4. The man screamed in agony as he was crushed between the two vehicles, still holding onto his weapon. Robert stood up quickly, and without hesitation, shot the man twice in the chest.

"Let's go!" he shouted, moving to the passenger's door of the primary vehicle.

Alex was on her feet and running back to where Tino was crouched at the front of his Taurus.

“Get inside!” she shouted, covering the van. “See if you can separate it from the van.”

He did so, and as Alex turned back, she saw the Excursion pulling out, taking the left at Wichita, easing the back bumper of the van out of the way as the front tires rolled over the body of one of the downed attackers. She saw movement over by the Lincoln and realized Gerry Conrad had managed to get out of his heavily damaged car, but was staggering, apparently bleeding from the forehead.

Tino got his Taurus started and dropped down into low, giving it gas. A minute later the bumper pulled free from the van. It was then that the young woman who had been a part of the *couple* that turned out to be part of the opposition stepped into Alex’s periphery, and almost got shot. However, Alex quickly realized the girl was no threat, not armed and shaking like a wind chime in a tornado as she hugged herself, staring around at the carnage, agape, but no sounds coming out of her mouth.

Alex didn’t know what her story was and didn’t really care at the moment. Her boyfriend had been a part of the hit, no question about it, but she wasn’t a pro by any means. And now lights were starting to come on in the apartments across the street from the hotel.

Alex climbed in the passenger’s seat of the Taurus, ignoring the broken glass all around her.

“Go!” she shouted. “We’ve got to catch up to the primary. Cut down Wichita and over to Victory Avenue.”

Tino nodded, moving the selector up to Drive, pressing the accelerator. Gerry Conrad was staggering toward them and Alex told Tino to stop.

“Get in, Gerry!” she yelled out the broken window. “Hurry!”

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He barely managed to get into the backseat before Tino floored it, also running over bodies in the way, and then moving as quickly as he could to catch up to the primary vehicle, probably already a mile or more away.

UPSTAIRS IN THE COMMAND POST, Centurion-Three, Ray Alvarez, had been busy from the moment Gerry Conrad reported the Protocol Two. His first call was to the local precinct of the Dallas Police less than two miles away over on Main Street, having been instructed by Alex to bypass 911 and call the direct number that the deputy precinct commander had given her in order to receive a prompter response. Unfortunately, this was not the case this Monday night because approximately thirty minutes before the attack on the principal at the W, someone had shot a Dallas Police officer in her cruiser and the whole department was out hunting the shooter or shooters, still at large. This included deputies from the Dallas County Sheriff's Department and the Texas Ranger detachment assigned to Dallas.

This sounded too convenient to Ray, like a deliberate diversionary tactic designed to delay police support at a critical time, but there was nothing to be done about it at the moment. He told the dispatcher that there was a major gun battle going on out in front of the W Dallas Victory Hotel and that more than likely a number of people were being killed. The man promised to send help as soon as he could, but it might be a few minutes because the shooting had taken place at the farthest point of the precinct, directly across town from the W, and that's where all the officers, deputies, and rangers were concentrating their efforts at the moment. Perfect, thought Ray. Just perfect. Definitely no coincidence.

Ray's job was to maintain the command post, to get help to the scene as quickly as possible, and to coordinate everything from relative safety, no matter how much he might want to run downstairs and help out his team. The first thing he did after calling the police was to get up and make sure the door to the CP was secured, then went over and picked up the Benelli tactical shotgun leaning against the wall in the corner, bringing it back to the desk and setting it down beside his laptop. From where he was he could barely hear the firefight, and couldn't see any of it from the windows in the CP because the room faced the wrong side. And there was no video support either, something he now regretted not doing anything about even though time had been short and other priorities had taken precedence.

For what seemed like an eternity, but was in reality less than two minutes, he sat and waited, worrying about the people down there, his friends and team members, and, of course, their client. When finally he heard Robert's voice come across the net, Ray had never been so relieved in his life. But then Robert was cut off in mid-transmission, just like Gerry had been, and Ray's blood ran cold again.

Another two minutes went by, then Alex's voice: "*C-One, this is C-Two! Seven and Eight are with me and we're in pursuit! Should catch up with you soon!*"

Robert had acknowledged with the proper code, giving a hint as to their present location, and Alex gave a return acknowledgement, letting him know that she understood. Ray could breathe again. And then he started to wonder about the rest of the team. Tino and Gerry were with Alex. Wally was presumably driving the primary car. That left Andie and Jim. Andie had been in the follow-up car with Tino, but Alex hadn't mentioned her being with them. It was possible that she had gone in the primary vehicle with Robert, but she could just as

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easily be down, too. Wounded, maybe even killed. Ray profoundly hoped that was not the case, suddenly remembering the faces of Andie's eight year old twins, James and Mia, seeing them grinning every time their mom opened her laptop screen.

"*Dios mio!*" he whispered. And Jim. No mention of Centurion Four. He'd left Turtle Creek with Alex and dropped her off at the hotel before going to cover the perimeter to the south and west, leaving Gerry to cover the north and east once the principal was on the move. He hadn't reported in during the entire battle and that was not like Jim Paxon. He was totally by the book.

And suddenly something struck in Ray's mind. Yeah, Jim was totally by the book, and the portion of the book he was probably operating from right now was Protocol Eleven: *Assuming communications are compromised, stay off the net, go dark, keep your position secret. Then execute your standing orders.*

That's probably what Jim had done, and once he heard Robert's order to take escape route *Charlie*, Jim had probably moved into position to cover them.

But how could Ray be sure? For all he knew Centurion Four could have been ambushed and killed when the attack started. Suddenly there was a buzzing in his right front pocket and he realized it was his cell phone. Probably his wife because he was late calling her tonight, but he had no time for that now. Reaching in his pocket, Ray pulled out the phone and opened it, prepared to press the CANCEL button before he realized it was a text message and the sender was not his wife. It was *C-Four!* Ray smiled.

"Son of a bitch," he said with relief. "Fucking Jim! Bastard's alive. Now let's just hope everybody stays that way.

Frantic knocking at the door.

Ray picked up the shotgun and stood, moving against the wall to his left. More pounding, then a heavy voice called his name.

“Mr. Alvarez, this is John with Hotel Risk. Are you in there, sir? Are you all right?”

Ray recognized the voice of the tall, black, and very powerfully built security man and knew he was on shift tonight, however right now he had no intention of opening the door.

“I’m fine, John,” he called carefully. “But don’t try to come in here. I’m waiting for the police to arrive. They’ve been delayed.”

“Yes, sir,” John replied, slightly anxious. “There’s been a shooting downstairs. Some people hurt bad, especially out on the street. My boss wanted me to come up and check on you.”

“Well tell him I’m fine,” Ray replied, his finger tense along the trigger guard of the shotgun. “But I’m not opening the door till the cops come. Those are my orders.”

“I understand, sir, and I’ll report that to my boss. But I’m gonna post right out here till the cops get here.”

Ray nodded, leaning his head against the wall, sweat beads running down his forehead.

“That’s fine, John. And I’ll be right here waiting.”

Suddenly he could hear his heart beating faster and faster, and the sweating increased. Offhandedly he wondered if he might be having a heart attack. That made him laugh. He was the one upstairs and safely out of harm’s way with nobody shooting at him and he might just keel over from too much excitement.

“Ray, you really need to lose some weight,” he said in a low tone. “But not tonight.”

A few minutes later, sirens could be heard downstairs and Ray started to relax a little, but he made no move toward the door. This was going to be a very long night, he knew. The cops were already not happy that one of their own had gone down—they’d be even less happy if they found out it was simply a diversion to keep them from getting here before it was too late—and they’d be most

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unhappy when they learned that one side in the battle downstairs had fled the scene, and the state. Ray was probably in for an interesting time himself, because he had no intention of telling them where the others had gone. Which the cops were surely to take the wrong way, meaning badly.

Five minutes later, there was more knocking at the door, this time the voice was different, and when Ray checked the monitors he saw a large white man in a Dallas Police uniform with sergeant's chevron's on his sleeves.

Gradually he relaxed, but only for a minute, taking a deep breath.

Then he opened the door so the *fun* could begin.

Chapter 46

“What the *fuck* do you mean you don’t have her?! Where *are* they?!”

Hugo Bock sat in the front seat of the darkened van parked off the side of the road leading down to the hangar where the Cessna that had brought Debi Patterson to Dallas was housed at Love Field. It was after midnight and he had been expecting a call from Flynn Logan to tell him they had snatched the target, taken out her bodyguards, and were on their way to deliver her. That, however, was not the call the German killer was receiving at the moment. And suddenly his stomach sank.

