

The Adamas Blueprint

A Novel By

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CHAPTER 1

September, 1995

Kevin, no time for details. The same men who killed Stein are after me.

Michael Ward's fingers trembled as he lifted his hands from the keyboard. He'd tried calling Kevin three times, but Ward kept getting the damned answering machine, and leaving a message was out of the question.

He needed a cigarette badly. His hand fumbled through his shirt pocket and removed the pack of Benson and Hedges. Only one left. He'd have to get another pack before they left for the airport.

He lit the cigarette despite the shaking and took a deep drag, trying to pull every milligram of precious nicotine into his system. He felt the smoke fill his lungs, and the trembling subsided. His attention returned to the words on the screen. He almost laughed at their absurdity, but he was afraid if he started he wouldn't be able to stop.

A wave of nausea hit him. Ward shook off the feeling. There wasn't much left in his stomach anyway, just half a bottle of Pepto Bismol he'd drained when he got home. He'd been spending

the Friday in his South Texas University office working and listening to the radio when he'd heard the news of Herbert Stein's death. The story had been short, but it was enough. An execution-style shooting, the body thrown in a dumpster. Ward got sick twice, once in his office trash can and again before climbing into his Mercedes. Even now, he still didn't feel like a man who was about retire to the Bahamas with \$10 million.

With the cigarette stuck in his mouth, he continued typing.

Irene and I are leaving Houston. I think we'll be safe where we're going, but I need your help to be sure. NV117 wasn't a failure, and Clay wants it. The details are in a notebook. I've recorded everything you'll need and put it in a safe place. DA483H3 is the...

"May we come in, Dr. Ward?"

Ward jerked visibly at the sound of the voice. He recognized the distinct enunciation of each syllable and his heart started racing. He turned his head to see two men standing in the doorway to his study. David Lobec and behind him, Richard Bern, Clay Tarnwell's men here to finalize the deal. They were early. The meeting wasn't supposed to start for another two hours.

He silently cursed himself for not grabbing their passports and running as soon as he saw his wife. *Five minutes*, he'd told Irene. *Pack whatever you can in five minutes, then we head straight to Intercontinental and get the first flight out.* She'd begun to protest, asking if he'd lost his mind. *I'll explain everything in the car, but we need to get the hell out of here.* When he'd practically shoved her up the stairs, she'd gotten the message. He was dead serious. Now they were out of time, and Ward's mind raced for options.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the blinking cursor on the screen and realized that the words on the computer might be seen from the front of his desk. Without glancing back at the

monitor, he pressed the F4 key as he turned the chair to face his visitors. The message disappeared from the screen.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Lobec," Ward said, rising from his seat. "I didn't hear the doorbell." The waver in his voice betrayed his attempt to remain calm. He took another puff from the cigarette.

Lobec smiled and strode in without waiting for the invitation he had asked for.

"Disgusting habit," he said, plucking the cigarette from Ward's lips. He stubbed it out in a heavily stained brass ashtray. "Much better. Now we can all breathe while we talk." He sat in one of the leather chairs. Bern remained standing behind him.

"Please sit down," Lobec said.

"You're early," said Ward, lowering himself into his chair. "I wasn't expecting you until 6:30." The clock on the study's mantle said 4:23.

"Of course you weren't. You expected to be far away by the time we arrived. I'm happy to surprise you."

He wasn't tall, no more than 5'10", but Lobec carried a quiet confidence that made him more imposing than a man six inches taller. His thick ebony hair, a marked contrast to his fair complexion and slate gray eyes, was combed straight back. His gray suit was tailored, perfectly fitting his trim, athletic frame, but otherwise rather ordinary. Lobec was not a handsome man, his nose angled slightly downward and crooked, his chin weak, but his eyes were always alert and focused. Despite being intimidated by Lobec, Ward couldn't help admiring the man's presence.

Lobec's younger associate, on the other hand, was the same height as Lobec, but about fifty pounds heavier, although Ward couldn't tell how much of that was muscle. Bern also lacked Lobec's sense of style, wearing an ill-fitting blue suit that looked a size too large for his bulky

frame. His brown hair was cut in a Marine-style crew, and boredom wafted from his perpetual frown and sleepy eyes. Beyond the visual, Ward knew hardly anything about the man. He'd never uttered more than a few unintelligible greetings.

Ward forced a smile, knowing he'd never be able to overpower either one of them, let alone both. Despite his four-inch height advantage over the two men, his large paunch and fleshy jowls gave him away as a professor whose sole exercise was swinging a golf club. Since the fall semester didn't begin until next week, he was dressed in the \$300 sweatsuit he normally wore on weekends, not the Sansabelt slacks and tight short sleeve shirts his colleagues seemed to prefer. Otherwise, Ward was the archetype of a distinguished professor, down to the thin, graying hair and wire-rimmed glasses. Judging by Lobec's attitude, he wasn't much of a threat.

"I don't know what you mean," Ward said. "I was just finishing up some..."

"You do know what I mean." Lobec seemed more amused than annoyed. "We've been searching for you for the last hour. It seems that you did not take your normal route from the office today. Perhaps you could tell us why."

He had suspected they were watching him, and now Lobec's statement confirmed it. After hearing the news about Herbert Stein's murder, Ward had taken the precaution of leaving through the subbasement to another building, hoping to elude his observers for just ten minutes. It was all the time he needed to hide the key to his insurance. Apparently, he had been successful.

"How do you know what route I take?" He was stalling, trying to think.

"The same way we know that your mandatory tenure has been denied."

Ward's eyebrow twitched. Lobec was trying to shake him. But the decision had been made over a month ago, the same day he had finally decided to sell his notebook on Adamas rather than

turn it over to the university. The tenure decision wasn't common knowledge, but at least a dozen people at STU knew.

Before Ward could respond, Lobec said, "The same way we know how you've been able to afford a half-million dollar home and a Mercedes on a professor's salary." Lobec looked around at the tastefully decorated study, with its mahogany desk, black leather sofa, golf awards, and memorabilia. Over Ward's shoulder, he could see the 18-hole championship golf course in the final stages of construction. His eyes returned to Ward. "Although lately, your situation has taken a turn for the worse, hasn't it? Mr. Tarnwell mentioned your successful ventures in the stock market. It's a pity your appraisal of Genetix wasn't as shrewd."

Ward's jaw dropped. Ward had gotten lucky on some Internet stocks and cashed out before the crash. Then Ward got a hot tip about a local company called Genetix about to issue a press release about a new drug it was developing. FDA approval was a sure thing, his source had said. Seeing how well other biotechs had done, Ward pounced on it.

In the first week after the press release, the stock soared to twice its price and Ward was ecstatic. He bought even more shares, leveraging himself to the hilt. But within a month, a report leaked test results detailing serious side effects of the new drug. The probability of FDA approval was virtually nonexistent. The stock plummeted. Ward couldn't give shares away. Before the deal with Tarnwell came along, he was on the verge of bankruptcy. Not even Irene knew about it.

As Ward sat dumbfounded, Lobec continued. "I mention these facts merely to impress upon you that our resources for gathering information are quite formidable. Should you and your wife think of leaving Houston, we *would* find you."

Suddenly, Ward remembered Irene packing upstairs. She should have come down by now. He saw a nasty gleam in Lobec's eyes.

Ward jumped from his seat. "Irene!" There was no response. He moved toward Lobec. "Where is she, goddammit?"

Bern tensed and took a step forward. Lobec, the smile never leaving his face, calmly reached into his jacket and pulled out an automatic pistol.

"Mrs. Ward is quite safe for the moment, but I wouldn't want any rash behavior on your part to jeopardize that safety."

"You won't shoot me. Somebody will hear."

"I know as well as you do that you and your wife are the first, and currently only, occupants on this block. I have a silencer, but there really is no need for it. Now please sit down, or I shall ask Mr. Bern to assist you."

Seeing that he had no choice, Ward reluctantly sat. The fear that had gripped him moments before was now competing with the anger seething just below it. Despite their problems, Ward loved Irene, and the thought of these bastards manhandling her was repulsive to him.

"What does Clay want?" he asked, his voice barely above a whisper.

"First of all, he would like the \$10 million you've stolen from him."

Ward erupted. "I didn't steal it! He paid me that \$10 million. And he's supposed to pay me another \$20 million when he gets Adamas."

"Second," Lobec continued, "we want the names of every person you've told about Adamas."

Ward's eyes narrowed. "If you don't let us go, you'll never see Adamas, and Clay will come out of this \$10 million poorer."

“Spare us, Dr. Ward. We already have the details of your process in our possession.”

Ward sat back as if slapped in the face. That was impossible. There was only one copy of the notebook and it was stored in a safe place. The meeting tonight was to go over the details of the final transaction. On Monday, he was going to retrieve the notebook, copy it, and give the copy to a lawyer before handing the original over to Tarnwell in return for the \$20 million. The lawyer would keep it and turn it over to the authorities if something happened to Ward. But something happened to the lawyer first. The lawyer was Herbert Stein, and he was murdered.

Ward sputtered, “But, you couldn’t...”

“You’ve been observed for the past two weeks, Dr. Ward. We’ve also had a chance to thoroughly itemize the contents of your office. We have everything we need.”

Something was wrong. He had hidden the notebook a month ago and hadn’t returned to the hiding place since then. He certainly didn’t keep it in his office. And he doubted even Tarnwell could get the notebook from its hiding place. He needed to know if Lobec was lying. “Then you have the videotape as well, I suppose.”

Lobec’s irritating smile finally dissolved. “You’re bluffing. There is no videotape.”

It was Ward smiling now. “So Clay doesn’t have the notebook. That’s too bad. When my friends find the videotape and the notebook, Clay is going to see a billion dollars evaporate. That is, if you don’t let us go.” This time he *was* bluffing. No one else knew of Adamas or the notebook’s location, and he hadn’t had time to finish the electronic mail message to Kevin.

Lobec’s smile returned. “Surely you learned what happened to your new attorney, Mr. Stein, or you wouldn’t have led us on this merry chase. I must say, Mr. Stein was quite forceful about his need to protect his clients’ interests. It wasn’t until I removed his second finger that he told us

about your attempt to secure his services, in great detail in fact. No doubt your friends will be as obliging with the proper incentive.”

Despite his horror, Ward tried to feign confidence. “You can’t possibly know who they are.”

“No, that is correct,” Lobec said, nodding. “But I think you will be most willing to tell us. Especially if you don’t want to see your beautiful wife damaged by Mr. Bern.” Lobec glanced toward Bern and nodded in Ward’s direction.

Ward’s stomach sank. They would never let him go. They’d torture the information about the notebook’s location out of him. Once they had that, there would be no reason to keep either of them alive. In fact, with him out of the way, there would be no one to dispute that Tarnwell was the inventor of Adamas. With that realization, Ward knew he had to take whatever chance he saw.

Bern walked around the desk and bent over to grab Ward’s arm. As he did so, Bern’s jacket fell open and Ward saw a semi-automatic pistol holstered under his left armpit. Ward looked up and saw that the bored expression hadn’t left Bern’s face.

As Bern wrapped his meaty hand around Ward’s arm, Ward sagged as if overcome with despair, his 250 pounds throwing Bern off balance in the process. He plunged his free hand into Bern’s jacket, found the pistol, and yanked it from the holster.

Bern snapped back and grabbed Ward’s wrist, pointing the gun toward the ceiling. To the side, he could see Lobec aiming his pistol at them but not firing, probably not wanting to kill Ward until he got the information he needed. Bern’s other hand grabbed at the gun. He pried at Ward’s hand, but Ward gripped the gun with tenacity born of desperation.

Ward tried forcing the gun into Bern's face. Bern deflected it as Ward pulled the trigger, and a deafening blast rended the air. A chunk of the ceiling hit them as Bern whirled them around and into the wall. He pulled Ward's arm down, trying to use leverage to wrest the gun away. With one hand still on Ward's wrist, Bern slid the other up the gun's barrel and jerked downward. Another shot rang out, and the gun dropped to the floor.

Bern stepped back to retrieve the weapon. Ward ignored him, his face contorted with agony. A red stain grew on his right shoulder. But instead of reaching for that shoulder, he put his hand to the other one. The pain was excruciating, spreading to Ward's chest. His eyes cast downward, searching for the source of the pain, but the only obvious wound was from the gunshot. Then he understood. The heart attack Irene had always predicted. The smoking, the greasy foods, the lack of exercise. She'd nagged him for years. Now it was going to keep Tarnwell from getting what he wanted. He tried to laugh, but the sound came out as only a weak gargle. He staggered forward a step and fell to his knees. Bern stood aside as Ward pitched over.

Ward looked up, his vision tunneling. Through the tunnel, he could see Lobec's eyes hovering only a foot from his face. Lobec shook Ward and spoke. Although his voice was only a muddy jumble, Ward felt himself responding, not really understanding what he was saying. He saw Lobec's face turn and start searching, stopping when he came to the computer screen. He followed Lobec's gaze there. The last thing Ward ever saw was the phrase *Message sent to: N. Kevin Hamilton.*

CHAPTER 2

Slamming the apartment door behind him, Kevin Hamilton sprinted to his car. As he ran, he pulled a Rockets cap over his wet, tangled hair and shoved his wallet into the front pocket of his shorts. One of his shoes was still untied, and the laces slapped against his bare ankles. He didn't dare stop to tie it. If he didn't get to the South Texas University campus in 20 minutes, his life would be over.

Kevin had just finished toweling off from a late afternoon shower when he'd begun to read the letters from his South Texas University mailbox. The first one had stopped him cold, and it felt like shaved ice had poured into his stomach. He'd read the letter twice to make sure he'd understood it correctly, then frantically called the number at the top of the letter. Getting a busy signal, he scrambled into the first clothes he could find. The long-sleeved button-downed shirt he'd ripped from a closet hanger was wildly incongruous with the workout shorts and tennis shoes, but he didn't care. Besides, he'd seen a lot worse on other graduate students.

He jumped into his Mustang and tossed the letter onto the front seat. As he inserted the ignition key, Kevin rested his other hand on the steering wheel, then immediately pulled it back with a gasp. Even this late in the day, the September sun was still strong enough to heat the

steering wheel to scorching temperatures. Gripping the cooler lower part of the steering wheel, he turned the key.

The Mustang wheezed for a few seconds, then nothing. Kevin swore under his breath. He'd had the car for nine years, won it in a radio contest when he was still in high school. His parents had let him keep it as long as he could make the insurance premiums. He'd gladly agreed and for the first two years lived the teenage male's dream of owning a flaming red V8 hot rod. But since then, it had started to slowly fall apart. The rear hatch release, the gas gauge, and the right window switch were all broken. The latest frustration was its difficulty starting. Probably a bad solenoid. He'd been meaning to get it fixed, but money had been tight lately.

He tried again, mouthing a silent prayer. The car roared to life.

"Yes," Kevin said. He tore out of the parking space and headed for the exit.

The Mustang roared down the straightaway lining the Sycamore apartment complex until Kevin had to brake for the closed security gate. The ten-foot-high gate slid sideways on a track. The gate always seemed to move slower when he was in a hurry, but it still probably took no more than eight seconds to open fully.

As soon as the opening was wide enough, Kevin accelerated, looked quickly to the left for cars, and turned right onto Gulfon.

A stop sign loomed a quarter mile ahead as he approached Chimney Rock, a major four-lane road split by a median. He'd have to turn left to go north to the Southwest Freeway, the quickest route to the university. As he braked, Kevin glanced at the dashboard clock. 4:43. He wasn't going to make it. Not unless he took some chances.

The Mustang squealed to a halt. Kevin rested his foot on the accelerator, revving the engine to 3000 rpm. Seconds later, a minuscule hole opened in the southbound traffic, one he thought would be just big enough. He popped the clutch.

The Mustang launched forward, and horns blared from his left. He could feel the back tires losing traction. He lifted his foot slightly, sliding the car gracefully into the northbound traffic, narrowly missing a minivan that had begun to change lanes.

The heavy traffic didn't leave much room for maneuvering, so he was stuck with the traffic's plodding pace, changing lanes over and over, looking for any opening he could exploit. Finally, he reached the traffic light at the Southwest Freeway feeder road and turned right to get onto the entrance ramp.

Once on the freeway, he was able to dodge the traffic at speeds 10 mph faster than the 70 mph flow. Thirteen minutes later, he was on the STU campus, amazed that he hadn't hit any freeway snarls or been stopped by the police. The dashboard clock read 4:59.

Kevin found an empty spot marked "Reserved" right in front of Braden Hall. He took the letter from the front seat and bounded up the steps into the granite administration building and up a flight of stairs to the second floor where he reached a glass door with "Office of Financial Aid and Student Affairs" etched on the front. He had the door halfway open when a woman on the other side of the door reached out to stop him.