Logan explained carefully and calmly in that annoying monotone of his, not a single inflection to be heard, and Hugo became more and more incensed with each passing second as he heard the man’s excuses. Finally he cut him off.

“Then where are they?” he asked. “If this occurred twenty minutes ago they should be here by now. The perimeter team should have picked them up at least.”

“I don’t know, Black,” Logan replied. “This whole thing has gone cluster-fuck tonight. First it was that dumb fucking coincidence that my guys coming from the east got made by their countersurveillance guy, and he warned his people before the rest of the assault team could move in.”

“Not coincidence!” Hugo Bock fired back. “Incompetence, Logan! *Fucking* incompetence! And then you let them get away! I thought Jean-Pierre had sent me professionals, not fuck ups!”

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“My men are professionals, Black,” Logan replied, a little of his cool melting away, but his voice still low through the cell phone pressed against the German’s left ear. “And they died like men, fighting against other professionals. This team is very good.”

“Maybe I should have hired them instead!” Hugo shot back derisively. “Then maybe I’d have had better results. This is unbelievable. And after we went through all the trouble to shoot that cop as a diversion in order to provide a window when police response would be delayed. *Goddamn*, where the hell are they?”

“Last report I got from one of my teams,” Logan offered, “was over near Commerce and Elm. They were closing on the backup car when out of nowhere this Suburban plowed into them and knocked them off the road. Must have been another member of the opposition covering their escape.”

“You *think*!” replied Hugo sarcastically. “Wait a minute, Commerce? That’s in the other fucking direction! The hell are they... Just a minute.” He put down the phone and pulled a map out of the glove compartment, shining his penlight on it. After tracing his finger around from the location of the hotel for a minute or so, he looked up and swore, picking up the phone again. “They’re most likely heading to another airport. Southwest of the hotel is *Millennium Dallas Airport*. Small but big enough to accommodate a light business jet, like a Cessna. They must have a backup plane there. *Goddamn* them! This should have fucking worked!”

“Should have don’t count, Black,” Logan replied, his own calm returning now that he could hear the German was worried. “We need to clear out fast. We missed our chance and the cops will be closing this city down. One of their own is dead, and then the mess at the hotel...”

“Your mess at the hotel,” Hugo pointed out. “Can your men be traced to you?”

“Of course not,” Logan replied, slightly offended at the doubt of his operational professionalism. “Even you don’t know my *real* name. Nobody does.”

“Fine,” Hugo said, thinking fast. “Get yourself out of Dallas however you can. And any of your people still alive. But this is not over. The teams here with me will get on the charter and depart. And we will find out where they went and complete our mission. Do you hear me? I’m not letting this payday go.” The thing he didn’t add was that he had no intention of telling Ignacio Riva and Don Fabio Sandoval that he had failed. They didn’t know that he knew who had actually hired him, but he did, and he knew what failing them meant. He did not intend to spend the rest of his life hiding from the Mexicans, and then dying anyway when somebody betrayed him or they found him on their own.

“Whatever you say, Black,” replied Logan. “I’m going now. Call me in a couple of days.” The line went dead before Hugo could say more and he put the phone down, glancing over at the stone-faced mercenary sitting in the driver’s seat.

“I guess you heard it did not go well. And the fault is your commander’s. We’re leaving now. Over to the other hangar, and quickly.”

The man said nothing, simply started the van, put on the headlights, and pulled out.

Hugo Bock took several deep breaths, trying to calm himself, and already thinking up exactly what he was going to tell his intermediary contact about what had happened tonight, putting as much of the blame as he could on the mercenaries who had actually failed to deliver. In the end, when the mission was successfully completed, Hugo intended to see to it that Flynn Logan never worked another job again. A nice nine millimeter parabellum to the brain

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stem should take care of that, and this thought filled him with immense joy. Short-lived though it was.

A chilling thought crossed his mind as the van turned off the road for the hangar where his plane waited. What if the cartel decided to do the same for him?

Best not to dwell on that right now, regroup and complete the mission. The difference this time would be that Hugo Bock would personally lead the next assault, and he would make one hundred percent certain it succeeded as planned. The target acquired, and all of her bodyguards dead. That was the only way to fix this. And Hugo would, he was positive of that.

What Hugo did not know, and really did not care about—which was a strategic failing of his—was just how determined Robert Chandler and company were to see to it that the next attempt failed as well. And should there be one, the next one after that.

Considering how well they had done their jobs this night, it stood to reason that they would be even better the next time. But Hugo didn't see that, nor could he conceive of the concept of his personal failure because he had never failed before. So he had to win, as he always had before.

Again, the consideration he was failing to take into account was the fact that Robert Chandler had never failed to protect a client. So somebody was going to be gravely disappointed at the end of this business. The advantage Robert had was the fact that his team was united, and they actually liked and respected him.

Hugo Bock could not say the same for his team, and again, he did not care. That strategic failing again. His *Persian Flaw*, arrogance, and it would be his undoing.

He just didn't know it yet.

Chapter 47

Charleston, West Virginia (one week later...)

Ray Alvarez had spent the better part of last week enjoying the hospitality of the Dallas Police, the FBI, the ATF, and several other local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies. Actually he had spent that time answering their questions, as best he could, but not really giving satisfactory answers, which is why they held on to him for five days. It finally took a call from a Deputy Assistant U.S. Attorney General in Washington to get him released late Friday afternoon.

It was understandable why everyone wanted to talk to him, and why they had been so insistent on getting better answers. There were eleven people dead, six critically wounded, and one of the best hotels in town had been shot all to hell. To top that off, one of the guns found at the scene came back as a positive match to the one used to kill a Dallas Police officer a half hour before the incident at the W. When Dallas P.D. investigators discovered this they really came at Ray hard, launching every threat they could think of, but Ray was not new to this game, and he himself had spent twelve years on the other side of the desk. He knew the score and how empty most of their threats were.

Still, it was true that he was obstructing an official investigation by not telling officials where the rest of his team had gone. They simply disappeared after the attack and no one had heard from them since. There was a report of a vehicle being run off the road a few miles south of where all the shooting had taken place. Witnesses claimed the car that was struck had been attempting to ram

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a dark colored Ford Taurus with a severely damaged rear end, and it was deliberately hit by a dark colored Chevy Suburban, which then took off following the Taurus.

Ray simply told them that his people had followed procedure and gotten their client out of the kill zone and to a safe place. He didn't tell them they had left the city or the state, but after a couple of days, the authorities began to suspect this was the case because there were no traces of them found in the city or surrounding counties.

Then, on Thursday afternoon, the maintenance supervisor at a private block of hangars at Millennium Dallas Airport reported finding three damaged vehicles parked inside the hangar that had been rented by one Alexandra J. Wells the previous Saturday afternoon for the storage of a Cessna Citation II business-class jet. The Cessna was gone and the vehicles looked like they had been shot up and wrecked. Dallas Police knew that Alex Wells was one of the lead agents of the protection detail that Ray Alvarez worked for, and this was their first confirmation that the people they were seeking might no longer be in Dallas.

Once again they leaned hard on Ray, and once again Ray held his ground, saying nothing. The FBI made a request for any and all flight plans filed with the FAA out of Millennium Dallas on Monday night around the time of the attack and forward several hours, but there was not one filed. They also couldn't find any record of any pilots hired to be on standby at the airport, unlike the crew waiting at Love Field with the plane that had brought the group to Dallas the previous Sunday evening. And then somebody discovered that Alex Wells was a licensed private pilot, too, with full ratings in Cessna business-class jets.

It had been the intention of the police and the FBI to hold on to Ray until he told them something of substance. They could charge him with obstruction of justice if they had to, and probably get it to

stick for a while, hoping that would loosen his tongue, but then that call from Justice came in Friday evening and they had to let him go, couldn't even make him stay in town.

Ray left Dallas Police Headquarters wearing the same suit he had had on since Monday night. When he got back to the *W*, he found the place almost fully repaired, the glass windows and doors along the North Houston side were completely replaced and a crew was working on patching the bullet holes in the walls. Along the block he could not detect any evidence of the gun battle that had taken place just a few days earlier. Amazing how people could just go on after stuff like that, and what choice did they really have?

When he went into the hotel, the desk clerk immediately summoned the manager on duty, and this was not a conversation Ray was looking forward to having. Understandably, the man was furious, and he let Ray know in no uncertain terms that any future business he or any of his team thought they might have with the *W* Dallas Victory Hotel would not be accepted. And then there was the matter of paying for the damages...

Ray simply listened and nodded, then went to the room where all of their luggage and equipment had been placed under police guard, checked everything out, and made arrangements to transport it all back home to Charleston. By Saturday afternoon he was on a charter from Love Field, and he slept the entire way back.

He had never been so glad to see his wife and family as he was that Saturday night, and all day Sunday he spent in the company of his wife and youngest children, but mostly his wife. Despite twenty-four years and probably forty added pounds between them, Ray and Elena Alvarez still enjoyed a rich and inventive sex life when time permitted; and that Sunday afternoon, well into the evening, it permitted a lot.

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Monday morning it was time to get back to work though, and since he was a senior agent with CPS, and the only one in Charleston at the moment, he went to the office on Fifth Avenue not too far from where he lived in South Charleston. It wasn't much, a small brick building in a small commercial area a few blocks away from South Charleston Police Headquarters and the public library. A mid-sized office in the back that Alex and Robert shared, a larger bay out from it with a few desks and telephones where the other agents could work when they were in the office, a bathroom, a small kitchen, an electronics and equipment storage room that Ray considered to be his office, and a very secure little closet of a room in between Robert and Alex's office and Ray's that housed their weapons arsenal.

Ray spent the better part of the morning unloading, cleaning, and storing the equipment and weapons he brought back from Dallas. Over the weekend everything was securely stored in the CP van at his house. His wife had driven it to the airport to pick him up Saturday evening. Although the van was paid for by CPS, Ray usually kept it with him because it was his responsibility, and a lot of the equipment in it was either his or modified by him.

At noon, Nyla Taylor stopped by and he met with her in Robert and Alex's office. She sat in one of the client chairs wearing an immaculate yellow blazer over a knee-length white dress and Ray found himself losing his concentration as he perched on the front edge of Robert's desk, watching her cross her very shapely legs right over left.

"I heard about what happened in Dallas," Nyla said, her face full of concern. "Everybody is okay, right?"

Ray nodded.

"Yeah. Our team and the principal got out okay, a few minor things. Gerry banged his head pretty bad and had a concussion. He was probably the worst. Some others got glass cuts, a few bullet

fragments here and there. Robert actually got creased across his back but didn't know it till later. Alex cut the back of one of her arms on some glass as well. I think Tino hit his head, too, but it wasn't all that serious. And the principal wasn't hurt at all. Andie got her down and covered her with her body as soon as things jumped off. Luckily they were standing right outside the armored primary car when it happened. She's scared to death, or was at the time, but uninjured."

"Well that's good," Nyla said, relaxing a little. "These guys who came after you were serious pros. And bold. A move like that on a public street, a real risk."

"Yeah," Ray agreed, casting a quick glance at her legs. "I suspect they were hoping that the element of surprise and the brazen nature of the attack—the cold brutality of it—would give them the edge they needed to take our team out quickly and get a hold of Debi. Too bad they didn't realize who they were messing with."

Nyla grinned.

"Fools they were. Is it true what I heard about them killing a cop first?"

Ray nodded.

"Yeah. And one of the attackers at the scene is the guy who did it. Apparently local talent brought in just for that and to do surveillance. He actually had his girlfriend with him on the scene, using her as cover. She was dumb enough to go along with him because she thought it sounded exciting, being in on something like that, and damn near got killed too."

"Unbelievable," Nyla said. "Some of us women can be so fucking stupid. I at least hope he was good in bed."

Ray laughed.

"Well if he, was he ain't anymore," he said. "He's dead. And his girlfriend won't know the touch of a man for quite a while either because more than likely she's gonna be in jail. She was with him

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when he shot the cop. Dallas PD is gonna make sure she goes down as an accomplice just so they can say they put somebody in jail for it. Might even get her the death penalty, being Texas. All the attackers on the scene died, along with two innocent civilians caught by stray bullets. Ballistics linked those two deaths to bullets fired from the attackers' weapons, thank god."

"Damn," Nyla said. "Unreal. And you're okay, too?"

Ray nodded slowly.

"Whole time all this was going on, I was safe upstairs in the CP. Never got to see a thing till it was over and the cops came to get me. Then I spent most of last week in custody in Dallas. That was loads of fun, let me tell you."

"I can imagine," she said, uncrossing and slowly recrossing her legs, and taking her time smoothing down the front of her dress. "I'm surprised they let you go at all, and I'm assuming you didn't tell them where the team went?"

Ray shook his head.

"Nope. That's something I could never do. Violates protocol and it would put our client's life in further jeopardy."

"Of course," Nyla said. "I got a call from the FBI by the way. They wanted to know if I knew anything about where the others had gone. Guess they found out TSS was subcontracting to you guys. But since I didn't know anything I didn't have to lie to them. And that means I don't have to worry about going to jail and spending some quality time with *Large Marge*, *Big Tonya*, or *Big Bertha*."

Ray burst into laughter and stood up, holding his side.

"Oh fuck," he said, still laughing. "And we definitely wouldn't want that. You'd probably be too popular."

Nyla smiled.

“Thank you. I think. And besides, guys can be dicks sometimes, but then that’s one of the things we women seem to love about them. If you *know* what I mean.”

Ray stopped laughing and stared into her dark eyes, knowing exactly what she meant. It was a pity, he thought, moving behind the desk and taking a seat, that he was absolutely faithful to his wife. Not a pity really, but sometimes just a bit of a burden.

“I’ve received instructions,” he said, folding his hands on top of the desk. “I am to tell you to pull the guards from the house, but maintain an hourly patrol. And once a day have your guy get out and walk the property.”

“For how long?” Nyla asked.

“Till I hear different,” Ray told her. “That’s what was passed to me, so I’m passing it on to you.”

She nodded.

“All right then. I’ll take care of it. So are you going to be going off to join the rest of the team wherever they are?”

Ray shook his head, glancing off to the left out the window on the other side of Alex’s desk.

“No. I’m staying here. Some things that need to be looked after. Other clients have been calling and I need to get in touch with them.”

“I see,” she said, uncrossing her legs and pushing her knees together. “Well if you need help with anything, don’t hesitate to call me. And when you talk to your bosses next, tell them the same.”

Ray stood up again.

“I will. And thanks for all your help.”

Nyla stood up and walked over to the desk, leaning against it and staring into Ray’s eyes.

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“Anytime, honey,” she said, then smiled, turned, and very sensually swayed out of the office, leaving Ray Alvarez mesmerized, and slightly aroused.

Maybe more than slightly.

Chapter 48

Dallas, Texas (then...)

Jim Paxon had been four blocks southwest of the hotel when he heard Gerry Conrad's warning come across the net, and in that instant his scalp shrank and his blood turned to ice water in his veins. He was not close enough to render immediate assistance, and was on a one-way street heading in the opposite direction, running the outer ring of the designated perimeter Alex and Robert had mapped out when they were planning routes.

Jim quickly accelerated the Suburban, made a left at the first intersection, and turned back in the direction of the W as soon as he could. His pulse quickened just a little and his stomach tightened, the familiar signs of pre-action nerves. Not a concern for Jim, more of a comfort actually, and would help to keep him sharp and alert during what was to come. Without looking, he reached over to the passenger's seat and pressed the release button on the handle of the briefcase.

Running stop signs and red lights, cutting off several cars, Jim was a block away from the hotel and was certain he could hear gunfire, and then Robert's voice sounded over the net this time, instructing everyone to execute escape option *Charlie*. That told Jim that the team was going mobile. So instead of rushing to the scene, he should hang back and wait, already having a pretty good idea from which direction they would be coming, and then be prepared to follow and give cover if necessary. So this is precisely what he did, spinning the steering wheel of the big SUV to the left and lifting the emergency brake at the same time, executing a perfect bootlegger's turn in the

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middle of the street, just missing a Honda and a Lincoln close behind him in the process.

It took five minutes before the primary vehicle passed the spot Jim had driven to three blocks south, and he sat patiently and waited after it did. Two minutes later the follow-up car, having some difficulty with steering due to the damage done to its rear end, rolled by. Again Jim waited, resisting the urge to pull out too quickly, and it was a good thing he had. Less than a minute after the damaged Ford Taurus had limped past his location, a dark blue Murano rolled by at a high rate of speed. Knowing the Murano wasn't in a hurry to go any place good, Jim pulled out and followed, catching up to them a few blocks away on Continental as they closed on the rear of the struggling Taurus, accelerating to ram it off the road.