"The office is closed," she said. He recognized the woman immediately. Her name was Teri Linley. She was an undergraduate, maybe seven or eight years younger than he was, with curly, brown hair piled high in front and too much makeup for Kevin's taste. He knew her because he

had graded a first-year chemistry course over a year ago, and she had been the biggest pain in the class, complaining about every little point he took off her exams.

She didn't give Kevin a second glance and tried closing the door. He held the handle firmly.

"Teri, I have to see Dean Baker," he said.

Teri examined her watch dramatically. "It's after 5. We are closed." Her expression was annoyance mixed with impatience. She wanted to be out of here.

"I know it's late, but I have an urgent matter to discuss with her."

She shook her head. "You'll have to come back Monday."

"I can't." Kevin waved the letter at her. "This says I have to see her before the end of today."

"As far as this office is concerned," she said, "the day has ended."

Kevin pointed toward the office hallway. "I know Dean Baker's still here. Her light's on."

"I didn't say she wasn't here. I said we were closed." Teri pulled on the door again. Kevin wouldn't let it budge.

"What are you doing?" she said. "Let go."

Kevin knew that if he got upset with her, it would only make the situation worse. He had to try another tack.

"I meant it when I said my business was urgent." He smiled. "I'm not letting go of this door until I get to see Dean Baker."

Teri hesitated, turning her head to look down the hallway.

"I promise you'll get out of here a lot faster if you let me in."

She turned back and held his eyes for a couple of seconds with a look of disgusted resignation. She let go of the door and threw up her hands. "Fine. Come on."

The woman went back to the front desk, and Kevin walked down to the dean's office.

He rapped lightly on the open door. "Dean Baker?"

Julia Baker, Dean of Financial Aid was younger than Kevin had expected, probably in her thirties, but when she looked up, her eyes peered over reading glasses with the unmistakable gaze of authority. She had straight red hair, an angular face with a dash of freckles, and was dressed in an expensive-looking gray dress accented by a turquoise scarf. He suddenly felt self-conscious about his own appearance but didn't take off his cap, knowing his hair would look even worse.

"Sorry to bother you so late..." he began.

"Not at all," Dean Baker said with a smile. "Please have a seat." She gestured to one of the chairs in front of the desk and Kevin sat. "I've been expecting you, Kevin."

"You know who I am?" he said incredulously.

"Of course." She ran her fingers along a pile of folders on her desk, then pulled one out, opened it and tapped one of the pages. "I recognize you from your application photo. You're not the first student at South Texas with perfect GRE scores, but we haven't had many." She nodded at the paper in his hand. "That's why I sent you that letter. I like to make sure our best students get every chance to succeed, no matter what problems they've had."

"About the letter," Kevin said, waving it. "I came over as soon as I read it."

"I sent that letter out August 25th. That was almost two weeks ago."

"I don't get to my STU mailbox very often. I didn't take any classes this summer and I work off-campus."

“Off campus?” She flipped to another page in the folder. “It says here that you were offered a research assistantship with Michael Ward and that you accepted.”

“I did have one with Dr. Ward. Until four months ago. He fired me.”

“Why?”

“There was an accident in the lab. Some equipment got destroyed. Some expensive equipment. He thought it was my fault.”

“Was it?”

“I can’t say for sure. Both of us were in the lab at the time, but I was the one who set up the equipment, so I got the blame. He fired me right after the accident. I didn’t get a chance to inspect the equipment closely.”

“Would you like me to speak to Dr. Ward for you?”

Kevin shook his head. Even if she could do it, he wouldn’t go back to work for the Arrogant Asshole. “No, thanks. After I was fired, I checked with all of the other chemistry professors. None of them had any open positions until the fall semester, so I found a job at Hermann Hospital in the biochemistry lab.”

“You like the job?”

Kevin shrugged. “It’s good experience. And it pays the rent.”

“But not your tuition.”

“I’d need a lot better job to pay \$15,000 a year in tuition. That’s why I need those school loans.”

“And that’s why you lied on your financial aid forms about your father?”

The reason for her letter. The reason Kevin had raced over to justify his actions. He shifted uncomfortably in the chair. “No, I didn’t lie to get more money. I did it for personal reasons.”

“Kevin, giving false information about your financial aid status is a serious offense. I could have rescinded your student loans and required you to pay them back immediately. I sent that letter to give you a chance to explain before I acted, which should have been by the end of today.”

Kevin began to speak, but Dean Baker held up her hand. “Unfortunately, I have to finish preparing for a speech I’m to give at 5:30. We’ll have to discuss this further on Monday.”

“But without those loans...”

“Kevin, you’re an outstanding student. I haven’t heard your story, but I don’t think kicking you out of South Texas is the answer. As I said, we’ll talk about this on Monday. The office opens at eight. Now, please close my door on your way out.” She went back to reading the papers on her desk.

Kevin tried not to let her see him sigh with relief. “Thank you,” he said, gently closing the door behind him.

Teri was waiting by the door as he entered the main office. She was talking to a huge body-builder type, no doubt her boyfriend. When she saw Kevin, the disgusted look returned to her face, accompanied by a scowl from the body builder. She nodded in his direction and whispered “Finally.”

Kevin pretended to ignore them. He smiled, pushed the door open, and strolled down the hall, feeling much better than when he had run through it ten minutes before.

His life wasn’t over after all. He had just dodged a bullet.

* * *

David Lobec closed the bedroom curtains in case someone happened to drive by on the otherwise deserted suburban street outside. Their car was on the other side of the house where it couldn't be seen from the street.

Richard Bern spoke from behind him. "So did Ward say anything important?"

He turned to see Bern carefully place Michael Ward on the bed next to his wife. Ward had already been stripped and put into his pajamas. Irene Ward, dressed in a negligee, looked as if she were sleeping peacefully next to him, belying the fact that Lobec had smothered her with a pillow.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"When he was whispering right before he died, it looked like he was telling you something."

Lobec's expression didn't change. "No, he was babbling." He took an unopened switchblade out of his pocket and threw it to Bern, who caught it with ease.

"I thought you were kidding about this," Bern said, his eyes wide.

"It's your bullet," Lobec said. "Therefore, you will take it out. Would you like to explain to Mr. Tarnwell that there is incriminating evidence linking us to Dr. Ward's murder?"

Bern's slowly shook his head, pondering the thought. Tarnwell was a bear of a man, a stout six foot six, and still every inch the football player he used to be. Everyone in his employ feared him. Everyone except Lobec. He had his own reasons for obeying Tarnwell.

Lobec handed Bern a pair of thin rubber gloves and put a pair on himself.

"I didn't think so," he said. "When you're through, wipe down everything in the room that we might have touched. Then come down and remove the slug from the office ceiling."

Lobec left the bedroom and stopped at the upstairs smoke detector. He took the battery out and slipped it into his pocket. He would do the same to the others. It wasn't uncommon for

firemen to find brand new houses burnt to the ground with the occupants still inside because they had forgotten to install batteries in their smoke detectors. The Wards would be another sad story the firemen would use to warn second graders and their parents.

It was possible that the coroner would be able to determine that the victims' lungs contained no smoke from the fire, but Lobec thought the likelihood was minimal. Once Lobec and Bern were through searching the house and Ward's computer for anything associated with Adamas or the missing \$10 million, flames would consume the entire building long before the fire department could arrive on the scene. Fortunately, the Wards had elected to use gas in their kitchen appliances. Two smokers in a house with a gas line and smoke detectors missing batteries was a recipe for tragedy.

Lobec smiled at his luck. With the gas fueling a raging inferno, the bodies might not even be identifiable, let alone capable of providing a definitive cause of death. Unless, of course, the coroner found a bullet in one of the corpses. And Bern was taking care of that.

Several issues still troubled Lobec, and he stopped smiling at the thought. Who was N. Kevin Hamilton? And what was the message Ward sent to him? He'd noticed Ward surreptitiously press a key as they walked into his office, but Lobec had thought little of it at the time. Now it could be a severe problem. He had checked the computer, but the message hadn't been saved when it was sent. Of course, the message may have been incomplete, but it was bothersome nonetheless.

Lobec needed to know more. After emptying the other two smoke detectors, he headed for Ward's office. The next item on the agenda was to look for anything regarding N. Kevin Hamilton. Unless they found him quickly, whatever was in the message might find its way to the

police. He couldn't let that happen. In more ways than one, their involvement would be disastrous for Lobec.

* * *

Reggae blasted from the stereo of the stifling, overcrowded house. Kevin opened the window he'd been looking out of, leaving the screen to repel the late summer mosquitoes.

It was 8:00 and Nigel Hudson was throwing his traditional beginning-of-the-semester party. Before coming over, Kevin had returned to his apartment, showered again, and put on khaki Bermuda shorts, a white V-neck pullover, and a pair of beat-up Bass Rangeleys with no socks.

Someone tapped his shoulder from behind.

"Is she coming?" said Nigel, handing a beer to Kevin.

"I can tell you've been drinking," Kevin said. "Your accent's back."

Nigel, an immigrant from Jamaica who'd been a US resident for 15 years, was meticulously stylish and probably the most gregarious person at South Texas. He was also one of the few friends from his undergraduate years at Texas A&M that Kevin kept in touch with.

Nigel shot him a bemused look. "Don't change the subject. You've been looking out the window ever since you got here."

"You mean Erica?" Kevin shrugged and looked around at Nigel's business school friends, most of whom he didn't know.. "She's still got two weeks left on her ER rotation. You know how busy med students are."

"But she did say she was coming."

"She said she'd *try* to come. It wasn't like I asked her out on a date."

“Why didn’t you? From what I can tell, there’s not a single thing wrong with her. What’s the problem?”

“There is no problem. We eat lunch together in the hospital cafeteria. Sometimes we study together at the library.”

“Nothing else?”

“We went to a picnic a few weeks ago, but we were with a bunch of other people. We’re just friends.”

“You, my friend, are a terrible liar.”

“It’s the truth,” Kevin protested a little too vehemently.

“Okay,” said Nigel, with a definite air of skepticism. “So why do I hear that she’s been over to your place three times already?”

“Who told you that?”

“You’re not the only person I know that works in the hospital.”

Kevin knew when he was caught. “Those visits were purely platonic.” That *was* the truth, unfortunately. “She makes a good stir-fry.”

“Sure,” Nigel said, drawing the word out. “What’s her pager number?”

“I’m not going to page her just to see if she’s coming to a party.”

“So you do have it.”

Kevin had it memorized. “So what?”

Nigel threw his hands up in defeat. “I was just making a suggestion. Do you want something to eat? There are chips in the kitchen.”

“No thanks. I stopped at McDonald’s on the way over. Besides, all you ever have is those ‘light’ chips.”

“Some of us don’t have time to go to the gym five days a week like you. I wish...”

Something over Kevin’s shoulder caught Nigel’s eye, stopping him in mid-sentence. Kevin turned to catch a glimpse through the window of someone approaching the door outside.

“Take a look at who’s coming in,” Nigel said.

Kevin’s breath caught slightly in spite of himself.

But as he saw the door open, he let his breath out in disappointment.

A voluptuous blonde, maybe five feet tall and shoehorned into a low-cut black leather dress, walked over to Nigel, hugged him tightly, and gave him a peck on the cheek.

“How are you, Nigel,” she said with exaggerated flair. “I haven’t seen you in hours.” She turned to Kevin and smiled up at him. “And who is your friend here?”

“Kevin,” Nigel said, “this is Heather.”

They shook hands. She had a surprisingly firm grip for someone her size, but then Kevin realized that a limp handshake wouldn’t get a business school graduate very far.

Nigel said something about getting her a drink and walked away, leaving Kevin and Heather alone.

Heather said something which Kevin couldn’t hear over the music. He said, “Excuse me?” and bent down to put his ear closer to her mouth. Her spicy perfume and the tequila on her breath engulfed his nose. The combination almost overpowered his senses, and he had to swallow a cough.

The cut of her dress wasn't sleazy, but it left little to the imagination. He turned his head so he wouldn't give the impression that he was staring into her cleavage.

"I said you're cute," she repeated, raising her voice. "You're not in the business school, are you? I would have noticed you before."

Normally, Kevin's stomach would be fluttering by now from the compliment, but tonight it was oddly silent.

"I'm getting my Ph.D. in chemistry. Nigel was my roommate last year."

"Nigel's great, isn't he? I'm taking a class with him. He helps me a lot with my homework."

I'll bet he does, thought Kevin.

"Did you go to South Texas for your undergrad, too?" she asked, putting her hand on Kevin's arm to balance herself.

"No. A&M." He held up his class ring, the words Texas A&M encircling the border. South Texas and A&M were huge rivals. "Some people don't speak to me when they find out."

She tilted her head and one end of her mouth turned up. "I won't hold it against you."

"So, when do you graduate?" he said.

"I just started last semester. There's no way to advance at the bank I work for unless you have an MBA, so I thought night school--"

"Heather!" A brunette ran up to Heather and began talking to her, looking at Kevin several times, but he couldn't hear them over the stereo. He breathed a sigh of relief and was about to excuse himself when Heather spoke.

"This is Darcy. We were going to Cody's and wondered if you wanted to join us. Do you like jazz?"

Kevin loved jazz. One of his favorite local bands was playing at Cody's.

"It's not really my thing." He looked down at his shorts. "Besides, I'm not dressed for it."

"Sure you are. I think you look great."

"Maybe some other time."

"Well, if you ever want to go, you can reach me at this number." She produced a card from her purse. "It was nice to meet you. Hope to see you again." She put the card in his hand. Her finger trailed down his arm as she moved away.

Kevin let out a sigh as he watched the two leave the apartment, then walked into the kitchen. He crumpled the card without reading it and threw it in the wastebasket.

Nigel was standing by the keg. He spotted Kevin and came over.

"Where's Heather?" he said. "I thought you two were hitting it off."

"I guess I wasn't her type."

"Wasn't her type? She was hanging all over you like drapes on a curtain rod."

"What can I say? She had to go."

Nigel frowned. "I thought you and Erica were just friends."

"We are."

"Really."

"Yes," Kevin said, then gulped his beer. He handed the empty cup to Nigel. "Now shut up and pour me another one."

CHAPTER 3

“That son of a bitch!” Clayton Tarnwell stabbed a finger down on the limousine’s intercom button. “Get Senders on the phone now.” His deep voice boomed, revealing just a hint of Texas twang. David Lobec, who was sitting across from Tarnwell, didn’t flinch.

Tarnwell’s personal secretary was in the front seat, hidden by the opaque glass partition. “Sir, Senders is still in Yosemite camping with his family. He’ll be out of pocket until tomorrow night.”

Tarnwell looked outside in time to see a sign saying “Welcome to Houston” whiz by. It was 7:00 on a Saturday morning and traffic out of the airport was light. “Didn’t he take his satellite phone with him?”

“It’s in his office.”

Christ, he thought, I’ve got some morons working for me. First, the problem with Stein, now this. “When does ZurBank open?”

“Two thirty Monday morning, Houston time.”

“Then call that idiot’s house and leave a message that if he isn’t in my office by two thirty Monday morning, he can kiss his ass good-bye.”

“Yes, sir. Will you be needing the Gulfstream Tuesday as planned?”

“No. Cancel the trip to Wyoming. Murphy can take care of that. But I’ve got to be back in DC Thursday for the meeting with the National Mining Institute. Tell them we fly out Wednesday night, 8 o’clock. And get another pilot. I almost lost a filling on that landing.”

He released the button and looked back at Lobec. “That’s all Ward said? Nothing about the money?”

Tarnwell had called ahead to have Lobec meet him when he arrived to provide him an update of the situation with Ward. He had too much to do to waste the 45 minute drive to his office. As the owner and CEO of Tarnwell Mining and Chemical, he spent a substantial amount of his time in Washington conferring with his lobbyists on the latest legislation that might affect TMC and, more importantly, its growth and profits. He had made most of his money taking advantage of loopholes in US mining laws, buying land from the government at ridiculously low prices and then stripping every last precious mineral from it, leaving the residue to be disposed of at taxpayer expense.

Lately, he had diversified into the chemical industry, relying on his mining interests to provide the raw material. And the only way to make the most of his investments was to ensure that his presence was felt on Capitol Hill. Usually, he took Lobec with him to Washington for special operations which he didn’t want to be directly associated with, but he had stayed behind to take care of Ward.

Ward was a special case. Probably once in a lifetime.

Lobec shook his head. “He died before I could get anything further from him. It must have been a heart attack. The wound was in the shoulder, not nearly severe enough to cause immediate death.”

“And you’re sure he didn’t have the account number hidden somewhere in the house?”