The occupants of the Murano were totally oblivious to the big Suburban bearing down on them from its rear, running without headlights. Jim was able get right up on their bumper and pull to the left before they noticed him, too late, and then there was the crunching sound of metal on metal, followed by a hard crash into a row of parked cars just past the intersection with Elm. Jim had used a classic take-out technique perfected through many years of training, and one or two other operational occasions, and he knew precisely how to execute the PIT maneuver without causing severe damage to himself or his vehicle. Therefore, he was able to carry on after disabling the Murano, only slightly jarred.

It took him a couple of minutes to catch up with the Taurus, and farther up ahead he saw the Excursion. That's when the lump that had moved into his throat fifteen minutes earlier started to ease. No one had spoken on the net since the last signal from Alex some time before and he figured that was because they believed their communications might have been compromised. Protocol Eleven was now in effect. So Jim reached into his jacket pocket as he steered with

one hand and pulled out the small disposable cell phone that each agent carried for just such occasions. He turned it on, then sent a simple text message to Centurion Three letting him know that the team had made it out of the kill zone and were proceeding on Charlie Route. Ray Alvarez had sent a signal back on his own disposable cell.

Thirty-seven minutes after the start of the ambush outside the W Dallas Victory, the detail was arriving at Millennium Dallas Airport's private hangar section where Alex had reserved a backup plane to be used in the event of an emergency, such as an ambush and/or operational compromise. The hangar was unguarded but locked, and Alex had the key.

Andie took Debi inside and directly to the plane while Robert posted the other agents in strategic positions around the hangar. Alex went into the cockpit and did a quick check and startup, then signaled Robert that everything was working as it should. The Cessna Citation II pulled out of the hangar and everyone climbed onboard, Robert bringing up the rear, and Alex moved out onto the runway. Because it is a small airport and no one is on duty in the tower after eleven, pilots wishing to take off after that time are required to contact the tower at DFW and file a flight plan with them, and get permission to take off. But Alex had no intention of doing any of this, and she had good navigation equipment so she felt confident she could get them airborne and out of Dallas without crashing into any other planes.

This she accomplished quite brilliantly.

Once they were airborne, everyone breathed a deep sigh of relief, even Robert, who had never liked being on planes as much as he liked being on that one on that night. He instructed everyone to check themselves and make sure they weren't seriously hurt. And it was during a self-examination that he discovered a bullet had actually gone down the back of his shirt collar and scraped a deep gash down his back, the bullet embedding itself in the rear interior of his body

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armor. He could feel the pain now, but luckily the wound wasn't too serious. And there were other injuries, none too serious either, which Andie, team medic, looked after while in flight, including the glass cuts on the back of Alex's left arm.

Initially, Debi had gone into a state of shock, and Andie had stayed close to her most of the time, holding the other woman like one of her kids and whispering comforting words to her. After a while, everyone else seemed to relax and come back to a sense of joviality, after all, they were all alive and more or less in good condition. Much better than some of the people left behind in the streets outside the *W*.

Robert went into the cockpit and took the seat next to Alex, easing into the chair because his back was really stinging from the antiseptic ointment Andie had applied. Alex glanced over at him, a small smile on her lips.

"Are you as horny as I am right now?" she had asked, and they both laughed... and laughed.

By the way, Robert's answer had been a resounding *yes*, and had it not been for the enormity of their current situation, it might have been a night for their entry into the *Mile High Club*.

Well, that is if they weren't already members...

Chapter 49

Draper, Utah (now...)

From the beginning of the operation to protect Debi Patterson, Robert and Alex had known that a strike against her was possible, actually it was extremely likely. And because of that certain knowledge, they had taken every precaution they could think of to provide their client with the best possible protection they could devise. Included in that planning was a contingency of safehouses in various locations around the country, places that were standing empty but ready to receive them; all utilities and basic necessities in place, clothes in various sizes and designs, dry goods, and things like that, as well as a small arsenal of weapons capable of repelling all but a heavy armor or aerial bombardment attack.

These safehouses had been established by Robert and Alex over the past couple of years as their business continued to grow. And in conjunction with Billy Rendale of Professional Training Solutions, they maintained them in relative secrecy, using a holding company that Billy owned as a front to hide the true ownership so the houses could not be traced back to any of them; which would compromise the safety of any principal being housed at one.

The safehouse at 12500 Somerdowns Court in Draper, Utah was designated as *Bravo*. After leaving Dallas following their escape from the attack, Alex had flown directly to Salt Lake City and landed at the Salt Lake City Municipal Airport in West Jordan, north of Draper and south of Salt Lake City proper. Robert had gotten in contact with Billy Rendale in-flight and told him what had happened, using a personal code developed between the two of them for such

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occasions. It was three in the morning in West Virginia but Billy had come fully awake on the instant when he heard the sound of Robert's voice, knowing that the call had to be urgent coming from him at such a time. Billy listened carefully, making notes on the pad he always kept at the side of his bed. When Robert finished, he told him he would take care of everything his friend had asked for, and asked if there was anything else he could do. Robert had paused briefly and then asked if Billy could spare "*The Boys*".

Billy Rendale grinned and said *they* would be on their way within the next few hours, fully *tooled up*. Robert thanked him and hung up, and then Billy climbed out of bed, went to the bathroom, and afterwards sat down at his desk and began working.

When the detail landed in Draper nearly two hours later, they were met by a tall, graying man in his mid-fifties with a kind face and jovial manner, wearing silver framed glasses. His name was Evan Stevens and he was a good friend of Billy's, and Robert knew him well, too. Evan had four vehicles parked outside the private hangar where Alex was directed to take the plane, and once Robert climbed down, he came over and greeted him warmly.

"Gettin' a call from Billy in the middle of the night tells me it's awful important." The accent was pure east Texas, and after his spending nearly twenty-five years in Utah, that was a little strange, but Evan was a Texan through and through no matter where he lived. "I got the cars like he wanted, plus a few *extras* in the trunks. Anybody need immediate medical attention?"

Robert told him no, they were fine in the short term, what injuries there were were minor. They quickly got off the plane and into the vehicles and left the airport, their goal to get down to Draper before the sun came up, which they were just barely able to do.

The safehouse had four bedrooms, three upstairs and one downstairs, plus two and a half bathrooms. It would be a bit cramped

for such a large number of people, excluding Evan who would not be staying, but Robert and Alex had decided to keep the whole team together, just in case another *tactical event* occurred. Ray Alvarez would not be coming to join them because at that time he was in the custody of the Dallas Police, and probably would be for some time to come. Robert planned on doing something about that as soon as it was feasible, once they had determined that they were safe and no one had followed them out of Dallas. For the time being, the first forty-eight hours, this meant going completely silent. This included contact with Billy Rendale, who already had all the instructions he needed and would be making moves of his own, working out details, preparing contingencies, and handling one more thing Robert had asked him to take care of.

Once the team was settled into the safehouse in Draper, Evan Stevens went out and did grocery shopping for them, taking the list that had been compiled by Tino with everyone's personal requests on it. In conjunction with everything that was already in the house they would have enough supplies for about two weeks. By then hopefully they would know where they stood.

Before Evan left that morning he told Robert and Alex that increased, but discreet patrols of the area would be made by units from the Salt Lake County Sheriff's station nearby, and that if they needed any assistance, a quick call to the station was all it would take to get half the patrols on duty over there. Evan could guarantee this because his day job was as a member of the Salt Lake County Sheriff's Department and he was the captain in command of the Draper Station.

"Thanks, Evan," Alex said, hugging him briefly. "For everything. Sorry to have woken you so early."

Evan smiled and told her he was more than happy to help, and then he left.

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For the rest of the day everyone took turns resting and standing post, inside and outside of the house. The location had been chosen because there were only a handful of houses down Somerdowns Court, and Safehouse Bravo was set at the dead end of the road, one way in or out by road; *theoretically*. The nearest neighbor house was more than two hundred yards away and there was open space all around the safehouse, except for a few strategic locations where surveillance devices were placed. They kept one car parked a hundred yards down the road from the house, two people on duty in it for four hours at a time, then relieved by another team. There was a rover who kept an eye on the back, although there were hidden cameras scattered about keeping all of that area under constant surveillance, too.

Inside the house, what had been the den was converted into a command post and whoever was assigned there could keep an eye on the monitors and alarms and maintain communications with all other team members. At nine-thirty that night, Robert was on duty in the CP when a signal came across the net, not from a team member, which meant only one thing because only one other person knew the frequency they operated on and the proper code needed to gain access to it. That person was Billy Rendale, and since Robert knew Billy was not in Utah at the moment, it meant "*The Boys*" had arrived.

Robert signaled Alex and told her to go to the back door. He sat watching the monitors carefully and a few minutes later, two dark apparitions emerged from nothingness and moved toward the back of the house. Alex let them in and shortly they were standing inside the command post. One tall and slender with a fresh haircut, the other shorter and heavier with a thick goatee and much-too long thick black hair. Both thirty-two, best friends for years, brothers-in-arms. Denton and Salvio. Officially they were senior instructors with PTS, Inc. Unofficially they were Billy Rendale's private enforcers, highly

skilled operators, ex-Marines both, with a wide range of experience in clandestine work. When they were not training students for PTS, they were handling *problems* for some of Billy's more discreet clients. Also, on occasion, they did work in support of Alex and Robert.

Robert greeted the two men warmly and then he and Alex briefed them. Both men listened carefully, asked a couple of questions for clarification sake, and then said they had no more. That was it, they went back outside and disappeared into the darkness. From that point on they were ghosts, never showing up on any monitor or tripping any alarm. Once a day a signal came in to Robert directly, no voice, just a single double ping, and that let him know they were still out there somewhere and alive.

Then the detail settled into a routine, still ever vigilant, but more relaxed, accepting of what might come next. Everyone took a turn at every job from CP to outside posting, except Andie that is. Because of her close relationship with the principal, Alex and Robert decided that she should stay available for Debi, keep her company because she would be cooped up inside for quite possibly a long period of time. They spent hours upstairs together talking and reading—the house was well supplied with books and magazines—and after the first week they stopped coming downstairs for meals, Andie simply reporting in every hour over the net that they were fine.

And now two weeks had passed since Dallas.

So far so good, but Robert knew very well that it was far from over. Whoever was hunting them was still out there, and still hunting. Considering who was ultimately behind this effort, it was highly unlikely that the hunter would ever give up willingly. He had no choice really. If he didn't complete the contract, Don Fabio would simply find someone else to do it, and he would kill the man who had failed him.

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Robert spent a lot of time thinking about this predicament over the two weeks they waited in Safehouse Bravo, and he really couldn't see a way to ever totally eliminate the threat to his client, but perhaps there was a way the threat could be minimized. At the moment he did not have a clear answer as to how this could be accomplished, but he had time to work on it. Things were quiet and going smoothly. For the time being.

But how long could that last?

Chapter 50

Washington, D.C.

Ray Alvarez was in the nation's capitol at the headquarters of the U.S. Department of Justice two and a half weeks after Dallas, visiting the office of Deputy Assistant Attorney General Lani Jenkins, at her request. A request that had been twinged with just a hint of threat, a vague reference to the *favor* DOJ had done in getting him out of custody in Dallas; the possibility that he could find himself in a similar situation in the not too distant future if he did not oblige. So Mr. Alvarez *graciously* consented to come to Washington.

In addition to the prosecutor, Supervisory Special Agent Dan Cox of the Drug Enforcement Administration was also in attendance at the meeting. Ray had on his best black suit, white shirt, striped tie, and highly polished black wingtips. He figured he might as well try to make a good impression, unfortunately the only person who seemed to be the least bit impressed by his appearance was Jenkins' personal assistant, a cute young thing named Nina. She smiled at Ray when he came in, and again when she showed him into her boss' office. Well at least the effort had not been totally wasted.

For the next three hours and twenty minutes, the executive level federal prosecutor, quietly aided by the DEA man, grilled Ray on every aspect of what had happened in Dallas the night of the ambush. They went over it again and again, asking the same questions over and over and over, sometimes in a different way, but still the same questions, and Ray answered them all to the best of his knowledge, reminding them that he had not actually been witness to the attack itself.

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A few times Nina Sabetella came into the room to bring coffee and to get her boss' signature on documents that had to go out that day, and one time Jenkins had asked her to remain to take notes while Ray dictated word-for-word the exact instructions he had been given by Robert Chandler regarding the continuation of Debi Patterson's protection assignment. Ray hesitated for a moment, glancing at Nina, then shrugged and repeated it, feeling there was nothing really compromising in his words. Nothing about where they had gone after the attack—although the cops knew they went to another airport and left town—or where they were now.

Before Ray left he gave Jenkins a phone number on a piece of paper, telling her that it was for her use only, and Debi Patterson could be reached at that number. The prosecutor took the piece of paper and thanked Ray, then told him he could leave, her assistant Nina would show him out. Ray was glad of this, and she was smiling at him when she walked out with him. And although Ray did not know it then, the reason Nina Sabetella, grandniece of *El Padrino*, was smiling had nothing to do with him. Well, maybe in a small way it did.

She now had a way. All she had to do was get her hands on that number, and as she had proven time and time again since getting a job inside Justice, Nina was a very resourceful young woman.

Chapter 51

Charleston, West Virginia

Hugo Bock had never felt so impotent and so on edge as he did at this moment. For more than two weeks he had been calling in every favor, making threats that he probably could not back up, doing everything humanly possible to find Debi Patterson, but it seemed the woman had fallen off the face of the earth, thanks to the efforts of her highly efficient and lethal protection detail.

She had not returned to West Virginia, Hugo knew this because that was the first place he had gone, discreetly penetrating the neighborhood in Cross Lanes himself, and finding that even the uniformed guards who had been posted earlier were no longer there. Surveillance on the office of Centurion Protective Services in South Charleston revealed that only one of the agents had returned, the tech guy, Ray Alvarez. They watched him for a while, hoping that he might lead them to the others, but he didn't seem to be going anywhere except home every day, and having a few meetings with other clients from time to time, carrying on like nothing else was happening.

Bock had thought about trying to get someone in to bug the phones, but thought better of it. Alvarez was rumored to be a genius with electronics and would probably detect any listening devices with ease, maybe even swept the office every day. Too much of a risk.

The next option was to snatch him and squeeze the information from him, but that might prove to be a problem because after a couple of days, Bock's surveillance team reported the presence of another surveillance team watching the office and Alvarez's home. This worried Hugo tremendously and he decided not to make a move,

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not wanting get another bloody nose from an encounter with these people for which he was not prepared. So he kept on trying through other sources, but none of them had anything for him, and to add additional pressure, his employer was becoming very impatient with him, and making very direct threats. Threats that the German knew full well were quite easy for them to carry out.

Flynn Logan, despite Hugo's increasing hatred of the man, was quite helpful in the effort, but unfortunately all of his sources weren't of much use either, so in the end Hugo revised his thinking. The man was no help at all.

Thursday night, two and a half weeks after Dallas, Hugo sat in his hotel room in downtown Charleston in the dark, contemplating his next move, and realizing that he really didn't have one. And maybe he should just cut his losses and run. Maybe he'd make it. Probably not, but if he didn't go soon, the cartel would send killers after him, and they would find him, he had no doubt about that. These people did not like failure, and dealt swiftly and permanently with those who failed them. He had never failed an assignment before, and could not believe that he was seriously considering giving up now, but he knew when a situation was hopeless, and the truth of the matter was he was afraid, more afraid than he had ever been in his entire life.

He did not want to die either, least of all in the manner he was sure would befall him at the hands of the Mexicans.

Hugo was just about to stand up and start packing when his cell phone rang. The voice on the other end was the intermediary for his client. Hugo felt his blood freeze, imagining that this would be the last time he heard this voice because at any moment, *El Sangriento Puño* killers would burst through the door and finish him. But this was not the case, and the call was perhaps the most joyous he had

ever received in his life. When he hung up he was smiling, and the knot in the pit of his stomach began to loosen.

“I *have* you now,” he said in a low, determined voice, squeezing his fists into his sides. “And this time there will be no *fuck* ups!”

He went into the bathroom to wash his face and to think for a few minutes, and then he went back into the main room and called Flynn Logan to give him the good news, and to tell him to get ready to fly to Draper, Utah.

Chapter 52

Draper, Utah

Wally Holt and Jim Paxon sat in the living room at a round table in the corner near the enclosed fireplace cleaning their weapons. It was six in the evening and they had just come off shift outside, replaced by Gerry Conrad and Tino Vega. In the past few days Robert and Alex had decided to expand shifts to twelve hours on and off, splitting the duties between two primary teams, Gerry and Tino, and Jim and Wally, with Robert and Alex working the command post and relief positions. Andie was still assigned to the principal, and *The Boys* had not been seen in the last couple of weeks, but Robert knew they were still out there... somewhere.