“We took several hours to search it. There was a safe, but nothing was in it besides some insurance documents and jewelry. The computer also looked fruitless, but I copied all of the files and gave them to Mitch Hornung to see if anything is there.”

Tarnwell nodded. Hornung was his resident computer genius and hacker. If anything was there, Mitch would find it.

“We were quite thorough,” Lobec continued, “but it’s very possible that something as small as a piece of paper with a number on it could have been overlooked.”

“What about his university office? On the computer there, maybe?” Tarnwell opened the coffee maker, poured himself a cup, and offered one to Lobec.

Lobec shook his head. “No, thank you. I checked the campus office, the lab, and the office computer after we were finished with his house. I could see nothing about Adamas or the Swiss account. Of course, Hornung has those files as well, so we won’t be certain until later today. I believe, however, that Ward must have memorized the account information.”

“Damn! I told Senders this was going to happen. That dumbshit is going to work twenty-four hours a day until he gets my money back.”

“I was under the impression that the money could not be transferred without our knowledge.”

Tarnwell threw his hands up. “That’s what *I* thought! That moron!”

Milton Senders, Tarnwell's chief financial officer, had been responsible for transferring the \$10 million to an account he set up for Ward in Switzerland. Tarnwell had no intention of letting Ward keep the money, but Ward was no dummy, so Tarnwell needed to make the transaction look legitimate to get Ward to give him the notebook. Senders assured Tarnwell that the risk of losing the money was minimal. Because they knew the banker and Tarnwell was one of his biggest depositors, they could simply let Ward withdraw small amounts to maintain the illusion that Ward had control of the money, giving up maybe a few thousand for the sake of appearances. Large transactions had to be approved by Tarnwell, and Ward hadn't made any. But last night they found that the account was virtually empty. Ward somehow slipped \$10 million past Senders' security measures.

"We don't even know how he did it," Tarnwell said. "It's almost as if he had help." Then his huge frame suddenly went rigid, and he narrowed his eyes at Lobec. "David, you have told me everything, haven't you? I mean, I can trust you. I know I can. But I just want to hear it from you."

Lobec looked him in the eye. "Mr. Tarnwell, I owe you my life. What more can I say?"

"You're damn right you owe me. If it weren't for me, you'd still be rotting in La Mesa." Tarnwell smiled to himself when he saw Lobec's mouth twitch at the mention of the Mexican prison that had been Lobec's home for two years. The only reason Tarnwell had gotten him out was because he'd needed a good security man, one who wasn't afraid to get his hands dirty. Through some contacts he'd heard Lobec was the best mercenary money could buy. The situation was also attractive to Tarnwell because he knew where to find Lobec's brother. He rarely let Lobec forget that.

“You are very generous, Mr. Tarnwell. I would never betray that generosity.”

“That’s what I like to hear. You’re the best man I’ve got, David. I think you know that. You’ve certainly lived up to your reputation. You know how to get things done, and I appreciate that.” Tarnwell leaned forward and lowered his voice. “But if I ever so much as have an inkling that you’re not being straight with me, you’ll be on the next truck to Guadalajara. Then I’ll have someone pay a visit to California.” He smiled. “Your brother’s insurance business is still in Encino, isn’t it? I hope it’s going well. It’s hard to support a wife and five kids these days.”

Lobec narrowed his eyes. “I understand.”

“Good,” Tarnwell said. “Now, tell me about how you took care of the house. Everything went as planned, I assume?”

“It should look like the fire started with a smoldering cigarette. I extinguished the stove’s pilot light and left the gas slightly on. As I understand from the initial police reports, the entire house was consumed. The bodies were so charred the police haven’t even positively identified them yet.”

“Do you think it’ll be enough to cover Ward’s gunshot wound?”

“Definitely for the next week. Fortunately, the county coroner’s office is swamped with bodies from the Baytown gas leak. Ward’s autopsy won’t even begin until that’s finished. With the bodies burned so badly, they may never know what really happened.”

“It doesn’t matter anyway. They have no way to link me with him. And at least we have the notebook.”

“Right before his scuffle with Bern, Ward did mention something about a videotape,” Lobec said. “He also said that you don’t really have the notebook.”

Tarnwell waved his hand. "He was bluffing. I would in his situation. Don't worry about it. The lab should have Adamas up and running any time now. And the lawyers started the patent ball rolling yesterday." A smile spread across Tarnwell's face, and a set of perfect teeth showed through. "Despite Senders' fuck up, I'm in a pretty good mood." Tarnwell leaned his head back and closed his eyes, stretching his long legs onto the seat next to Lobec.

Lobec cleared his throat. "There is one detail that remains."

Except for his mouth, Tarnwell didn't move. "Then take care of it."

"I will. But I thought you should know. It seems that Ward sent an electronic mail message before we arrived."

Tarnwell's head jerked up. "What?"

"We know he didn't phone anybody. And he had virtually no time to see anyone between the time Stein's murder was reported and the time he got home. But we never considered electronic mail. It was the only way he could have contacted anyone without our knowledge."

"Do you know who it went to?"

"It was sent to an N. Kevin Hamilton."

"Who is he?"

"We found a number of references to him in Ward's files. He's in his third-year of graduate school at South Texas University. He worked with Ward until last May. Of course, Bern and I searched his apartment as soon as we were finished with Ward." Lobec passed a picture to Tarnwell. "This is from his apartment. He won't miss it."

It showed a smiling man in his twenties with thick brown hair. He was wearing a Texas A&M T-shirt and jeans and was standing next to a tall brunette with long tan legs extending from a pair of white shorts.

“Who’s the model?” Tarnwell said, handing the photo back.

“We don’t know yet, but we’re looking into it. Her first name is Erica. He had several photos like it in his bathroom mirror, and one of them had their names written on the back.”

“Do you think Ward sent him the Swiss account information?”

“No, I believe that information died with him. Ward was scared, but I don’t think he was planning on relinquishing the money. Most likely, he was sending a message about the process or something incriminating toward you. Possibly both, but we can’t be sure. Hornung hasn’t been able to locate the correct file yet.”

“It doesn’t sound like you’ve talked to this Hamilton yet.”

“He wasn’t there when we arrived last night, which is why we are trying to find this girl. He could be at her place. Bern is watching his apartment and we have a tap under way. I will join him after we reach your office. Do you have any specific instructions?”

“Find out what Hamilton knows. I mean anything. And videotape the interrogation for me. I can’t be there, but I want to see it. Then get rid of him.”

“It is possible that Hamilton knows nothing,” Lobec said.

Tarnwell took a sip of coffee and leaned his head back again. “Nobody ever said life was fair.”

CHAPTER 4

Kevin Hamilton's eyes fluttered, and the pounding in his head left no doubt that he was conscious. The sun was up; no other source of light could be as excruciatingly painful. He made a half-hearted attempt to turn over, but his stomach argued and won. Besides, it didn't feel like his muscles would respond.

He lay in the same position for an hour, awake the entire time, his brain seemingly three sizes too big for his skull. Suddenly, a chainsaw started in the next room and he sat bolt upright. He pried his eyes open enough to see Nigel in the kitchen standing over a coffee grinder.

Looking around, he realized that he had slept on Nigel's couch the entire night. He wondered how he'd squeezed his six foot two length into the tiny area between the armrests. He was bare from the waist up and a blanket was balled up at the end of the couch. Various cups and bottles littered the floor around him. He also noticed the stale smell of beer for the first time. The pounding in his head returned to full strength and nausea gripped him. He ran to the bathroom.

After emptying the contents of his stomach and then bladder into the toilet, Kevin turned to the mirror and found just about what he was expecting. His face was unusually pale and his hair looked rather comical. On one side, it stood straight out in all directions, on the other it was

matted from sleep. Thick red lines extended from his hazel irises. He hadn't bothered to remove his contacts.

He felt slightly better after vomiting and thought some milk might soothe his stomach. He rifled through the cabinet, found some aspirin, and carried the bottle into the kitchen.

The television came on in the living room as he poured the milk into a tall glass. He put two tablets into his hand, thought about it, added another, then popped all three into his mouth and took a small sip of the milk. He held the cool glass to his forehead as he walked back to the living room.

Nigel was sitting on the couch with a cup of coffee, surfing the channels with the remote. Kevin had never known him to look anything but impeccable, even early in the morning, and today was no exception. He was already showered and fully dressed, as if he hadn't had a sip of alcohol the previous night.

With a slight grunt, Kevin immersed himself in the Lazy Boy.

"Good morning, beautiful," Nigel said with a smile.

Kevin turned toward him and gave him a dirty look. "I hate you."

"I told you the Jello shots were strong, but you didn't want to listen."

"You had just as many as I did."

"I also drink more often than every six months."

"So do I. But now I'm thinking about quitting all together."

"Aren't you supposed to be at the gym at nine?"

"Yeah, that's the only time I can get into the pool to swim laps." Kevin sat up. "Why? What time is it?"

Nigel looked at his watch. "9:01."

Kevin sank back into the chair. "Damn! This is the first time I've missed in two years."

Nigel shook his head. "Two years? You're weirder than you look." He continued clicking the remote.

Kevin watched TV and brooded quietly. Conversation was not generally part of his morning routine, and he had not yet had his requisite Diet Coke. As Kevin sipped his milk, Nigel flipped past a face on the screen that Kevin immediately recognized.

He almost spit out the milk. After swallowing, he sputtered, "Wait! Turn it back!"

"What?" Nigel said, as he reversed directions on the remote.

Four channels down, Kevin saw it. "There! Stop!"

Nigel stopped on what was apparently a local TV news broadcast, and looked over at him with a puzzled expression. "What..."

"Shhh! Turn it up." Kevin stared incredulously at the screen. To the right of the anchorwoman's head was a small photo of Dr. Michael Ward. The picture had been taken when Ward still had a beard, but it was definitely him.

Nigel thumbed the remote, and the program became audible.

"...where we take you live to Lisa Hernandez. Lisa, what can you tell us?"

The image shifted to a woman standing in front of the blackened ruins of what used to be a house. Wisps of smoke could still be seen rising in the calm air. The only things left standing were a crumbling chimney and the scorched remains of a large tree. Police and firefighters mingled in the background, and yellow crime tape was visible circling the property.

“Joan, at two o’clock this morning, residents of this usually quiet north Houston community were awakened by a huge explosion. When firefighters arrived on the scene, they found the home of Michael Ward, a South Texas University chemistry professor, burning out of control. As you can see, the fire is now contained, but not before two firefighters succumbed to heat exhaustion in this morning’s sweltering conditions. When the heat of the fire had subsided enough for a search, the charred remains of two people were found among the rubble.”

The TV cut to a clip of two black plastic bags lying behind a van marked “Harris County Coroner.” Kevin’s grip on the milk glass tightened.

“The police haven’t issued a statement as yet, but sources close to the investigation believe they could only be the bodies of Dr. Ward and his wife, Irene.”

Kevin continued silently watching, shaking his head slowly.

Joan interrupted. “Has the cause of the fire been determined, Lisa?”

“The cause of the fire has not yet been determined, Joan, but arson investigators are on the premises and foul play has not been ruled out. Speculation now is that the fire was started by a cigarette and spread to the gas lines, which then caused the explosion. The house is in a relatively new development and is the first on the block to be occupied, which may explain why the fire was not reported soon enough to prevent this horrible tragedy. This is Lisa Hernandez reporting live from Spring for H News. Joan.”

“Thank you, Lisa. We understand the police are expected to make a statement within the next hour, and when they do, H News, Houston’s only twenty-four-hour news source, will bring it to you live. Turning to other news, police say drugs may be involved in the execution-style shooting

of an attorney whose body was found yesterday morning..." Nigel pressed the mute button on the remote.

"You knew that professor, didn't you?" he said.

"He was the one who fired me four months ago."

"Wow, that's wild." Nigel didn't seem know what else to say.

Kevin stared out the window. Dr. Ward, dead. When the accident had happened and he'd been fired, Kevin had wished a lot of bad things on Dr. Ward, but never death. Yet he didn't feel grief about the loss either. He really didn't know how he felt.

"Kevin," Nigel said, "are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. It's just weird."

"Did you know him well?"

"Well enough. That's why it's so strange. Ward was a jerk, but he was also a careful guy, almost anal. I guess I'm just surprised that that kind of accident would happen to him."

"I hear about these things happening to smokers all the time."

"So do I. But it's still strange."

They sat in silence for a few minutes. Kevin decided he needed to get back to his apartment and started to search for the rest of his clothes. He found his shirt and shoes under a pizza box and put them on. The hangover was still there, but it was down to a dull throbbing.

"If you need anything, give me a call," Nigel said.

"Really, I'm okay. Don't worry about it."

Kevin walked out into the bright September morning. The newscast was right about the temperature. The heat was already shimmering off the driveway's pavement.

He tried starting the Mustang several times before the car turned over. He automatically switched on the radio, which was usually tuned to the local jazz station, and then figured that he needed a little silence this morning and shut the radio off. As he released the parking brake and shifted into first, he looked at the trip odometer, which was how he gauged his gas level. There was enough to make it back to his apartment complex. Nothing was going to stand between him and a nice cool shower.

CHAPTER 5

The Sycamore apartment complex was nowhere near the South Texas University campus. It was located on the west side of Houston, just outside the Loop, far from the high crime area around the university where the cheapest apartments were, but not quite into the more expensive suburbs. It was relatively safe, with a security gate and fence encircling the complex, and the rent for a one bedroom apartment was affordable. The only drawback was the commute, which could take over forty minutes with the morning rush hour.

Like most complexes in the city, sprawling parking lots surrounded long rows of nondescript three-level buildings, which in turn overlooked courtyards with the *de rigueur* swimming pools that were used practically year-round. Hedges and small strips of grass separated the buildings from the sidewalks. The only thing that made The Sycamore stand out from other complexes, and in defiance of the complex's name, was the abundance of large oaks shading cars from the relentless heat. In the far corner of the lot, inside a Pontiac parked under one of these oaks sat David Lobec and Richard Bern.

Bern was dozing, taking a break while Lobec read the short dossier they had compiled on Kevin Hamilton in the last few hours, cobbled together from his school files, a quick search of his

apartment, and Texas Department of Public Safety records. Every thirty seconds, as if he had a built-in chronometer, Lobec would look up to observe Kevin's first-floor apartment, whose front door faced the parking lot.

A truck with the words "Four Seasons Landscaping" emblazoned across its side in large green letters rumbled to a stop twenty yards in front of them. A man with no shirt and a huge gut hanging over a pair of greasy shorts climbed out and proceeded to unload a riding lawn mower out of the trailer hitched to the truck. Lobec, who hadn't seen snow in the five years he'd been in Houston, wanted to ask the man when the other three seasons would arrive.

The mower belched a plume of smoke and the engine rose to an unmuffled crescendo, drowning out the distant sound of the street traffic and waking Bern. He looked around for the source of noise and through the car's heavily tinted windows saw the fat man ride onto the grass.

"Damn! And I was having a great dream." He turned to Lobec, who realized what was coming. He'd heard this kind of thing about fifty times from Bern.

"Oh man, what a dream! In this one I was like Frankenstein, right? You know, making my own person? Except, I wasn't making a monster. I was making my dream girl from parts of all the girls who've ever been in the Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue, cutting out somebody's leg from this picture and somebody else's tits from that picture. She was just hit by lightning, right? She was alive, buck naked, right on the table in front of me! So she got up and she was just about to..."

"You may save the details for your memoirs, Bern."

Bern gave him a quizzical look. "Sometimes I don't know if you're really human, Lobec. You got any hormones at all?"

“I prefer to separate my sexual urges from my professional functions, and I suggest you attempt the same, if at all possible. It may help you better concentrate on your work.”

“What’s there to concentrate on? This guy ain’t even home.” He put a pair of headphones up to his ears and punched a button on a machine sitting on the seat next to him. “The tap’s working fine. What else am I supposed to do?”

Lobec looked around the parking lot. Every few minutes, a person or two would emerge from the building complex and get into one of the cars. “Perhaps we should discuss the new procedure we will follow when Kevin Hamilton returns.”

“New procedure? Too many people around for you?”

“Yes. Instead of approaching him at his apartment, we will monitor his telephone calls and wait. If no particular urgency arises, we will let him leave the apartment and stop his car in a more secluded area. I assume you have your identification with you?”

“Yeah, I got it.” Bern took out his wallet and flipped it open, revealing a Houston Police Department badge and identification. Lobec nodded and Bern returned it to his pocket. “But I’m sick of the name Kaplan. I think I’ll get Sheryl to make me a new ID after this op is over. What do you think of Braddock?”

“No. This is the third identification you’ve had this year. Changing aliases too often can compromise an operation. It may be difficult to remember in times of stress.”

“Afraid you’ll forget it?” Bern smirked.