Wally and Jim were day shift and Tino and Gerry had nights, and that is how it would remain until further notice.

Jim ran a solvent-soaked cloth on a rod through the disassembled barrel of his Glock-23, then looked down the barrel, one eye closed, and smiled.

“I love a clean gun,” he said.

“I’ve always been partial to dirty ones myself,” Wally replied with a grin. “Just like my women.”

Jim laughed.

“We really need to work on finding you a decent woman, Wally. Now that we got you a decent gun it only seems fair.”

Wally reattached the slide of his Glock-29 to the frame and closed the breach, working the action a couple of times to make sure there were no obstructions.

“Don’t need a decent one, Jimmy, just one willing to do the basics. Cook, clean... and then there’s the housework.”

Both men laughed.

“Jen heard me laugh at a joke like that and I’d be sleeping with the dog outside. But seriously, Wally, you might want to think about it, settling down and all. It’s the best thing I ever did, really. And I never thought I wanted to be married, not until I met Jen, then I knew she was the one I’d spend the rest of my life with.”

“Well good for you,” the west coast ex-cop said, now reloading his weapon’s magazine with semi-jacketed 10mm hollow points. “Really, man, but I just don’t think I’ll ever get married. Not sure I want to. But it would be nice to find a girl who was interested in more than just how much money I made or how I looked.”

“And she’s out there, Wally,” Alex said from the doorway to the kitchen. “You just have to be willing to look.”

Jim and Wally turned as their shift leader walked in carrying a mug of coffee in her left hand.

“You’ve been eavesdropping, boss?” Jim said as he slipped the barrel of his weapon back into the slide and attached the recoil spring assembly without looking.

“Of course,” Alex said. “How else am I supposed to know if the troops are thinking about rebelling?”

Both men chuckled.

“Nobody in their right mind would ever rebel against either you or Robert,” Wally said. “Especially after seeing the two of you in action a couple weeks ago. If Robert hadn’t been right there by the door when everything happened—and I knew he’d have kicked my butt if I got out of the car—I’d have jumped out to help. But the whole thing was over in thirty seconds and you two got ‘em all. Damnedest thing I ever saw, and half the time I was ducking down in the seat, even though I was in an armored car.”

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“Actually Tino got one of them,” Alex told him, sipping her coffee, her other hand resting on her hip just behind her sidearm. “And Gerry got another.”

“Yeah,” Jim said, attaching his slide and frame. “With his car.”

“Whatever works,” Wally said. “Cars make pretty effective weapons, too. Obviously.”

“Any news we should know about, boss?” Jim asked.

“Not yet,” Alex told him. “We’re still waiting and listening. Could be a while still. But waiting is just the nature of our work, both of you know that. As long as we keep the client safe, that’s all that matters.”

“Yep,” Wally said, sliding the now fully loaded magazine into the butt of his Glock. “And as long as we’re working we’re getting paid. And that means I can find me that woman.”

Everyone laughed, Alex after shaking her head and trying not to.

“Seriously gonna have to get you fixed up when we get back home, Wally,” Jim said, smiling across the table at his shift partner. “Maybe one of my wife’s friends...”

“Oh *god*,” Wally grimaced. “Now I’ve just become one of your pet projects. I really must be pathetic.”

“No,” Jim rejoined. “Just a friend in need.”

“And a friend indeed,” Alex finished.

The three security agents looked at each other for about ten seconds, then burst into laughter again.

Robert was in the command post with the door open and he heard most of what was said. It was good that everyone was keeping things light and loose, and making plans for the future. A positive sign. And he very much intended for all of them to have a future,

their client included, despite the worst intentions of a certain Latino drug lord.

He slid a full magazine of .45 caliber hollow points into his freshly cleaned Glock and racked a round into the chamber, then slipped the weapon back into the paddle holster on his right hip.

All the monitors were clear and all the alarm signals showed green, nothing amiss. For now.

For right now.

Chapter 53

Zero Three Hundred. The time of night, actually morning, when people working night shift are at their most vulnerable to falling asleep. Especially when they work twelve hour shifts. Just a few more hours to go, but the body and mind start becoming sluggish, and all they want to do is sleep, if for only a few minutes...

This is one of the chief reasons that military planners prepare their attacks to commence around this window in time, usually somewhere between two thirty and three thirty, when night sentries are at their weakest. Being thoroughly schooled in battle and attack tactics, Hugo Bock planned his assault on the safehouse off of Somerdowns Court accordingly, set to initiate at precisely 0301 hours.

It had been three days since he received Debi Patterson's location, and after arriving in Utah early the next morning, along with Flynn Logan and three others, he went to work making his plan. The first order of the day was surveillance. There was no way he was going into this operation blind, and this time he would not settle for vague assurances from others, he would conduct the major points of surveillance himself. After all, he had been highly trained in the art of clandestine reconnaissance in hostile environments by one of the best covert antiterrorist forces in the world, GSG-9. He would leave Logan to make arrangements for the rest of the team members who were being brought in—promised to be fifteen of the hardest men in the business, all of them with more than ten bodies to their personal credit. And they had better be the *best* of the worst. Hugo Bock knew

this was his last chance. Either he came out of this night on the winning side or he'd be dead. One way or the other.

Now it was 0301 and Hugo lay along side Logan at the back of the house closest to Safehouse Bravo, both dressed in all black, wearing night-vision goggles, and carrying silenced assault weapons and sidearms. They had been in luck; the house was empty, the owners away on vacation or something, so the assaulters had control of this area without having to risk a confrontation with civilians. More lucky for the owners because Hugo's plan had simply been to kill them; but that turned out not to be necessary. For some reason this disappointed him a little.

He glanced over at Logan, touched his shoulder, nodding. The mercenary leader nodded in return, then pressed the transmit button on his wireless communicator. Pushed it three times in all, then gave the thumbs up to Hugo and started crawling away in the darkness. Hugo took a deep breath, released it slowly, and then started crawling off in the opposite direction.

Chapter 54

Gerry Conrad told his partner that he had to go in and use the bathroom and get more coffee, he'd be back shortly. Then the former FAST Company Marine climbed out of the car posted a hundred yards down from the front of the safehouse, stretched his back as he yawned, casually looking around the darkness before walking back toward the house.

The two man mercenary team who were preparing to kill the two men in the car froze when Gerry got out, and decided to let him go, take the man in the car alone, then deal with the other one in the body of the main attack. They waited until Gerry had gone inside the house before continuing to move out of the shadows on the driver's side of the car. A head was barely visible in the darkness of the car's interior, and one of the men rose quietly to a kneeling stance, sighting through his night-vision scope, and then smoothly pulling the trigger, blowing the head apart. He flattened on the ground quickly, certain of the kill, and nodded at his partner, who in turn sent a signal to their commander, receiving the requisite acknowledgement signal in return. Now they would move to take up positions on either side of the car and cover the house from the front, their mission to take out anyone who tried to escape in this direction once the attack started.

Hugo Bock was now on the east side of the house near the back, a two merc team accompanying him. They were all crouching in the darkness, waiting for the signal to come in from Logan telling them that everything was ready to proceed. It came right on time a

few seconds later, and Hugo smiled, turning to his men and nodding, and they moved for the back door.

Fifty yards west of the house, Flynn Logan checked the infrared readout on the small remote device in his gloved hand, all indicators showed ready, and he smiled one of his rare half smiles, satisfied with himself, ready to go to work. He pressed the main control button and the night sky was lit up by an explosion.

However, instead of being pleased with the result, Logan recoiled in shock because the explosion did not come from the direction he had expected. Off to his right about a hundred yards he saw the car where the two CPS sentries had been posted burst into flames and the two men he had stationed there were now engulfed by it, rolling around and screaming in agony as they tried in vain to get the burning liquid and hot metal off of them.

“What the...”

Those were the last words that Flynn Logan ever uttered as a living, sentient human being. At that precise moment, Denton descended from the tree he had been concealed in for most of the night, right on top of the mercenary leader, pinning him to the ground with most of his body weight while plunging a razor sharp combat blade deep into the base of Logan’s skull.

Boy-One flattened on the ground after retrieving his knife, returning it to the sheath at the small of his back. Then he signaled his partner and told him to go to work.

Salvio (*Boy-Two*) was fifty yards behind and to the east of the house, lying perfectly still in the tall grass, next generation high-resolution night-vision goggles covering his eyes. On either side of him, Tino Vega and Jim Paxon lay prone and similarly attired. Once the signal came in from Denton, Salvio touched both men on the shoulder, their signal, then they each man shot their pre-designated

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targets through the head with silenced rifles, and the next targets after that...

Gerry Conrad was on the roof of the house now, having slipped up through the attic after quickly donning a black BDU jacket and night-vision eyewear, picking up a sniper rifle of his own, too. He had a hostile in his sights and did not hesitate, smoothly pulling the trigger of his weapon and watching the target's head explode. Gerry let out a breath as he worked the bolt-action, quickly acquiring another target just twenty yards farther out. Another trigger pull, another kill. Just like being in back in FAST Company again, he thought with a little grin, seeking his next target.

From their position at the rear east end of the house, Hugo Bock and his men didn't know what was going on. The explosion they had heard had been too far away. It should have occurred on the small front porch, blowing out the doors and most of the front of the house, creating the distraction they were waiting for to enter the house at the rear. But it had not happened as planned. Another *fuck up* by *fucking* Flynn Logan! Bock was enraged, imagining what it would be like to strangle the mercenary leader with his bare hands. He had had it with the man. He was dead now.

Dead!

How hard could it be to plant explosives where you were supposed to? Just simple incompetence. Jean-Pierre would be receiving a most unpleasant phone call in the near future, and perhaps even a bullet himself if Hugo had his way.

Then his mind returned to the present, remembering that the rest of the men should be moving in now, firing controlled bursts to drive those still alive inside the house toward the west side where Logan was supposed to have a second explosion planned. But that was not happening either. Suddenly Hugo Bock had a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach, the knot returning, this time twice as big.

Stellen Qxz

He had no time to waste now, though, nothing else to consider. Despite whatever had gone wrong, his target was inside the house and he was going to go in and get her, complete his contract, even if that meant killing everyone himself. Flynn Logan included. *Especially.*

“Come on!” he yelled at the two men on his team. “We’re going in!”

Chapter 55

Two rounds from Wally Holt's Glock 10mm shattered the back of the head and neck of the second merc on Hugo's team as he was preparing to follow the German assassin and the first merc into the next room. Wally had been concealed in the kitchen's pantry, wearing night-vision gear of his own, and silently slipped out right behind the men after they made entry. As a cop, he would have had a problem shooting a man in the back without first giving him the chance to surrender, and certainly the shooting review board would. But he was no longer a cop, and this man was no ordinary criminal. He was a cold-blooded killer and Wally had no doubt he would have killed him first without the slightest of hesitations if the situation were reversed.

Alex had explained when hiring him that sometimes their work fell into the category of counterterrorism, and in counterterrorism you played by a different set of rules, or you'd died in a hurry. And sometimes there was a bit of what she had called *moral flexibility* involved. Oddly, it was not a concept Wally had a difficult time accepting, and so he had no trouble shooting this terrorist... mercenary—what the hell ever he was—in the back of the head and splattering his brains all over the kitchen walls and floor.

Hugo Bock flinched when he heard the loud reports behind him and ducked down low, the man in front of him doing the same. And in that moment he *knew*—knew for sure, because he had already begun to suspect—that he was not going to make it out of this house alive. He had been setup, failed to see something critical because he

was blinded by his fear of his employer, and as a result, he was lured into a trap. Amateur mistake, and his last.

However, even though he was sure this was his end, Hugo Bock was not prepared to lay down his weapons and surrender. He was not that man, and could not take prison. He would go out on his terms and on his feet, and he would do one more thing, too. Make sure that Debra Patterson died with him, along with as many of her accursed protectors as he could take. Not exactly what the client was paying for, but ultimately all he really wanted was the woman dead. And by achieving that before he himself died, Hugo's professional reputation would remain intact, his record for success spotless. He would die a warrior's death, and become a legend at the same time.

All he could hope for now.

"Get over on that side of the room!" Hugo shouted at the last member of his team. "Anybody comes out of that kitchen or anywhere else, you kill them. And cover me. I'm going upstairs. She's supposed to be in the bedroom at the back of the second floor. I'm going in and kill her, then I'm coming back if I can. You *better* be here waiting on me when I do."

The merc was about thirty, black, shaved head, long scar along his left cheek that looked to be about a decade old. Apparently, he started along this path at an early age. Even so, he knew when he was in the middle of a losing battle, and did not intend to listen to that foreign prick. Soon as he was up those stairs, Jeremiah Davis intended to haul ass as fast and as far as he could. He would keep an eye on the kitchen though, but that was just to protect his own ass.

Hugo Bock reached the staircase, glanced around quickly, and then just as quickly started up the stairs two at a time. As soon as he was out of sight, Jeremiah Davis started for the front door, moving as swiftly and as quietly as he could, but he did not get far. Alex had been crouching at the front end of the sofa across from the front door

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of the living room, unmoving for more than ten minutes. She'd heard everything that Bock had said and waited until he was on his way upstairs before making her move. As soon as Davis turned his attention to the front door, Alex stood up and shot him twice in the side of the chest, knocking him down on the floor. Suspecting that he was wearing body armor, as she and the rest of her team were, and strictly adhering to the rules of engagement for counterterrorism operations, Alex shot him once in the center of the forehead just to make sure that he was dead. Then she kicked his weapon away while continuing to cover the unmoving body with her Glock, glancing around to make sure no one else had entered the room that she hadn't seen.

Upstairs, Bock momentarily froze, his hands sweaty inside the tight leather tactical gloves he wore, his mouth dry, sweat pouring down his forehead from under a dark watch cap covering his head. Three gunshots, not silenced, smaller caliber than an assault rifle. Would Davis have used his sidearm? And why would he? *Fuck!* More than likely his last remaining merc remained no more. *Fuck it*, he thought.

"I'm coming for you bitch!" he hissed, then took a deep breath and charged down the hall to the bedroom where he expected to find Debi Patterson, and maybe some of her bodyguards. His weapon was on full automatic now and he removed the suppressor. No need to be concerned about noise now. Everything had gone to shit for him. So he would make this last effort count in blood.

Five feet away from the door, Hugo opened up on full auto, firing short, controlled bursts, splintering the wood on the door and the frame. Then he ran right through it, yelling like a wild man, spraying the room from side to side in a wide arc, simultaneously dropping low to avoid being an easy target.

Once the magazine in his AR was expended, he dropped it and pulled the 9mm SIG pistol from the tactical holster on his right thigh. He was breathless and now sweat poured into his eyes, blurring his already poor vision, caused by rapid-fire muzzle flashes. The room was empty, feathers from pillows flying everywhere, the windows and mirrors and pictures on the walls shattered, the walls themselves stitched with neat little dark holes.

“*Nooooooo!*” the German screamed in rage and frustration as the familiar smell of cordite filled his nostrils. “*Not like this!* It can’t end like *this!*”

“But it can, Mr. Bock,” Robert said evenly from halfway down the corridor behind him. “She’s not here. Actually, she hasn’t been here for the last couple of weeks. I’m afraid you’ve been very seriously played.”

There it was. Cold reality. It can make a man react in any number of ways. But Hugo Bock knew only one way, making the decision simple.

Growling furiously, filled with a profound desire to keep on living, Bock dropped low again and spun right, firing before he had even completed a half turn. Robert had been expecting this move, of course, and was ready for it. Just before Bock turned, Robert calmly squeezed the trigger of the Heckler & Koch UMP-45 submachine gun he held at the ready, pouring half a magazine of .45 caliber hollow points into the German’s center mass and head, killing him instantly.

Still covering the dead assassin’s body on the floor of the bedroom a few seconds later, Robert allowed himself to breathe again, leaning against the hallway wall for support.

“Well, about what I expected,” he said soberly, lowering his weapon to his side, taking a deep breath. He heard a noise to his right but wasn’t alarmed, Alex had called on the communicator to let him know she was coming up. When he turned and saw her on the top of

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the stairs, Robert smiled, reaching up and pulling off his night-vision goggles as the lights in the house suddenly popped on.

Alex walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder.

“You okay, old man?” she said with a smirk, and Robert thought she had never looked more beautiful, smudges of dirt on her face in no way detracting from his assessment.

“Soon as I take a nap, I’m gonna show you an *old man*, missy.”

Alex grinned, leaned over, and kissed her husband on the cheek.

A few minutes later, Jim and Tino reached the second floor, finding both of them leaning against the wall holding hands, weapons hanging by their sides from the other. Several feet away, a dead hitman lay on the floor.