“I wasn’t speaking of myself. Must I bring up the incident with the OGP?”

Bern’s smirk dissolved and he offered a curt no. The Old Growth Protectorate was a fringe environmental group bent on radical, sometimes militant, protection of primeval forests. Clayton

Tarnwell had never even heard of them until his company announced plans to open a copper strip mine on virgin forest land in Montana. When the OGP threatened to destroy his mining equipment, Tarnwell sent Lobec to persuade the group's leader to share his knowledge of their plans. Bern and Lobec had been wearing ski masks, but during the interrogation, Bern slipped and used Lobec's name, requiring a more permanent method of dealing with OGP's founder.

"What's all this stuff about Adamas anyway?" Bern said, clumsily changing the subject. "Is that some new chemical Tarnwell's trying to make?"

"You know as much as I do about Dr. Ward's process. I am not well-versed in the chemical sciences, and Mr. Tarnwell has not seen fit to brief me on the details. I think for both our sakes it's better not to talk about it."

"Was he pissed about Stein?"

"You could say that he was upset."

"Well, it's not like it was our fault those kids found the body when they were playing in that dumpster." Bern pulled a cigarette from the pack of Marlboros in his front pocket and stuck it in his mouth, then pulled a Bic lighter from the same pocket. "Christ, that lot looked so deserted, I thought it would be months before anyone would look in..."

"Mr. Bern," Lobec said, his voice a dagger's edge, "what have I asked you not to do in my presence?"

The Bic's flame flickered two inches in front of the unlit cigarette. Bern's eyes widened when he realized what he'd done and he sat up straight, releasing the Bic's lever. "I'm s-sorry, Lobec," he said in a rush. "I didn't mean to, it's just habit..."

“You know that smoking offends me, yet you do not respect my wishes. That offends me even more. I sincerely hope further correction won’t be necessary.”

Bern shook his head vigorously, and Lobec was satisfied that his point had been made. Bern had objected to his demands only twice, and he’d learned that Lobec did not take his smoking policy lightly. The burn scar on Bern’s forearm proved that.

Now that Bern was awake, Lobec returned his full attention to the folder in front of him and read from the beginning. He always liked to know as much as he could about the people he dealt with, even if it would be for only a short time.

Nicholas Kevin Hamilton. Age 26. Valedictorian of Sam Houston high school in Dallas, Texas. According to old letters of acceptance he had stored in a file box, he applied to and was accepted by 8 universities, including Stanford and MIT, but he attended Texas A&M on a National Merit scholarship and \$5,000 a year in student loans. Graduated in five years with a B.A. in chemistry. Parents Frances May and Murray Hamilton both died of cancer while he was at A&M, most likely accounting for his five-year stay. He began graduate school at South Texas University in chemistry immediately after leaving A&M and was about to begin his third year of studies. He drove a nine-year-old red Ford Mustang GT hatchback, with three moving violations for speeding in the past three years.

“Is this all we have?” Lobec asked.

“Uh, no. I almost forgot,” Bern said. He pulled a notepad out of his pocket and flipped it open. “Mitch called while you were with Tarnwell. After he was done with the DPS records, he decided to access a local credit bureau. Said he finds lots of juicy stuff there. Anyway, it seems Hamilton has had a little trouble paying his bills lately. He’s been late with his rent three times

this year, and he has a Visa and a Mastercard maxed out. Total limit \$6000. Mitch says he's been paying tuition with them."

"What about the car?"

"That's the funny thing. There's no record of a loan on it. Must have been paid for with cash."

"Life insurance?"

"No payout that Mitch could find. He has one checking account with the university's credit union, current balance \$85.86. We don't know what his father did yet, but he wasn't rich. Probably most of the benefits he did get went to pay for the funerals. Hamilton probably used the rest on the car."

"Possibly."

"Why do we got to get all this stuff this time anyway? I thought we were just gonna find out what he knows and take him out."

"Bern, in my experience I have discerned one unchanging characteristic among all of the operations I've conducted. No matter how simple an operation seems, there will always be complications. And when they arise, the more information one has, the more likely one will be to succeed."

Bern looked past Lobec's shoulder and nodded as he put the microphone in his ear. "At least we don't have to wait too long to find out."

Lobec turned to see a car pull into the parking lot. It was a red Mustang.

CHAPTER 6

Kevin threaded the Mustang into his usual slot beside one of the parking lot's islands, pulled through one space, and lurched to a stop in the second, the car facing away from the apartment building and shaded by an oak. He sat there for a minute, turning his face back and forth through the refreshing blast of the air conditioner, trying to soothe his still-pulsating hangover. Ready to face the heat, he killed the engine and reluctantly opened the door to the humid air that seemed to suck the coolness from the car. He was sweating by the time he reached his apartment.

He dropped his keys on the kitchen counter and walked through the tiny living room to his bedroom. After cranking the thermostat to full cool, he glanced at the answering machine. The light shined steadily. No messages.

Kevin ran his fingers through his oily hair and realized just how nasty he felt. He peeled off his sticky clothes and removed the contacts from his dry, itchy eyes. Kevin spent the next twenty minutes in a steaming shower, letting the hot water massage his aches.

When he stepped out of the bathroom, the newly cooled air of the apartment met him. He felt refreshed. With a towel wrapped around him, he put on his glasses and went into the kitchen to

open a can of Diet Coke. As he passed through the living room, he hit the power key on his Mac and leaned over to turn on the TV, which he normally had on while he worked.

He stopped when he didn't see the remote on the coffee table. He searched for a minute and finally found it under the couch. How did it get there? He tried to remember the last time he watched TV. After a second, he shrugged, picked up the remote, and flipped on the TV. It was on Headline News as usual.

After taking a gulp from the soda, he felt even better. He put the can on his desk and returned to the bedroom, where he put on workout shorts and a South Texas University T-shirt. The pair of beat up slippers he slipped into completed his typical Saturday outfit.

As Kevin sat down at his desk, an anchorman was telling viewers what they'd be seeing when the news resumed at the top of the hour. He switched on the modem, adjusted the keyboard and mouse to their correct positions, and clicked the email icon.

Waiting for the connection, he thought he should start getting ready for the appointment with Dean Baker on Monday. In the desk were copies of his original financial aid forms. He started thumbing through his file drawer, which also contained all of the research articles he had copied over the years, then abruptly stopped.

The files were all there, but something was wrong. What was it? And then he knew.

He filed his folders alphabetically by the first author of the reference, with the stapled end up so he could grab and replace the references easily when he was working on his dissertation or writing a paper. It was a habit he had developed from years of research. Today, the articles were in the exact order they always were, and the four file folders were in the correct order. But in every one of the folders, the stapled end of the article was at the *bottom* of the folder.

As he put the articles back in their correct orientation, Kevin didn't know what to make of it. Just another strange thing on an already odd morning, he thought.

A flashing icon on the computer told Kevin that the connection was successful. He entered his ID and password, taking him into the school's e-mail system.

A line blinked on the screen to alert him that three new messages were in his box. He downloaded the messages so he could work off-line and closed the modem connection, freeing up the phone line.

Two messages were on the current page, the third was on the next so he couldn't see who it was from. The first message was from the American Chemical Society student chapter. Probably asking for dues. He skipped it.

He smiled when he saw who the second message was from: Ted Ishio, his best friend since coming to grad school. Ted had joined the program two years ahead of him and had just graduated this summer to accept a teaching position at Virginia Tech. When Kevin last saw him, Ted and his wife, Janice, were leaving to move to Blacksburg. Kevin had only heard from him once since he left. Now he obviously had his e-mail account from the university. Kevin opened the message eager to read the news.

He was disappointed when he saw how short the message was.

Kevin, I'm sorry I've haven't called in a while, but as you might guess it's been a madhouse getting ready for the semester. I've got three classes to teach, not to mention the ACS conference coming up next Wednesday. Five days in Minneapolis. Janice is going with me because she has some family there, so it shouldn't be too bad.

By the way, the lab is looking great, and the equipment they're giving me is incredible. That's about all. I've got to go. My presentation isn't done yet, and I only have the weekend to do it. Talk to you later.

Ted.

Kevin exited the message. He'd send a reply later.

He paged forward to the last message and raised the Diet Coke to take a sip. When he saw who the message was from, he stopped, the can hovering in front of his face.

It was from Michael Ward. Sent at 5:43 PM the day before.

Kevin placed the can precariously on the edge of the desk, feeling strangely repulsed that one of the last messages Ward had ever sent was waiting for Kevin to read. Nevertheless, he had to read it. He opened the file.

Kevin was unprepared for the message he found. His heartbeat tripled as he read and reread the short message.

Kevin, no time for details. The same men who killed Stein are after me. Irene and I are leaving Houston. I think we'll be safe where we're going, but I need your help to be sure. NV117 wasn't a failure, and Clay wants it. The details are in a notebook. I've recorded everything you'll need and put it in a safe place. DA483H3 is the

Questions filled Kevin's mind. Who was Stein? Where were Ward and his wife going? Who were these men he was talking about? They must be connected to Clay, whoever that was. And what did he mean NV117 wasn't a failure? Of course it was a failure, a huge failure from Kevin's standpoint.

NV117 was a routine investigation into high temperature superconductivity. They'd been conducting experiments like it for months with little success. Then the routine was shattered when it almost blew up in their faces. The damage to the equipment had been extensive, or so Kevin had been told. Ward hadn't let him back into the lab after the accident. Even if the experiment had turned out to be a success, the results they were expecting would have been interesting, but certainly nothing revolutionary. Nothing worth killing for. It didn't make sense.

Maybe the message was a joke, Kevin thought. He shook his head and dismissed the idea. No one he knew would have done something this bizarre. Not when Ward's house went up in flames hours before. The only other possibility was that Ward actually sent the message. If that was true, why write a message to Kevin? Why didn't Ward just call the police?

He looked at the last sentence, which made it seem as if Ward had been interrupted. Or maybe he'd been drunk and didn't realize he hadn't finished. He'd heard about smokers getting drunk and falling asleep with a lit cigarette. Maybe that's how the fire started. He cringed at the thought and studied the beginning of the cut off sentence.

What was DA483H3? It looked familiar, as if Kevin had seen it before, but he couldn't place it. A license plate number? Or maybe the model number of one of the lab's equipment? It could be anything. Without the rest of the sentence, Kevin might never know.

The phone rang. Kevin let it ring. He turned on the laser printer and selected the print option. The page fed in as the answering machine clicked on and played the announcement.

"This is the home of Kevin Hamilton. If you are calling from a touchtone phone and would like to hang up, please press one now. If you are selling something or asking for money, please

press one now. Otherwise, leave a message and I'll get back to you." The beep sounded, and he heard Erica's voice.

"Kevin, it's me. Give me a call when you get back..."

Kevin ran into the bedroom and snatched up the phone. "Erica. I'm here." He stopped the recorder as he spoke. "I'm sorry you missed the party last night."

"Me too, but I had a, uh, personal matter that came up." Her voice was cautious.

"What happened?"

"Money problems. I don't really want to talk about it."

"Me neither."

"What?"

"Nothing. Are you all right?" Kevin asked.

"I'm fine," she said, but she didn't sound fine. She sounded as if she had been up all night, and Kevin knew that she wasn't supposed to go on her ER rotation until this afternoon. He wasn't going to press the issue.

"Do you want to get lunch?" he said.

"Maybe. I was going to try to get some more sleep before I leave for the hospital, but that may not happen. I was just calling because...Have you seen the news today?"

"You mean about Dr. Ward?"

"So it's the same Ward you've told me about?"

"The one who fired me, yes." Kevin went over to the printer and picked up the printout.

"Funny you should ask. I just got an email from him."

"What do you mean?" Erica said. "Today?"

“Just a few minutes ago. It was sent yesterday afternoon.”

Kevin read the message to her.

“That’s weird,” Erica said. “Are you going to call the police?”

“The police? I hadn’t gotten that far.”

“I heard something about arson on the radio.”

“They said they aren’t ruling out arson, but they always say that.”

“Do you know who Stein or Clay are?”

“I had a high school math teacher named Joshua Clay, but I don’t think that’s him.”

“Do you know what any of it means?” Erica asked. “What about that code?”

“It looks familiar, but I can’t put my finger on it. We never used a code in the lab. But I do know what NV117 means. It was an experiment we were doing for the Department of Energy on superconductivity using a new kind of chemical structure.”

“Superconductivity? Would somebody killed him for it?”

“I can’t imagine why. The experiment was a total failure. In fact, it was the one that got me fired. As far as I know, he stopped all work on it after the accident. Even if it wasn’t a failure like the message said, it wouldn’t have been groundbreaking. Certainly nothing worth killing for. We’re probably getting worked up over nothing. Some people in the department said he was a drinker. He was probably wasted when he wrote it.” He told her his theory about the cigarette.

“That’s certainly possible. I’ve seen three alcoholics in the ER who’ve burnt themselves with cigarettes. Still, the police should probably know about the message.”

“Yeah, I know. I’m just trying to avoid it because I also know it’s going to be a hassle. They might want me to go down to the station.”

“What about lunch?” Erica said.

“I’ll call you back when I know. In the meantime, try to take a nap. You sound beat.”

“Thanks.”

Kevin hung up, thumbed through the white pages, and dialed the number for police headquarters. There wasn’t really any reason to call 911.

He was put on hold three times as staff at the police station shuffled his call around to various departments. Each time someone new answered, he had to explain the situation all over again. As he waited for someone in Homicide to pick up, Kevin thought that at least his day couldn’t get any stranger.

* * *

Lobec and Bern listened as a female voice on the line said, “Homicide. Detective Chambers speaking.”

“Detective Chambers,” Kevin Hamilton said, “I hope I’ve finally got the right person. I have a message from Dr. Michael Ward--you know, the guy who died in the house fire last night?”

“What is your name, sir?” The voice was curt.

There was a pause. “Uh, my name’s Kevin Hamilton, one of Dr. Ward’s students. He sent me e-mail telling me that the same men who had killed Stein were after him. It seemed suspicious, so I thought I’d better let you know.”

“I don’t know who this Ward guy is, but Stein is Guy Robley’s case.”

There was another pause, this time longer. “You mean, there really is someone named Stein?”

“Herbert Stein was found Saturday morning in a vacant lot near the Astrodome. Shot twice and loaded into a dumpster. Look, Detective Robley isn’t here right now, but he should be back in about twenty minutes. Can he call you back then?”

“Wow. Okay. I’ll stay here.” He gave her the number. “Please have him call me as soon as he gets in.”

“All right.” Two clicks could be heard. Bern began to speak, but Lobec lifted his hand as another number was dialed. The LCD panel in front of him displayed the number of the girl named Erica Jensen, who they had already identified with their caller ID unit. The line was busy, and Hamilton hung up the phone. He tried twice more and then seemed to give up.

Finally, Lobec lowered his hand, and Bern spoke.

“We can’t let him talk to the cops.”

“You are correct. It’s unfortunate that we did not know of Hamilton’s involvement in NV117 previously.” Lobec pulled out his SIG Sauer P230, a compact weapon easily concealed and modified to accommodate a silencer. He chambered a round and replaced it in his shoulder holster. “It would have been so much easier.”

“We going now?” Bern checked his badge and identification and grimaced again when he saw his alias.

“No, that would be unrealistic. The police would never arrive so quickly. Even so, we don’t have much time. We will wait ten minutes. If anyone calls in that time, we will need to surprise him. Otherwise, we can introduce ourselves to him in the usual fashion.”

CHAPTER 7

After shaving and changing into more presentable clothes, Kevin tried calling Erica again. Busy. He laid the receiver in the cradle, put his slippers back on, and walked back to the living room, plopping himself on the couch. Headline News was into the next half hour, but he switched it to the local channel to see if he could find out anything about this Stein. Damn, he wished he got the paper.

Kevin was still confused by the events of the last two hours, and he played them over in his mind to see if any of it made sense, to try to put it together into some rational explanation. No. First, he needed to start with the facts. One, his professor and the professor's wife were dead, supposedly from a house fire. Two, he received e-mail from Dr. Ward claiming--wait, change that--from Dr. Ward's e-mail *address* claiming that someone was trying to kill him, and that same someone had already killed a man named Herbert Stein. Not only that, but they wanted to kill him for an experiment that was a failure, and one of these people was named Clay. Three, Herbert Stein, a person he had never heard of until today, was murdered.

Which left him with what? He looked at the printout again. He wished he could believe that this was all an elaborate hoax, that somebody owed him for a joke he had pulled at one time, but

he was too much of a realist to believe it. Even the nerds in his chemistry department wouldn't stoop to something like this.

That left a high probability that the message really was from Dr. Ward. Three dead people. Maybe all of them murdered. He was glad he had called the police.

A sharp knock on the door startled him, and Kevin accidentally tore the printout in half. He stuffed the pieces of paper into his pocket as he rose and walked over to the front door.

Normally, during the day he would just open the door, although at night he always checked who it was first. Today was not normal. He looked through the foggy peephole and could make out two men in suits. He recognized neither of them.

"Who is it?" he said loudly.

"Detectives Barnett and Kaplan," a well-spoken voice said. "Guy Robley radioed us and asked us to stop by since we were in the neighborhood. He said he couldn't get to the phone right now to call you. If you'll crack the door, you can see our identification."

At the mention of Detective Robley's name, Kevin calmed. Even so, he kept the chain on and gave the IDs presented a thorough inspection. They seemed all right to him, not that he'd know what fake badges looked like. Satisfied, he removed the chain and asked the officers to come in.

"Man, am I glad you're here." The officer named Barnett looked to be in his late thirties and was neatly dressed in a gray suit and paisley tie. He looked more like a businessman than a cop. His matching gray eyes examined Kevin thoroughly, but he gave Kevin a friendly smile. The other officer, Kaplan, was younger and more rumped in his navy suit. Both were shorter than Kevin by about four inches. "You guys must be hot. Can I get you something to drink?"

Barnett glanced at Kaplan and then shook his head. “No, thank you. We just had a late breakfast, and I think we drank a pot of coffee between us.” As they sat down in the living room, his smile changed to a concerned frown. “We are working on the Stein case with Guy. He said you called with some information concerning Mr. Stein.”

“Actually, I was calling about a professor, Dr. Michael Ward.”

“The professor from STU who died in the fire last night?” Barnett said.

“Yes, I go to STU. I worked with him for year and a half until last May.”

Barnett concerned expression deepened. “This must be difficult for you. I’m sorry. Please, go on.”

“I wasn’t very close to Dr. Ward. I just worked for him.” Kevin told them everything that had happened to him since he woke up. During the story, Barnett asked a few questions for clarification, but Kaplan just scribbled on a notepad and said nothing. When Kevin got to the part about the message from Ward, Barnett stopped him.

“Do you know what the message means? This could be very important in our investigation into Mr. Stein’s death.”

“No, I don’t. Maybe if Dr. Ward had been able to finish it, I would have understood. The last sentence was cut off, as if he’d stopped typing abruptly.”

“Could I see this e-mail message?” said Barnett.

“Sure,” Kevin said, “I can even give you a copy.” He went to the Mac and typed the commands to print them a fresh copy instead of giving them the torn one in his pocket. “Do you really think it’s from Dr. Ward?”

“As you said yourself, this could have been typed by anyone and merely sent from his account. But I don’t think we can rule out the possibility.”

Kevin gave them the note. Both officers read it intently.

For the first time, Kaplan spoke. His voice was surprisingly high for his size. “What is NV117?”

“It was an experiment we were conducting right before I stopped working with Dr. Ward. It was research I was conducting for the Department of Energy, fairly harmless stuff.”

“Why would someone be interested in research in superconductivity?” Kaplan said.

Kevin gave Kaplan a puzzled look. “I have no idea. How did you...”

Barnett interrupted. “Do you know what the code means?”

Kevin shrugged as he completed the commands to print the message. “I keep thinking I’ve seen it before, but nothing comes to mind. Like I said, the message wasn’t finished.”

Kevin turned back toward Barnett, and for a split second, caught Barnett glaring at Kaplan. The look vanished quickly and smoothly, as if Kevin wasn’t meant to see it.

“Did you know Herbert Stein?” asked Barnett.

“Never heard of him before. Who was he?” Kevin plucked the note from the printer and handed it to Barnett. “Some drug dealer?” The drug wave had hit Houston as hard as any city.

“Well,” Barnett said, “of course, you understand that I can’t reveal everything we know about the case, but I can tell you that he was a respectable attorney with a small practice in the Village. And no, drugs don’t seem to be involved.”

“A lawyer, huh? Was Dr. Ward a client of his?”

“I don’t recall that name from his records,” Kaplan said.

“I don’t either,” Barnett said. “We’ll check that out later. Have you seen a photo of Mr. Stein?”

“No. I’ve been watching the news off and on, but I haven’t seen the story. I didn’t even know he was a real person until I talked to Detective Chambers.”

“Mr. Hamilton,” Barnett said, “I wonder if we could ask you to come down to the station and look at a picture of Mr. Stein.”

“Why?”

“If he and Dr. Ward had some clandestine meetings--say at the university?--a student such as yourself may have seen him. We also have some photos of other suspects. They may have been intermediaries between Mr. Stein and Dr. Ward, and we’d like you to take a look at them.”

Kevin nodded. “I thought you might want me to do something like this. Sure. I’ll do it.” He looked down at his slippers. “I have to put my shoes on.”

“That’s all right, Mr. Hamilton,” Barnett said. “Go right ahead. We’ll just wait out here.”

Kevin ducked into the bedroom. His eyes felt better, so he took his glasses off and put his contact lenses back in. Just then the phone rang. He picked it up and started putting on his tennis shoes.

“Hello.”

“It’s me,” Erica said.

“There you are. I tried calling you four or five times.”

“Somebody called right after you hung up, and I couldn’t get him off the phone.”

“Never mind that. You are never going to believe what’s going on. There really is a Stein. Herbert Stein. Actually, I should say there was. He was murdered two days ago.” Erica gasped. “Now the cops are here, and they want me to go down to the station with them.”

“To look at a lineup?”

“No, just some pictures. It shouldn’t take too long.”

The sound of a gas motor steadily grew as a man on a lawnmower neared Kevin’s apartment. He raised his voice.

“You still interested in lunch?”

There was a pause on the other end. “All right, but no McDonald’s.”

A click in the phone interrupted Erica’s voice. He could barely make out the tell-tale beeping of the call waiting signal over the din of the lawnmower. “That’s another call. Can you hang on?”

“Yes.”

Kevin depressed the switch.

“Hello?” He was practically yelling over the sound of the lawnmower.

“Mr. Hamilton, this is Detective Guy Robley of the HPD Homicide Division. Detective Chambers said you called about Herbert Stein.”

“Yes. Barnett and Kaplan are here. They explained about you not being able to get back to me.”

“Who?”

Kevin frowned. “Detectives Barnett and Kaplan. They said you asked them to stop by my apartment. I was just about to leave with them to come down to the station.”

“What do you mean, Mr. Hamilton? I didn’t send anyone to your apartment.”

Kevin looked at the closed bedroom door. “There must be some misunderstanding. Their names are Detectives Barnett and Kaplan.”

“Look, Mr. Hamilton” Robley said, “I have no idea what you’re talking about, but I don’t know anyone by the name of Barnett or Kaplan.”

* * *

Lobec leaned against the wall by the bedroom door. He had moved over there to hear the phone conversation, but the noise of the lawnmower was drowning out Kevin’s voice. No matter. He had heard most of the conversation he had had with his girlfriend, and it didn’t sound as if he had told her anything of importance. Besides, her home was going to be their next stop. So much easier to make their deaths appear as an accident.

He couldn’t hear Kevin hang up the phone, but his voice called from the bedroom.

“I just have to go to the bathroom, and then I’ll be ready to go.”

Lobec heard a door shut. After waiting a minute, he peered into the bedroom. Seeing that it was clear, he walked in. The obese man with the lawnmower turned his machine off. Lobec listened at the door of the bathroom. The fan was on. He heard nothing.

He waited a few seconds. Still nothing.

He knocked on the door and asked if everything was all right. No response. He drew his pistol and tried the knob. Locked. He hit the flimsy door with his shoulder and rushed into the bathroom.

It took him only a second to scan the tiny room. Before his eyes reached it, he could feel the heat flowing through an open window, large enough for a man to fit through easily. He looked through. Hamilton's car was still in the lot, but the student was nowhere to be seen.

"Something must have tipped him," Bern said. "He didn't take the car?"

Lobec turned and saw Bern looking through the window, his pistol already drawn. He slapped Bern's right cheek, leaving an angry red mark.

"You fool. Of course he was tipped off. You did it by mentioning the word superconductivity before he told it to us."

"I heard him say superconductivity."

"He said he was conducting an experiment. He made no mention of the word 'superconductivity.'"

"But I..."

"This is not a debate. His keys are in the kitchen and his wallet is on the coffee table. Get them in case he decides to come back. He must be in the apartment complex."

Lobec heard talking coming from the bedroom. He and Bern rushed out of the bathroom to find Hamilton's greeting playing on the answering machine. When the machine beeped and started recording, Lobec recognized the voice. The girl named Erica.

"Kevin? Kevin, are you there? It's Erica. We got cut off. Kevin? If you've left for the police station, let me know when you get back." After a few more seconds calling his name, she hung up.

Bern looked at Lobec. "What do we do now? Same plan? Interrogation?"

Lobec gave Bern a cold stare, twisting the silencer onto his pistol. “No. Hamilton obviously didn’t know what the code meant. Therefore, he is of no further use to us. When you find him, kill him.”

CHAPTER 8

As he heard Barnett and Kaplan, or whoever they were, leave the bedroom, Kevin felt the air rush from his lungs. He hadn't even realized he had been holding his breath. Now he was breathing in huge gulps. His hiding place under the pile of laundry in the bedroom closet was tenuous at best. They would be back as soon as they realized he wasn't anywhere in the apartment complex. He needed to move.

His hands were shaking as he eased open the closet door. These guys were impersonating police officers and spoke about killing him as if it were nothing more than an inconvenience. Once the lawnmower had stopped, he'd been able to hear everything they said in the bathroom.

When Detective Robley said that he had never heard of Barnett and Kaplan, Kevin had put the phone down without another word, knowing he'd never be able to convince Robley of his situation before the two impostors got suspicious. He also turned off the ringer, so the other line with Erica wouldn't suddenly start ringing the phone. But in his hurry he'd forgotten about the answering machine. Now Erica might be in just as much danger.

The conversation with Robley made everything suddenly click. There was the misplaced remote control and the incorrectly filed folders. At first glance, those inconsistencies were

nothing more than a curiosity. Given what just happened, though, the conclusion was obvious.

Someone had been in his apartment last night. They had been very careful, but not perfect.

But the real clincher was Kaplan's off-hand question about NV117. Kevin had never mentioned to Barnett and Kaplan that the experiment involved superconductivity. He was sure of it. Meaning the phone was tapped and they had heard him talking about it on the phone with Erica. That's why they had come now. The phone call to the police. They had heard it and were afraid he'd tell them about the message from Ward. And because the phone was tapped, they almost certainly knew who Erica was and where she lived.

When Kevin realized Barnett and Kaplan's deception, his choices became limited. Overpowering them was out of the question, not when one of them looked like a linebacker for the Cowboys. And if they had guns, which Kevin was almost sure of, running wouldn't have done much good either. That's why he had opened the bathroom window, pushed the button locking the bathroom door, and closed it before hiding in the closet. Sneaking out was the only way. Luckily, the trick seemed to have worked. For now.

Kevin crept out of the closet. The apartment was quiet. He kept his steps soft as he moved into the living room.

As Barnett had ordered, Kaplan had taken Kevin's wallet and keys. Kevin opened the right desk drawer and flipped through the files he kept in there. Even though he was meticulous with his research files, his personal files were a mess. He didn't even label all of them. His stomach dropped when he didn't find what he was looking for on the first pass. As he more carefully went through the files a second time, his hands shook, and several times he glanced at the door.

Finally, he found it in the tenth file and breathed a sigh of relief. The valet key he had gotten with the car, but never used.

He snatched the key from the file and ran to the door. He poked his head through. No one was in sight. There was no choice. He had to go for it.

Kevin sprinted to the Mustang, all the while expecting a bullet in the back. He crammed the key into the door, his head swiveling as he quietly opened it. Still no sign of them. He got in and kept his head down as he eased the door shut.

He jammed the key into the ignition and turned it. The Mustang wheezed and coughed, struggling to turn over. It cranked and cranked, but the engine wouldn't catch. Shit! He let go and tried again. Same result.

"Not now," he muttered to himself, glancing in the rearview mirror. He opened the window to let out some of the stifling heat. "Come on. Come on."

He turned the key again.

* * *

To the left of the apartment complex entrance, Lobec saw no sign of Hamilton. It was unlikely their target had scaled one of the ten-foot high fences encircling the apartment property. The chain link was topped with razor wire to keep out intruders. That left the front gate as the only route out of the complex.

Lobec returned to the gate, where Bern was waiting.

"I assume there was no sign of him," Lobec said.

"No. But there's no way we wouldn't have seen him. The street's clear, and there's nowhere to hide."

“It’s the same on my side. He must still be in the complex.”

“You want me to wait here in case he tries to get out?” Bern said.

“No, we need to find him immediately. He might try to call someone. We’ll make one pass through the complex. If we can’t find him, we must assume that he found refuge with a neighbor.”

Lobec and Bern skirted the edges of the complex, each taking a side looking under bushes, behind cars, and inside shadowed alcoves. Both of the pool areas were crowded with sun-worshippers. Lobec kept his distance, not wanting to present a face that residents might remember should he have to shoot Hamilton. No sign of their target. As he finished at the last courtyard, the one directly outside Hamilton’s apartment, Bern came towards him.

“No luck. I’ve searched every inch of this place between here and the entrance. If he’s here, I don’t...”

Lobec raised his hand, cutting Bern off. Somewhere nearby an engine was turning over, struggling to start. It sounded like the rumble of a V8 engine. It seemed to catch and roar to life, but then abruptly died. He ran toward the end of the building and Bern followed.

As he rounded the corner, he saw the Mustang at the far end of the lot. Someone was inside. Lobec started running toward it.

He motioned for Bern to get the car and pulled the SIG Sauer from his jacket.

* * *

Kevin nervously searched the parking lot as he let the engine pause before trying again. He was just about to reach for the key when he caught motion out of the corner of his eye. To his right he saw a man sprinting from the opposite side of the parking lot. His hand fumbled for the

ignition. The engine had almost started the last time, and it looked like he'd only get one more chance. He frantically turned the key.

The engine caught on the first crank. Kevin mashed his foot on the accelerator, but he was now surging with adrenaline and was almost unaware of how fast he released the clutch. The car lurched forward, coughed, and then roared back to life, the needle on the tachometer leaping toward the redline. The rear wheels emitted an ear-piercing screech, and Kevin could smell the tires burning on the hot cement.

He twirled the steering wheel to the left, the Mustang gyrating wildly on the spinning wheel. Kevin tried to get it headed in the direction of the apartment complex exit. As he completed the 180 degree turn, he quickly glanced out of the window.

The man, who he now recognized as the fake officer calling himself Barnett, stopped only fifty yards away and raised his arm, pointing it at Kevin. Kevin realized what was happening almost too late and ducked down as the passenger's window disintegrated. He yelled "Shit!" and raised his arm to shield himself from the bits of glass ricocheting around the car's interior. He heard another bullet smash the driver's side mirror and others pepper the door. The tires finally gripped the pavement, and the Mustang shot past the end of the building and out of Barnett's sight.

Kevin saw the front gate growing quickly and only then remembered he would need to stop and wait for its sensor to detect the car's weight before opening. As the Mustang skidded to a halt within inches of the gate, he looked in the mirror. Barnett came to a stop 200 yards back and a large Pontiac rounded the corner. It stopped barely long enough to let Barnett yank the door open and jump in. The car leapt towards him and would close the distance in seconds.

Kevin gunned the engine as the gate crawled along its track, still only three-quarters open. It had always seemed slow, but now the wait was agonizing. He looked in the mirror again. His pursuers were now only 100 yards back. He couldn't wait.

The engine roared as the Mustang sprang forward, and Kevin winced as he heard the tearing of metal from the passenger side, the mirror ripped from its mounting. For a second the car seemed to be hung up on something, as if a piece of metal was caught on the gate, but then whatever it was tore loose and he was free. Turning right onto Gulfon, Kevin floored it.

As he rocketed past a puttering Honda, he suddenly realized that he had no idea where he was going. He knew he had to get to the police, but until this moment, it had never crossed his mind that he didn't actually know the location of a police station. The only contact he'd had with the police was a few tickets, but he'd always paid them through the mail. His only hope was to get caught in a speed trap. He'd cheerfully accept another citation if they would stop him.

He was coming up on Chimney Rock. The Pontiac was lagging behind, but not as much as Kevin had hoped. Apparently, it had almost as much power as the Mustang's V8, and the driver was putting it to good use.

Kevin was about to randomly pick a direction when a sign caught his eye. It advertised the wholesome atmosphere at Houston Baptist University. Suddenly Kevin realized that he did know the location of a police station. The campus police station at South Texas University. At the rate he was going, he could be there in ten minutes. And the quickest way was to get on the Southwest Freeway. Which meant turning left onto Chimney Rock.