Jim lowered his weapon and turned to his partner. Then both men turned and started back down the stairs without saying a word.

Chapter 56

Charleston, West Virginia (Safehouse Alpha)

Billy Rendale put his cell phone back in the pocket of his jeans and turned around smiling, facing Andie Pearth and Debi Patterson, both of whom were sitting on the sofa on the other side of the living room.

“It’s over,” he told them. “All of our people are fine. They got both Bock and Logan, that’s been verified.”

Debi Patterson flushed with relief and leaned back on the sofa. Andie put her hand on the other woman’s arm and squeezed gently.

“Told you they’d do it,” she said to her client. “I’ve never met two people more capable and devious than Robert Chandler and Alexandra Wells. And they’re brilliant.”

Debi looked at Andie.

“What did they call it again?”

“The *Rostov Gambit*,” Andie answered. “But don’t ask me to explain. I just did what I was told, hoping like hell it would work. And apparently it did.”

Both women looked over at Billy and he grinned, picking up his coffee cup from the table behind him and taking a quick sip.

“The *Rostov Gambit* actually comes from a TV show back in the 80s. One that both Robert and Alex used to like to watch. I never did see it myself, but they’ve told me about it often enough, and they actually used this little maneuver a couple of times when they were working... well doing other work. The show was called *Scarecrow and Mrs. King*, and in one episode they had this Russian defector named Rostov they were trying to smuggle to safety, while at the same

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time making the KGB think that he was still in a place where they could find and kill him. And when the KGB assault force showed up, they were the ones who got ambushed. As I understand it, the plan used in the show was not actually very good, Hollywood license and all, but Robert and Alex came up with a way to improve upon it and used it when they had a similar need. Still works—obviously. And they kept the name because of the TV show they liked.”

Debi grinned a little.

“So I owe my life to a television show from the 80s?” she said.

“Actually no,” Billy said, finishing his coffee. “You owe your life to a very professional team of operators.”

“Yourself included,” Andie said. “This wouldn’t have worked without you, Billy. You were the only one Robert would have trusted for this.”

Billy shrugged.

“Glad to be able to help.”

Debi suddenly frowned and her eyes became serious.

“But it’s not really over,” she said in a small voice. “Fabio Sandoval will still send others after me. I’ll be living under this threat for the rest of my life. Even if the DEA did manage to plug the leak inside Lani Jenkins’ office, they’ll undoubtedly find others. These people have too much money and power. Sooner or later, they’ll find another way.”

Billy nodded slowly, glancing at Andie.

“A conversation for another day,” he said softly. “I want more coffee, anybody want some?”

Neither did, and he nodded again, walking out of the room.

Andie squeezed Debi’s hand.

“We’ll work something out,” she told her. “Trust me.”

Debi Patterson smiled, but then burst into tears and Andie held her close. She was worried too because she knew Debi was right.

Stellen Qxz

This was far from over. As long as Fabio Sandoval lived, and probably those closest to him as well, Debi would always be in danger. Maybe they all would.

Chapter 57

Chihuahua, Mexico

Everything was a mess now. What should have been a simple abduction with a few bodies left in the wake had now blown up into a major incident, quite a few bodies left in the wake, and none of them the people who should have been dead. Debra Patterson still lived and was still being protected by a group of individuals who had proven to be more cunning and ruthless than Ignacio Riva would have ever believed was possible. And the Don was enraged, as was his right. Riva was enraged as well, but he was not *el padrino*. To make matters even worse, the old man's grandniece at the American Justice Department had been uncovered and was now under arrest. Somehow she had fallen under suspicion and they had used her to lure Hugo Bock and his men into a trap, a trap that had been sprung with brutal efficiency.

Yes it was all a mess. And now *el jefe seguridad* was on his way into a meeting with the Don and his son Raul, new heir-apparent and the man responsible for overseeing *El Sangriento Puño's* day-to-day operations around the world. Riva was not looking forward to this meeting, and to be truthful, he was a little apprehensive. It was no secret that the younger Sandoval did not like him and had tried to get his father to replace the aging security chief with someone younger who had fresher ideas. Thus far Don Fabio had resisted these attempts, telling his son that the experience and ruthlessness of Ignacio Riva was what was needed more than youth and fresh ideas right now. But would that remain the case after this failure? Arguably it was not really Riva's fault, but since he had been charged

with hiring the personnel... this could turn out very badly for *el jefe seguridad*. Which is why he had contingency plans. As any good security man would.

Riva steeled himself for confrontation as he slowly walked down the long corridor toward the old man's office where he and his son waited. He had already come up with a new plan for dealing with the Patterson woman (killing instead of kidnapping her), and if the old man approved, it could be finished in a matter of days, a week at the most. But first he would have to deal with the old man's anger, and the schemes of the younger man.

Now he stood outside the door of the office, taking deep breaths, releasing them slowly. Then he knocked.

Raul answered, simply saying "*Come!*" The *insolent* prick.

Riva straightened his shoulders and opened the door, stepping inside and shutting the door behind him.

Two minutes later, the whole room and half the mansion exploded.

Chapter 58

North Miami Beach, Florida

Howie Vaughn was having lunch with his wife Ruth at a place called the *Caribbean Delight Bar and Grill* on NE 164th Street. She had just folded a copy of the *Miami Herald* and set it down on the table between them, leaning her elbows on the table and cupping her cheeks in both hands, her large brown eyes staring over at her husband. On the portion of the paper that was visible was a story about the bombing of a mansion in Mexico that belonged to one of the most notorious drug dealers and murderers in the world. A bombing that killed the drug lord himself, his only remaining son, and, it was believed, his chief of security as well; along with countless others.

“Got something to say, Mr. Vaughn?” his wife asked with a sly grin.

Vaughn stared at his wife for a moment, and then briefly at the paper.

“I read that story,” he said, cutting his steak. “Really tragic. But I guess what they say is true, you die the way you live. Probably one of his rivals finally found a way to get to him. Not that too many people will care I imagine.”

Ruth continued to stare at him, and her smile grew wider. Finally she lowered her arms and picked up her fork, digging into her salad.

“So how do you think this development will affect the situation in West Virginia?” she asked casually.

Howie took his time chewing his steak and then reached for his glass of wine.

Stellen Qxz

“Let’s hope for the best,” he said, closing the conversation.
Officially and otherwise and forever.

Epilogue

Charleston, West Virginia

“You know they all think we took out the head of the Chihuahua Cartel, the *godfather of black tar*, along with his son and chief enforcer.”

Robert groaned softly, adjusting his position on the sofa. The injury to his back was almost completely healed, but it still bothered him a little, and there would be a permanent scar. But what was one more?

Alex was lying in front with her back to him and he held her close, nuzzling her neck. It was Saturday. Their favorite day of the week.

“They don’t really think that,” he told her, slipping his hand under her T-shirt and resting it on her tummy. “They just want to believe it. Believe they work for people with that kind of power. They know better.”

“I’m not so sure,” Alex said, pressing her body back against his. “The looks we’ve been getting ever since word about the bombing came out. Hell, even Debi thinks we did it.”

“Well maybe we should send her a bill for services rendered,” Robert quipped. “Think she’d go for it?”

Alex giggled and shifted, turning around to face him.

“Let’s not go defrauding our clients just yet, sir,” she chided, raising her right leg and draping it over his hip. “And speaking of billing her, how long do you think we should continue the detail?”

Robert leaned forward and kissed her just above the neckline of her T-shirt.

“Been thinking about that. We’ll talk to her on Monday and see if she feels comfortable with cutting it back to one person per shift. See how that goes. Then, maybe in a few weeks we pull off altogether. With Sandoval’s death, and the others, the threat to her is probably nil. The rivals who take over the operation, once the bloodletting ends, probably won’t care. They’re probably all just as glad Paulo Sandoval is dead as they are about the old man and his brother.”

Alex nodded and smiled, leaning closer and kissing her husband’s lips.

“You’re probably right. No honor among thieves.” She paused and kissed him again, then pulled back a little and looked directly into his eyes. “So who do you think blew them up?”

“No idea,” Robert said, reaching down and lifting up his wife’s T-shirt. “And I really don’t care. Now could we please talk about something that really matters, like your perfectly *delectable* little body?”

Alex snickered, pressing her lower body against his, then reached back behind her head, tugging her T-shirt up and off. This had an immediate and *noticeable* effect on her husband because she was not wearing a bra. Robert was delighted beyond words.

But it did not deter him from using his mouth...

Finis



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