He bothered to slow long enough to time his entrance into the heavy cross traffic. Then he saw an opening and punched the accelerator. The Mustang blasted through the stop sign and

swerved sickeningly, missing the front of a pickup by inches. He proceeded to weave past cars, honking the horn whenever someone blocked the way.

The Pontiac tried the same maneuver, but it sideswiped a UPS truck, which knocked the battered car into the median. Kevin was elated until he saw the Pontiac rebound off the median and continue in his direction.

Luckily, there were no lights until the freeway feeder road, and Kevin was able to maintain the separation between him and the Pontiac. Then he saw the freeway rising ahead, and a sign saying “US 59” flashed by. Once he was on the freeway, he’d be able to open it up and maybe even lose the Pontiac.

During Kevin’s race to school on the same route the day before, the adrenaline had flowed, but now it was a tidal wave pounding through his system. He had always wanted to go to one of those driving schools, the ones where you learn how to slide through a controlled skid or accelerate out of decreasing radius turns without plastering the car on whatever unfortunate objects were around you. He’d even fantasized about being in a car chase just like this one, thinking it would be a blast to tear through the streets at eighty miles an hour with another car hot on his trail. But the reality was nothing like his fantasy; all he felt now was sheer terror.

His fear inched up a notch when he saw the traffic backed up at the feeder road stoplight. He’d be stopped for thirty seconds, easily long enough for the thugs following him to run up and drag him from the car, probably flashing badges all the way.

There was an entrance into a strip mall on his right. It was a new Wal-Mart, and Kevin was sure it had an outlet onto the feeder road. He wrenched the wheel to the right and flew into and over the steeply inclined parking lot entrance, mashing the nose of the Mustang in the process.

After speeding down the side of the Wal-Mart, he rounded the corner and almost ran down an employee wheeling an empty shopping cart toward the store front. The startled employee jumped back, pushing the cart directly into the Mustang's path. The car's nose hit it low, tossing the cart into the right half of the Mustang's windshield, creating a maze of cracks in the safety glass.

Kevin turned left and bypassed the crowded store entrance, racing across the empty fringes of the lot and struggling to see through the crazed windshield. He wiped sweat from his forehead, wishing he could use the air conditioner but not wanting to sap any power from the engine. Not that the air conditioner would do much good with the shattered passenger side window.

He took another look in his one remaining mirror. The Pontiac was still there, now a mere seventy-five yards behind. Kevin aimed at the closest exit.

Then Kevin saw the freeway entrance ramp he had taken yesterday. It was a hundred yards to his left. The only problem was the feeder road was one way, with two lanes of dense traffic coming towards him. To get on the freeway on this entrance, he'd have to head into the oncoming traffic and make a 180 degree turn to get onto the ramp. With the cars racing along the feeder at 60 miles an hour, he'd never make it without crashing into another car. He'd just have to make it to the next freeway entrance.

He took the feeder road toward the Loop, the beltway encircling Houston. To his horror, he saw orange cones diverting traffic away from the freeway onto a temporary asphalt macadam. Houston's ubiquitous construction strikes again, he thought. The macadam led to an intersection which merged into Westpark. The makeshift light was green, and Kevin made a tight left to keep heading in the direction of downtown Houston.

He thought about staying on Westpark the whole way and decided against it. Too many lights. He went under the Loop and saw that the feeder road was blocked here as well. He'd have to go up to Newcastle, which was the first road that would lead back to the freeway. He'd been on it just three days before and hoped it was still open.

Kevin looked in the rear view mirror. The Pontiac was now only fifty yards behind him. The traffic was thinning out. Kevin floored it and accelerated up an overpass rising above several railroad tracks. By the time he reached the top, the distance between the two cars had opened to 100 yards.

As he crested the hill, the Mustang coughed. Kevin ignored the old car's wheeze. From his vantage point on the overpass, he could see Newcastle a quarter mile ahead. Fifteen feet to the right of the Newcastle-Westpark intersection was a railroad crossing which cut across Newcastle. The signal began to flash, but the gates were still up. Below and to the right of the overpass, he could see a train slowly moving in the same direction, parallel to Westpark, its engine a few hundred yards from the crossing. To the left, Newcastle headed toward the freeway. Just as he thought, it was clear. In thirty seconds he'd be on the Southwest Freeway and might be able to put some distance between him and the Pontiac.

The Mustang coughed again. Kevin looked at the hood. No steam or smoke. It coughed again. In seconds the Mustang was sputtering, as if trying to catch its breath, the power falling off. Kevin glanced at the instrument cluster to see if the engine had overheated in the hot summer air. He gasped when he saw the gauges.

The trip odometer read 295 miles. The sputtering made sense now. The fuel tank was empty.

In his desperation to escape, he had forgotten that he'd driven home without filling up. Now he'd be lucky to make it to the freeway before the car lurched to a stop. He needed to get something between him and the Pontiac.

A ear-ringing blast startled Kevin. The train, which was 100 yards behind the Mustang, blew its air horn twice more as it approached the crossing. Kevin suddenly realized what he had to do and thought for a moment that he was crazy for deciding to do it so quickly.

The gates on the right were lowering. The barriers were long, long enough to stretch across the two lanes on either side of the road, but they left a hole about fifteen feet wide. If a car was angled correctly, it could make it through.

The Mustang continued to sputter. Luckily, the light ahead was green, letting the traffic on Westpark through. There were no cars between Kevin and the intersection. He didn't want to tip his hand until the last possible second, so he drove as though he were going past Newcastle. Behind him, he could see the Pontiac closing the gap. The train was only a fifty yards behind him. He couldn't be sure, but the distance looked long enough for what he planned. It didn't really matter. He had no other options.

Just before he reached the intersection, Kevin hit the brakes and wrenched the wheel to the right. The Mustang went into a four-wheel drift with its nose pointed at the crossing. For a moment, he could see the surprised expressions on Kaplan and Barnett's faces as the Pontiac steered to avoid hitting him. Kevin floored it, praying that there was enough gas left to get him across the tracks.

The sputtering got more violent, but the car responded, squirting through the gap in the barriers. The looming train filled the windshield, and the blast of the air horn was deafening.

Heading at an angle across the tracks instead of perpendicular to them, the Mustang careered toward the right hand curb and glanced off. Kevin was thrown against the seatbelt with the impact. Now hobbled, the Mustang limped forward, still scraping the curb. Kevin coaxed it a hundred more feet before the engine died. It took Kevin a second to realize he hadn't been broadsided by the locomotive.

He didn't spend time celebrating. He turned the key, hoping there were a few drops of fuel left. It was no use.

Kevin scrambled out of the car and quickly surveyed his surroundings, pausing for only a second to appraise the damage to his faithful car. It was pitiful. The broken mirrors, the crazed windshield, the bullet holes, the wheel skewed from the impact with the curb. He didn't want to know what the passenger side looked like. He quickly put it into perspective though. Better it than me, he thought and then searched the street for a hiding place.

Kevin wasn't heartened by what he saw. On both sides of the street, a high chain-link fence with barbed wire stretched as far as he could see before the end of the road curved out of sight a quarter mile ahead. On the left, the fence protected a electrical transformer station. On the right, construction equipment lay dormant. A sign on the fence said "Stratford Pointe - An apartment community for the future."

He looked down the track in the direction the train was coming from. A caboose was visible in the distance. It would be there in less than a minute. They'd catch him before he could run to the next street.

Kevin looked at the low-slung train cars piled high with lumber. Through the gaps he could see his pursuers searching for him. Then he saw something which caught his attention. It looked

like his best chance. He began running away from the crossing, and angled across the street, using the traffic waiting at the signal to stay out of sight of the other side. When he was sure Barnett and Kaplan could no longer see him, he headed back toward the tracks.

In front of the crossing, at the back of the line of waiting traffic, a pearl black pickup with tinted windows was stopped. Its back window and bumper were festooned with stickers with the familiar maroon and white colors of Texas A&M. Many of them said "Texas A&M Aggies" or "Gig 'em Aggies." Kevin had seen bumper stickers that said, "My daughter and my money go to Texas A&M," but he'd never seen the one on the truck's bumper that said, "I did your daughter and spent your money at Texas A&M."

He ran up to passenger's door, hoping that it might be less threatening in this era of carjackings, and knocked on the window. The electric window lowered to reveal a man around his age in a tank top and jeans. A gun rack was mounted on the back window, but it held only an umbrella.

"You got a problem, bud?" the man said.

"My damn car broke down," Kevin said between gulps of air, "and I was wondering if you could give a fellow Ag some help." He wiggled his class ring toward the man.

The man looked at the ring and a smile broke across his face. "I'll always help another Ag in trouble. And today's your lucky day. My dad owns a garage. Maybe I can take a look at it and see if we can't get it fixed. Name's Bob Tinan." Bob leaned over to extend his hand through the window, and Kevin took it.

"Kevin Hamilton." Through the windshield, he could see the approaching caboose thirty seconds away. "Thanks, Bob, but I know what's wrong with it. It's the head gasket." Kevin

jerked his thumb toward the Mustang. "It was bound to happen sometime. The only way it's going to move now is behind a tow truck."

Bob looked at the heavily damaged car 100 yards behind them and turned back to Kevin. "Hell, you're probably right. No sense messin' it up more than it already is. Come on in. There's a gas station a couple blocks from here.

As Kevin climbed in and closed the door, the caboose passed, and he could see the Pontiac shoot under the opening gates.

"He's in a hell of a hurry," Bob said. Kevin bent over, pretending to tie his shoes.

"What year did you graduate, Bob?"

Bob told him and drove toward the intersection. Kevin looked back towards his car. Barnett and Kaplan were already out of the Pontiac and slowly approached the immobile vehicle, their guns discreetly held at their sides. As the pickup turned right onto Westpark and out of sight, they still didn't realize that Kevin was gone.

CHAPTER 9

From the Transco Tower, the 800-foot-tall suburban skyscraper on the West Loop, the railroad crossing at Westpark and Newcastle was easily visible, as was most of the rest of Houston. It was one of the reasons that Clayton Tarnwell had chosen it for his vast office headquarters. On clear days, the Houston ship channel, over ten miles to the east, could be seen through the silvery towers of downtown Houston. From this vantage point, Tarnwell could survey the vast metropolis as if he owned the entire expanse. He loved to watch the expressions of visitors as they walked into the enormous office, toward the floor-to-ceiling picture window. It was an awe-inspiring sight.

Clayton Tarnwell was paying no attention to it whatsoever.

“What!” he screamed into the phone. “Are you telling me that two highly-trained, very expensive operatives couldn’t handle the simple task of bringing in a college student?”

“I think you may want to hear the entire report,” David Lobec said from his car phone. “And I recommend not discussing it any further over an open line. We can be there in less than five minutes.”

He thought about using some choice words, but trusted Lobec's professional advice. Someone might be eavesdropping. "You damn well better be!" He slammed the phone into the cradle, then stabbed the intercom button.

"Coffee. Now. And when Lobec gets here, send him in."

A female voice replied, "Yes, sir."

Tarnwell picked up the loan contracts he had been studying, then slapped them down on the desk without seeing any of the words. Damn! He was so close. After years of building his small, but extremely profitable empire, he was now on the verge of leapfrogging into the ranks of the Forbes 400. Ward's Adamas process—no, Tarnwell's Adamas process, he corrected himself—was the key. Once he had the process patented, he would own the most lucrative invention of the decade. He could truly be one of the richest men in the world. And now some pissant little college kid was getting in his way. He would not let that happen.

Tarnwell's office had all the trappings of a successful businessman: the teak coffee table, the leather sofa and antique Chippendale chairs he had bought at auction, the state-of-the-art media center on the far wall, the hand-made oriental rug. A vast array of photographs adorned the office, most of them pictures of him posing with tennis pals from the club, local sports celebrities, a couple of congressmen and a senator. They showed a tall, handsome, rugged blond in prime condition. An all-American boy living The American Dream.

But it wasn't enough. He was a nobody outside of Houston. He could get his share of attention in Washington, in the mining and chemical circles, but he wasn't a big player, not like the chairmen of the megaconglomerates. The giants in the industry would brush him aside if he were too much of a nuisance. He was a barracuda in an ocean of killer whales.

He wanted to be more. *He* wanted to be one of the killer whales, maybe even the biggest. And thanks to Adamas, Tarnwell's name was on the brink of becoming a household word. He would be one of the most powerful men in the world. And this Hamilton snot was endangering everything.

The door to his office opened, and a shapely blonde emerged with a sterling and china tea set. She placed the set on the spotless mahogany desk and gave Tarnwell a playful smile as she poured. Even though they were occasional lovers—one of the reasons she was hired in the first place—Tarnwell ignored her and went back to staring at the wall. After serving his drink, she retraced her steps to the exit without saying a word.

Moments later, Lobec walked in. Tarnwell didn't wait for him to cross the entire room.

"Let's hear it," Tarnwell spat.

"These are Mr. Hamilton's," Lobec said, throwing a wallet and a set of keys onto the desk.

Without asking, Lobec filled one of the other cups from the pot. He sat in one of the high back leather chairs and took a sip before starting his report. He took Tarnwell through every detail of the morning's events, starting with their stakeout and finishing with the high speed chase that ended at the rail crossing.

"He apparently received a ride from one of the vehicles traveling in the other direction," Lobec concluded. "Otherwise, we would have seen him running. There was no place to hide within the immediate area."

Despite his anger, Tarnwell had been involved in some of Lobec's previous operations. He knew Lobec was capable, so he didn't waste time trying to assign blame. The most important thing was to find Hamilton. "Then that means he's not mobile."

“Correct. He’ll have to get help from someone.”

“The police?”

“That’s a distinct possibility. Since he contacted them before, we have to assume that he might try again.”

“What can we do about it?”

“There really isn’t anything we need to do about it. I have several associates at the Houston Police Department. If Hamilton arrives at any station, I will know about it within fifteen minutes.”

“Did anyone at the apartment complex see you?”

“It is possible, but no one was in the parking lot. If they did see us, it was from a distance.”

“But Hamilton saw you. He can identify both of you.”

“He can describe us, but I assure you, the police have no photographs of either me or Bern.”

“Can we get to him while he’s in there?”

“No, not unless he were put into a cell. In that case it would be exceedingly easy. The police would find him beaten to death in the morning. However, there is no reason to believe he will be jailed. The police will take his statement, show him a few pictures, and then let him go. Once we know where he is, it is a simple matter to wait until he leaves the building. Actually, the best thing he could do for us is go to the police.”

“What if they provide him with protection?” Tarnwell said. “You *did* try to kill him.” A flicker of amusement and disdain crossed Lobec’s face, and Tarnwell knew he had made a suggestion which Lobec thought amateurish.

“Protection is offered only in special cases, such as to witnesses who have been threatened before testimony is to be given. The resources the police have are limited. It is highly unlikely they would provide protection to a student with a poor driving record who makes such an outrageous claim. There is no other evidence, and he has no idea why we were there.”

“Yes there is. The email message. And what about the car?”

“Now that we know what the message is, all traces of it will be erased from the school’s computer system by noon. We still haven’t determined what the code means, but Hamilton hasn’t either. As for the car, it was towed to a more suitable location. The Fourth Ward. The car will be stripped within the hour.”

“Good thinking.” Tarnwell took a sip of his coffee, going through Hamilton’s wallet while he thought. Nothing was in it except a few credit cards, a driver’s license, and a student ID. “Then what are our options?” he finally asked. “I don’t like waiting for him to make a move.”

“There is not much more *we* can do, but *he* has several alternatives,” Lobec said.

“Such as?”

“Do you remember the picture I showed you this morning?”

“You mean the girl? What was her name?”

“Erica Jensen. We have her telephone number as a result of the wiretap.”

“Have you given the information to Mitch?” Tarnwell knew Mitch Hornung could get any information they needed from the state records.

“Hornung is working on it as we speak. If Hamilton does not go to the police, she is the next most likely alternative. I’ve faxed her photograph to our other operatives, who have been

instructed to apprehend her on sight. When we have her full records, we'll relay her profile as well. I will go to her residence as soon as we are done here."

"What about friends?"

"We have operatives stationed at all of the most likely places Hamilton might go, but we have little information on his other friends. We should be able to get that in a few hours. Perhaps a day at most."

Tarnwell turned his chair and looked at the skyline. "He'll go to the police as soon as he can. But he has no car and no wallet, and he's not going to get very far in Houston without either of those. That means he'll have to call a friend, maybe this Erica Jensen, to come get him." He swiveled the chair back in Lobec's direction. "We can't afford any more problems. You don't have to tell me when he gets to the police. And I don't care who picks him up. As soon as he leaves the station, take him out."

Lobec cocked his head and raised an eyebrow. "Is that a wise move, considering he will have just told his story to..."

"It won't matter. You said he had nothing. If he was involved with NV117, he may know about Adamas, and I can't chance that. Just make him disappear. And this time, I don't want the body found. Ever. Do you think you can handle that?"

Lobec smiled. "I now have access to a local paper mill. Have you ever seen an industrial shredder?"

Erica Jensen looked at the phone, wondering if she should try Kevin's number again. For the past twenty minutes she'd been calling and all she got was the answering machine.

Something bad had happened. That's what she had been thinking since they'd been disconnected. She didn't know why. It was easy to get caught up in a conversation if someone called or came by, especially for Kevin. She remembered a few of their conversations in the hospital. He had been so intent on the conversation that he didn't hear someone call his name until she told him. But this was different. Before leaving with the police, he should have at least called to tell her that he would get back to her later. If he just forgot, she would really be pissed.

Erica picked up the phone and hit the redial. She let it ring three times before hanging up, not knowing whether to be angry or worried.

There weren't many options: either wait here until he called or go over to his apartment. It was just a five minute drive away. Neither option was desirable, but inaction was the greater of the two evils. She recorded a new message on the answering machine saying that she was going over to Kevin's apartment and would be back in ten minutes if he wasn't there. Then she grabbed her purse and headed to the door.

As she pulled it open and felt the blast of heat invade her townhouse, the phone rang. She slammed the door and ran to the phone.

"Hello?"

"Thank God you're still there," Kevin said, the relief in his voice palpable. "I want you to get out of there."

"What? Kevin, what's going on? I've been calling for twenty..."

"I can't tell you right now, so don't ask."

"Tell me what? You're not making sense. Just calm down."

"I'm about as calm as I'll get until you come get me."

“Come get you? Where’s your car? Where *are* you?

“I’m at...” He paused. “Do you remember where I said I wanted to go for lunch on my birthday?”

“You wanted...”

“Don’t say the name! Just answer yes or no.”

“Kevin, what is going on?”

“There’s no time! I think they tapped the phone. Just answer me, *please*.”

“All right! Yes, I remember.”

“Good. I’m at the gas station across the street from there. I want you to leave the townhouse right now and come pick me up. Get your car keys and go.”

“Will you at least tell me...”

“No. I’ll explain everything when you get here. Just get out of there.” With that, the phone clicked off. He had hung up.

She stared at the receiver, but for only a second. In the four months Erica had known Kevin, he had never once been irrational. Stubborn maybe, but never irrational. And she didn’t think he was starting now. She didn’t know what was going on, but apparently he was terrified about her staying in the apartment. That was enough for her.

She dropped the handset into the cradle and ran out of the townhouse, pausing only to pick up her purse and lock the door. In ten seconds she was driving her three-year-old Honda Accord to a gas station across the street from Fuddrucker’s Hamburgers.

CHAPTER 10

The air conditioning was on the fritz again, and Detective Guy Robley was sweating his ass off. The HPD headquarters was already 85 degrees, and it was only going to get worse. *Why did it always quit on the hottest day of the year?* he thought. The commissioner probably had pissed off somebody on the city council, and this was the punishment.

Robley filled out the report as fast as he could type. As soon as he was done, he could hit the field again in his nice cool Caprice. There was no way he was going to spend a minute longer in this hellhole than he had to. The phone rang, and he stopped typing, looking at the black receiver with disgust. He picked it up, handling it as if it were a used Kleenex.

“Robley.”

It was Joe Johnson, who was sitting on the other side of the homicide division office. “Hey, Robe, some guy on the line says he has to talk to you. Says it’s an emergency.”

“Who is it?”

“Name’s Hamilton. Says he talked to you earlier about the Stein case.”

“That crank again? Goddammit, what is it with the heat that brings out these nuts?”

“You want me to get rid of him?”

“No, I’ll take care of it. Put him on.” Under his breath he muttered, “Goddamned heat.”

As soon as the transfer was made, Robley could hear the noise of traffic in the background and the ding of a service station’s bell.

“Detective Robley here.”

“Detective Robley, this is Kevin Hamilton. We spoke about twenty minutes ago.” The voice was slightly higher in pitch than the last time, but it was definitely the same guy.

“Yes, Mr. Hamilton, I remember. We got disconnected.”

“I’m sorry, but I had to hang up.” He paused, as if struggling for words. “Some men tried to kill me.”

Robley rolled his eyes. “Someone tried to kill you, Mr. Hamilton?” Johnson, who was watching him from across the room, shook his head and chuckled. “You mean, while we were on the phone, or afterwards.”

“I know this sounds crazy, Detective, but these two guys who came to my door and said they were cops, shot at me and then chased me in a blue Pontiac. A Bonneville.”

“Uh huh. And did you get their license plate number?”

“Uh, no, I couldn’t see it. They were behind me, and we were going too fast.”

“I see. Look, Mr. Hamilton, why don’t you come down to the station and make a statement. You know, give us a detailed description of the assailants and an account of the events.”

“Then what?”

“Then we’ll see what we can do about it.”

“That’s it? You’ll see what you can do about it? Those guys tried to kill me! They know where I live.”

“Why would they want to kill you, Mr. Hamilton?”

Another pause. “I don’t know. I think it has to do with this note I got from Dr. Ward. You know, Michael Ward? The South Texas professor who died this morning? I used to work for him.”

“The professor and his wife who died in the home fire?”

“Yes, in the note he said the same people who killed Stein were after him. Then he said it has to do with an experiment we did together.”

“What’s so special about this experiment?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know.” Of course he doesn’t.

“Look, I do know that a guy in a business suit and his muscle-bound buddy came to my apartment this morning pretending to be cops and tried to shoot me.”

Robley wiped his forehead with a handkerchief. “Where do you live?”

“The Sycamore apartments.”

The Sycamore was on the west side. No reports of shots fired came from that area this morning. “Did anyone else at The Sycamore hear the shots?”

“I doubt it. They were using silencers.”

This was too much. “Silencers? Mr. Hamilton, you’ve seen too many movies.”

“If you don’t believe me, my car is on Newcastle just south of Westpark. It has two bullet holes in the driver’s door.”

Robley sighed. “Okay, I’ll check it out. But falsely reporting a crime is a serious offense, Mr. Hamilton. Do you want to stick with your story?”

“It’s the truth! I swear!”

“Fine. Give me the license number on your car.” As Robley jotted the information on a notepad, he shook his head. Maybe it wasn’t the heat that brought out the nuts. Maybe it was the humidity.

Kevin let out his breath in relief as he saw the familiar gray Honda pull into the Exxon station. He emerged from the shadows of the food mart and dashed to the car as it came to a stop. Even before she had stopped, he flung the door open and leapt in.

“Go. Romanelli’s. It’s dark and it shouldn’t be too crowded yet.”

As Erica began heading in the direction of the Italian restaurant, Kevin looked behind her to see if he could spot anybody following her, particularly a Pontiac sedan.

“What’s going on?” She glanced at him. Her dark eyebrows were furrowed with a mixture of concern, curiosity, and skepticism.

“In a minute. Turn here.”

“What?”

“I want to make sure you weren’t followed.”

“Are you kidding?”

“No. Then take the first left. Go!”

“All right,” Erica said in a voice normally reserved for small children telling you about their imaginary friends.

After another three turns, Kevin was satisfied that they were alone. “I know I must have sounded like a nut...”

“You still do.”

“Okay, I’m sounding like a nut. But I didn’t want to be stranded at that gas station.” He leaned back and closed his eyes, welcoming the rest, and then began to tell her about his encounter with Barnett and Kaplan. During the entire story, Erica didn’t say a word. Kevin was glad. The act of explaining what had happened helped to clarify the events in his mind. By the time he was finished, they were pulling into Romanelli’s parking lot.

“Park in the back, out of sight,” Kevin said.

Erica pulled into a space in the almost empty lot. Turning off the engine, she said, “Why aren’t we at a police station? You said somebody tried to kill you.”

Kevin let out another sigh. “The police don’t believe me.”

“What? When did you talk to them?”

“After I called you, I called them and asked for Robley.”

“The detective who told you he didn’t know who Barnett and Kaplan were?”

“Right. I probably sounded like a nut to him, too. He said I could make a statement, but that’s about all. Maybe when they have the Mustang, they’ll believe me.” He looked at his watch. “I’m supposed to call him back in about ten minutes to see if they found it. One thing’s for sure, I’m not going down there until I know they’ll give me some protection.”

“Why not? What else can you do?”

“I can’t go home now. For all I know the police could be in on this. If those guys *were* cops, they’ll know where I am the minute I set foot in the station. And it’s possible they know who you are.”

“Is that why you wanted me to leave the townhouse?”

Kevin nodded. "Something bothered me about the conversation I had with Barnett and Kaplan, something that wasn't right. It wasn't until after the call from Robley that it sunk in. It was something Kaplan said. I told them about the message and the experiment, and then he asked me if I knew why someone would be interested in an experiment involving superconductivity."

"So?"

"I hadn't told them what kind of experiment it was. I had just told them we had conducted one. But Kaplan asked me specifically about superconductivity. He couldn't have known that unless he'd heard you and me talking about it. The phone was bugged."

"Come on, Kevin! Do you know how crazy this sounds?"

"Yes. And don't say I've been watching too many movies. Besides, I know they heard your voice on the answering machine when I was hiding in the closet."

Erica tapped her fingers on the steering wheel. "And you think they might have traced the phone call to my apartment."

"I think it's possible. For all we know, they could be over there right now."

"This is crazy."

"Tell me about it."

"How about we continue this inside?" she said as she grabbed her purse. "It's getting hot out here."

* * *

Romanelli's was one of the trendy new restaurants springing up around Houston with antique-looking knickknacks strewn about, bookshelves lining the walls, and so little light that identification of the food was difficult. The effect was supposed to be elegant privacy, but Kevin

hated it. He just liked the fact that it was dark. As they entered, he saw that he'd been right to choose it. The lunch time rush hadn't started yet, and most of the tables were empty. He asked the hostess for a dim booth in the far corner, close to the telephones.

They both ordered Diet Cokes and told the waiter they needed some time to examine the menu.

After the waiter left, Erica said in a lowered voice, "Are you sure these men were trying to kill you? You couldn't have misunderstood?"

"I heard every word they said!" he exclaimed and then, realizing how loud he was, lowered his voice. "I know it was muffled in the closet, but I heard Barnett clearly. He said Kaplan should kill me if..." He looked at Erica's concerned expression, and now he didn't know if it was his safety she was worried about. "You don't believe me." The thought that she wouldn't hadn't occurred to him until this point.

"No, that's not what I'm saying. I just want to make sure we have all the facts straight. Now, you said that this Barnett shot at you."

He paused, not sure that he wanted to go on, angry that she even doubted him. But it *was* a fantastic story. He didn't know if *he* would believe it if he hadn't lived through it himself. And if she didn't believe him, then the police wouldn't either. He needed to convince her. "Either that or he blew out my window from fifty yards away with his finger."

"But you didn't hear any shots."

"He must have been using a silencer. The car's engine would have been loud enough to cover the sound."

"How do you know that?"

Kevin shrugged. "I heard one at a shooting demonstration one time." Erica gave him a puzzled look, but he didn't elaborate. "Besides, I saw the bullet holes in the car door."

"You could see them even with all the damage to the car?" she said.

"Yes."

"Then why didn't they just kill you in the apartment?"

She had a point. "I don't know. I don't even know why they would want to kill me in the first place. All I can figure is that it has something to do with the message from Dr. Ward and experiment NV117."

"OK, let's assume somebody was trying to kill you because of the email he sent you. Then the answer has to be there. What exactly did it say? Something about..."

"Shit!" Kevin said. "I totally forgot!" The printout. He still had it in his pocket. He dug out the crumpled and torn pieces of paper and flattened them on the table between them.

Erica furrowed her eyebrows and frowned as she read the message. Kevin focussed on the last line of the message and ran it over and over in his mind. *DA483H3 is the...* That had to be it. Nothing else told him anything. The code had to be the key.

"Is the' what?" Erica said. "Are you sure he never used a code with you?"

"It could be anything for all I know. A combination, a locker number, something he mentioned to me once. But Ward was hiding this notebook from someone, and he was telling me how to find it. I'm sure of it. It has to be what these guys are after."

"Or maybe they already have it and they didn't want you to find out about it."

"Then why would they ask me what the code means?" he asked, receiving only a shrug in reply.

Kevin looked at his watch. It was time to call Robley back.

Leaving the printout with Erica, he went to the phones and dialed the number Robley had given him.

“Detective Robley.”

“It’s Kevin Hamilton.”

“What are you trying to pull, Hamilton?”

This wasn’t the response Kevin was expecting. “What do you mean?”

“I checked with dispatch. Seems your Mustang was reported stolen at 9:30 this morning.”

“What!”

“Luckily, we’ve already found it. In the Fourth Ward.”

“The Fourth Ward? But it was out of gas. How did it...” Kevin ran his fingers through his hair, searching for an explanation. “They must have moved it. Did the officers who found it tell you about the bullet holes?”

“Yes, they did. They found exactly zero bullet holes.”

Kevin’s mouth dropped open. “That’s impossible. I know I saw two bullet holes in the door.”

“They also found zero doors on the vehicle. It was totally stripped. Dispatch said it looked like it had the hell beat out of it, too.”

“Detective, believe me. I know this sounds weird, even crazy. But this has something to do with Stein’s...”

“Hamilton, I don’t know what your angle is, and I don’t care. I just want to get the hell out of this hothouse. If you want a copy of the report for your insurance company, fine. Call traffic. I’m through with this shit.”

Kevin heard the phone slam down. He slammed his own receiver in return. Damn! Robley’s probably bitching about Kevin to his friends at this very moment. And since he was the one handling the Stein case, Kevin wouldn’t get help from anyone else trying to connect Ward’s and Stein’s deaths. If Kevin went to the police now, they’d throw him out of the station.

He plodded back to the table and slumped into the bench across from Erica.

She leaned forward. “What’s wrong?”

“They found the Mustang in the Fourth Ward, stripped. No evidence of any wrongdoing. Other than my car being stolen and vandalized. The theft was reported at 9:30 this morning.”

“9:30? But that’s almost two hours ago!”

“These guys have some connections if they can make the police believe something like that. I’m screwed. No, I’m dead. Maybe when Robley finds my body he’ll believe me.”

“Kevin, you’re not dead. This may just be some major screwup. I’m sure if you go down to the police station and explain...”

“Without evidence, I can’t go down there. They’ll just think I’m making it up. And now I can’t go back to my apartment. I can’t even go to your apartment. Neither of us can go home.”

Erica put her hand on his. “Kevin, there has to be a rational explanation for all this. Maybe this *is* all a big joke and you ran before they had a chance to tell you.”

“No, you don’t understand. You didn’t meet these guys. They were smooth. Man, were they smooth. They had to be professionals. Professionals sent to find me and bring me in. If they

couldn't do that, they were definitely going to kill me. I could hear it in their voices. When Barnett talked about killing me, he was cold. No emotion."

The skepticism was still in Erica's voice. "Then what are we going to do?"

"Unless we can find out what that code means and get that notebook, I have no idea." Kevin sat back against the wall, put his leg up on the bench seat, and rubbed his face as he glanced around the sparsely populated restaurant. Two older women were busily chatting, almost talking over one another. A young man, obviously a student, hunched over a text, one of many stacked around him, and sipped a cappuccino. A couple shoveled spaghetti into their mouths, never saying a word. Three thirtysomethings sat...

Kevin's eyes returned to the student and the stack of books. Most of them were glossy textbooks, with bold, colorful typeface, but a couple of them were old and worn and had white strips of tape across the binding.

Kevin leaped out of the bench, and ignoring Erica's surprised questions, ran over and grabbed one of the older books off the student's table.

The student gaped at him, and Kevin said, "Sorry, this'll just take a second." He opened the book, but he wasn't looking for the title. Inside the front cover, he saw it. A stamp saying "Campbell Library."

"Can I borrow this for a second?" he asked the student and pointed to his table. "I'll just be right over there."

The student shook his head, but said "Sure," with a puzzled look on his face, and Kevin rushed back to Erica, book still in hand. He was smiling.

"What are you doing?" she said. "A second ago you were wallowing in death."

“I knew I’d seen that code before.” He tapped the note with his finger. “We were looking at it the wrong way. Can I have a pen?”

Erica rooted around in her purse for a few seconds before giving up that method. She pulled handfuls out of the purse and piled odds and ends onto the table: wallet, hospital badge, pager, keys, notepad, torn Lifesaver wrappers. Finally, she found a pen and gave it to him. He quickly scribbled on the message while she repacked her purse. When she was done, he passed the printout to her. Instead of *DA483H3*, the code now read *DA483 H3*.

She read it, then looked up. “So? It still looks like a code to me.”

“That’s because it is. And you and I both know what the code is.” He turned the book binding up so Erica could see it. On the white tape, in small black characters, was “N8107 H12.”

“You mean, he hid the notebook in the library?” Erica said.

“There have got to be over a million books in the university’s library. I bet 90% of them never get checked out. It’s the perfect hiding place. Let me have your keys. I’ll be back in half an hour.” He started to grab for her purse.

“Wait a minute, bud,” Erica said, sliding the purse off the table and into her lap. “Don’t you think the university campus might be one place they’re looking for you?”

“I thought you didn’t believe me.”

“Let’s just say I’m giving you the benefit of the doubt.”

“Erica, I have to go. If we can get that notebook, it might be the evidence we need to take to the police. I’ll buy a cap for a disguise.”

“With your height, they could spot you from across the quad. You’d lead them right to it.”

“We don’t have a choice. I need to get there before they figure it out, too. Otherwise, we’ll have nothing.”

“You’re overlooking the obvious. I can go.”

Kevin shook his head. “No way. You’re in this as much as you need to be.”

“Now don’t get chauvinistic on me. It’s simple. They know what you look like. They don’t know what I look like.”

“How do you know? What if they traced the call?”

“Then it will take a few hours for them to get a picture of me. Besides they haven’t seen me in person.”

Kevin didn’t like it, but she was right. He would be identified too easily. And they *didn’t* have a choice. It was either get the notebook or...

“All right,” he said grudgingly. “Do you have your mace with you?”

She pulled a cylinder out of her purse. “Armed and ready,” she said with a smile. “Maybe I’ll even get to use what I learned in karate class...”

“Will you stop joking. This is serious.”

“I *am* serious. Two years of karate. I have a green belt.”

“Why are you doing this?” Kevin asked.

“Because you’re in trouble, and I help friends in trouble.”

“Thanks. Be careful.”

Erica gave his hand a squeeze. “I’ll be fine. If I’m not back in an hour, send the cavalry.”

CHAPTER 11

The closest spot Erica could find to South Texas University's Campbell library was still a quarter of a mile away, and the temperature was inching toward one hundred. She took a barrette from the glove box and clipped her hair into a pony tail before getting out of the car.

She tried to make some sense of Kevin's story as she hiked through the university's main entrance. She wanted to believe him, but the idea was just so farfetched, even preposterous. No one wanted to kill a college student. Kevin admitted as much. Their relationship had never gone past friendship, but it wasn't because he was odd. Far from it. He was one of the most well-adjusted men she'd ever met. It was just that after four months of getting to know him, there still seemed to be a barrier there. Distance. In some ways she thought he understood her better than anyone else did, but in others she felt like she barely knew him.

Despite the distance, Kevin was the best friend she had. There was potential for more. She saw that in the way he looked at her when they talked. She just wasn't sure if she had the will to risk their friendship.

She'd almost decided to spend the hour doing something else, pretending she had gone to the library, but she knew she would never be able to look him in the face and lie to him like that.

Which left actually looking for a library book marked “DA483 H3.” She still had no idea what she would do after she told him there was nothing there.

Several other people dotted the campus, mostly students enjoying the last days of the break between summer and fall terms. A few older men in suits and sports jackets strode purposefully across the quad, no doubt professors returning to their offices.

Erica reached the shadowed portico leading to the library’s main entrance and took off her sunglasses. She looked at the number scrawled on the piece of paper in her hand and shook her head as she opened the door, wondering what type of book she would be looking for.

Across the main quad, a suntanned blond in his mid-twenties, wearing a gray suit and sunglasses and saddled with the name Vernon Francowiak, watched the woman entering the main library. His gait never slowed as he saw her disappear into the library’s foyer, then he abruptly changed directions when he was sure he wouldn’t be noticed.

Franco had been posted at the university to look for any signs of the student or his girlfriend, a picture of whom he had been faxed only half an hour before from Bern. His boss, Stan Wilson, was watching the building where Hamilton did the research with Ward. At the briefing this morning, Franco had been told to roam the campus in the hopes of seeing one or both of them, in case they tried seeking help from a friend at the university. Another operative was at the hospital with the same instructions.

The woman he’d seen enter the library fit the description, but he’d been too far away to make a positive ID from the photograph he’d been given. He wasn’t going to pass up any chance he might have of making a few points with Lobec, who Franco knew had Tarnwell’s ear. He

retreated to the cover of the physics building's shadows before removing a small, but sophisticated, walkie-talkie from his pocket.

He clicked the button on the side of the device, which was set to communicate scrambled messages with one of its matched handsets.

After a second's pause, he heard, "This is Wilson. Go ahead."

"This is Franco. I have a possible on the woman." A click when he released the talk button told Wilson it was okay to speak.

"Where?"

"She just entered the main library."

"When?"

"Ten seconds ago. Should I follow?"

"No, the library's too big. She's got too much of a head start. She might come out before you find her."

"But it hasn't been that long..."

"I said no."

Franco swore under his breath, eager to get a chance to prove himself.

"How sure are you about her identity?" Wilson said.

"I was about a hundred yards away. Just a possible."

Another short pause. "The library has only one entrance. Wait outside to make a positive. If it's her, buzz me twice." He meant the walkie-talkie's vibrating ringer; an auditory alarm would have been too suspicious to passersby.

"Then what?"

“Follow her until I join you. We’ll make contact together.” Franco knew better. Wilson wanted to take the glory for himself.

“She looks like a fucking student. I can take her.”

Wilson’s voice hardened. “You have your orders. Understood?”

Franco clenched his teeth. “Yes, sir.”

He replaced the walkie-talkie and shifted the fake HPD badge to his front pocket. As he walked toward the library’s entrance, he deftly unsnapped the restraining clip on his shoulder holster. No way was he going to let Wilson take the credit for this one.

Muted colors and warm lights bathed the library’s information center. The lone staffer at the island reference desk looked up as Erica entered the room and then went back to reading his paperback when she didn’t approach him. Computer terminals lined the room’s walls, and Erica took the nearest one.

She stood as she typed the search parameters into the library’s electronic search system. Several seconds passed as the system processed her request, and then green characters scrolled up the screen. She was startled when she read the four titles listed under the “DA483 H3” call number.

DA483 H3 B6 Patriotic Lady

DA483 H3 H3 Emma in Blue

DA483 H3 L63 Emma Hamilton

DA483 H3 B6 Emma Lady Hamilton

She hadn't really expected to find any books under that call number, but the name Hamilton in the last two titles had to be more than a coincidence. Her stomach started fluttering. Of course, it could still be a prank, with a goofy note left in one of the books, but now she was intensely curious as to what she might find. She headed for the nearest stairwell. The "D" section was located in the basement.

Rather than instilling a sense of wonder as edifices of learning and freedom, libraries always gave Erica the creeps, and this one didn't change her mind. The tall bookshelves interfered with the fluorescent lighting, which wasn't especially effective to begin with. Occasionally, bulbs flickered or were burned out, and the whisper of her Keds along the linoleum was the only sound she could hear, making it seem as if she'd entered a dank catacomb. She could almost imagine that she was the first to set eyes on this place in a thousand years.

I can see why this would make a good hiding place for something, Erica thought as she rounded the corner of the stacks where she would find her books. *I bet at most two people have been in this stack in the past three months. Including me.*

She ran her fingers across the bindings as she walked down the stack. CS. CT. D. DA. She stopped and looked at each shelf, bending over until she found the bottom row. There it was. DA483 H3. There were four books with that call number. Nothing seemed out of place, no notebook amongst them. She reached down and took the first title, quickly flipping through it to see if there was a note contained inside. Nothing. And no notes written on the book itself, either. She replaced it and did the same with the next book.

With no luck on the next two, she picked up the last one, grunting as she did so because it was about as thick as the other three combined. Erica wondered aloud how this much could be

written on somebody she'd never heard of. She flipped through it with the same negative results. It was huge though; she could have missed something. Erica grabbed it by the covers and shook it to see if a note would fall out. As she was shaking, she lost her grip on the heavy book, and it tumbled to the floor.

She crouched down to retrieve it, embarrassed that she might have damaged it. It landed on one of the covers, however, and wasn't harmed. She was about to put it back, somewhat disappointed that she hadn't found anything, when she noticed a small piece of yellow paper toward the back of the empty slot where she had removed the book. She hadn't noticed before because the ledge above had blocked her view of the back of the shelf when she was merely bending at the waist and not crouching.

Skeptical, but still curious, Erica reached into the slot and found that the paper was partially covered by the other books labeled "DA483 H3." She removed them and could now see that they covered a large Post-It note, folded and taped down on the bookshelf. She tugged at it until the tape peeled off the surface.

The note felt unusually heavy, and as she unfolded it, a key fell into her palm. Although she didn't have one, Erica knew that this was a key to a safe deposit box. Stenciled on it was the number "645." On the note, only three words were written: First Texas Bank.

No one would hide a key to a safe deposit box in the library. It was absurd. Yet here it was. The only reason would be because its owner had to hide it quickly. She immediately regretted doubting Kevin, afraid now that men really were after him—maybe her too. She was shaking as she walked back toward the stairway.

"Miss!" said a voice from behind her.

She whirled to see a tall, gaunt man in jeans standing at the end of the stack. Her heart raced.

“If you are going to use our facilities,” he said, pointing at the books she had left on the floor, “the least you can do is clean up after yourself.”

Franco felt the vibration signal on the walkie-talkie. He retreated farther behind the pillar from which he had been watching the front entrance of the library and pulled the walkie-talkie from his pocket.

While keeping an eye on the entrance, he said, “This is Franco. Go ahead.”

“It’s Wilson. I just got an update from Hornung. We’ve got more info on the woman.” At the briefing this morning, they’d only had the woman’s picture, and they thought Hamilton would be found shortly. But later they’d found out that Hamilton had gotten away from Lobec and Bern. Franco didn’t know many of the details. The last he’d heard was that they were at a stakeout, ready to use their Barnett and Kaplan identities to try and capture him.

“Her name’s Erica Jensen,” Wilson continued. “She’s a fourth-year med student at South Texas and is probably dating Hamilton.”

“So it’s possible she’s here to study in the library.”

“Correct. Remember. Just wait outside, and don’t let her get out of your sight once you make a positive ID. We already lost our boy once today. She’s probably the best way to find him.”

“Acknowledged.”

Franco replaced the walkie-talkie. Just as he did so, the front door of the library opened, and a woman burst through, out of breath. She was dark-haired, approximately five foot eight, with

bright green, almond-shaped eyes that darted from side to side but did not see him behind the pillar. The T-shirt and shorts she wore conformed well to her lithe, athletic body, and her high cheekbones and delicate jawline enhanced an already pretty face. The overall effect was a girl-next-door attractiveness that made her easily identifiable from this distance.

Franco looked at the photo in his hand and smiled. He now had a positive. It was Erica Jensen.

Erica's eyes darted around as she hurried back towards her car. The man that had scared her minutes before had only been one of the librarians, but she was still worried about the prospects of meeting one of Kevin's policemen. Her right hand clutched her purse and the safe deposit box key inside it, and her left was wrapped tightly around the mace canister.

Footsteps rushed at her from behind. She turned, hoping it was only a student late for an appointment. Her breathing stopped when she saw a handsome young man wearing a suit. He had his hand raised. She couldn't see what he was holding, but he started to call to her.

"Miss Jensen! I need to speak with you!"

She didn't recognize him and had no idea how he knew who she was. She almost turned to run when she realized that he was flashing a badge towards her.

He came to a stop in front of her. A fine sheen of sweat glistened on his face.

"Miss Jensen, my name is Detective Watson with the HPD. It's urgent that I speak with you regarding Kevin Hamilton."

After Kevin's story about the police detectives, she didn't know what to think. The badge looked authentic, but then she had never seen a real badge before. If he wasn't a policeman, he was very convincing.

Nervously, she looked around again. She could see only two other people. Both were far away and moving out of the quad.

"What do you want?" she said. She could hear the nervousness in her voice, but she couldn't do much about it.

"Actually, this concerns both of you. I think it would be better if we discussed it at the station." He motioned in a direction away from her car. She didn't move.

"First, I want to know what this is about."

"It's in connection with Dr. Michael Ward's death last night. We have reason to believe Mr. Hamilton might have some information that would be helpful in the case."

"Why?" Erica asked.

"I'm afraid I can't discuss the specifics of the case. Have you seen Mr. Hamilton this morning?"

She wasn't going to commit herself just yet. "No, I just talked to him a little over the phone around 9:30. He said a Detective Robley was going to call him. Do you know him?"

"Robley? The name doesn't sound familiar. But I'm with the arson squad, investigating Dr. Ward's death as a possible arson. Detective Robley is probably in another division. Do you know why Mr. Hamilton would call him?"

The fact that he didn't know Robley might not mean anything, but she was still wary. "He said it had something to do with Dr. Ward, but I don't know what."

“Then I’m sure you can understand why I have to speak with him. I’m going to have to ask you to come with me. I’d like you to help me locate Mr. Hamilton. As I said, it’s very urgent.” Again, he motioned toward the west end of the campus.

She started to slowly walk in that direction with Detective Watson beside her. She decided she had to be convinced.

“Detective Watson, there was one other thing that might help. Kevin said he was talking to two police officers. I can’t quite remember their names. I think one was Barnett. You might try one of them. He might even be with them.”

Watson seemed to think for a second. Then he said, “You must be talking about Detectives Barnett and Kaplan. We could try contacting them when...”

Erica whipped her hand up and blasted him in the eyes with the mace. He sank to his knees, his hands went to his face, and he began screaming. As she ran, she could hear him yelling after her.

“Goddam bitch!”

No one was in the quad anymore. She bolted for the nearest building, passing a sign that said “Cooper Physics Building.” She pulled furiously on the door, but it wouldn’t budge. Locked. She ran down to the next door. This one was wedged open with a piece of wood. She yanked it open, pausing only to look back at the police impersonator, who was now on his feet just forty yards behind her.

The literature that came with the mace said a full-grown man would be incapacitated for twenty minutes. Either the claims were exaggerated or her aim must have been off and she didn’t spray the chemical right in his face.

She kicked the wedge out and ran down the hallway. Turning, she was horrified to see that, instead of slamming shut, the door had hydraulic hinges. It was closing, but excruciatingly slowly.

Ahead, she saw a stairway and decided to take it. Over her footsteps echoing on the stone floor, she could hear Watson slam the door open, sputtering as he did so. It sounded like he tripped and fell as he crossed the door's threshold, but she didn't dare turn to look. She took the steps two at a time.

The second floor hallway was dark, but some sunlight filtered through the office transoms. The stairway was about midway between the ends of the hall and topped out on this floor. She randomly chose left and started twisting knobs in an effort to find an unlocked door.

After trying three doors unsuccessfully, she came to the last room in the hall, whose massive metal door was equipped with a lever instead of a knob. She pushed down on it and the latch clicked. Someone had left it unlocked. She pushed in and slammed the door behind her. She scrabbled for the deadbolt switch and then realized it needed a key to lock from this side as well. Two wooden wedges were on the floor, probably used to prop the door open. She jammed them under the door. They'd hold for a minute, but not against sustained pounding.

Looking around the room, she now knew why it had a door different from the others on the floor. Surrounding her was thousands of dollars worth of complex machinery and gadgets, the purpose of which she couldn't hope to decipher. Along one wall, storage cabinets stretched from floor to ceiling, and a huge metal box took up a quarter of the 30 foot by 20 foot room. Jumbles of cable connected many of the devices together, and she almost tripped on one as she searched for a telephone. Because there was so much electronic equipment, it took her several seconds to realize that there wasn't even a desk in this laboratory, let alone a phone.

As she frantically hunted for a hiding place, she noticed that a door on the metal box was slightly open. On a table next to it sat a heavy-duty padlock with the key still in it. The box's door had three steps leading up to it, putting the bottom of the door at mid-thigh level. She examined the door's handle mechanism, trying to ignore the fact that Watson was going to be pounding at the laboratory door any second. The thick steel handle had an eyelet that lined up with a similar eyelet in the door when the handle was closed. The padlock was big enough to go through both eyelets and lock the door. Erica opened the door wider and climbed the steps to look inside.

She'd seen a room like it once before, while she was taking introductory physics. It was called an anechoic chamber, used to study sound in an environment which was almost completely free of any echo. Large foam wedges covered the floor three feet below. A wire mesh was suspended above the wedges for walking and mounting equipment. Only some of the wall and none of ceiling was covered by the sound-absorbing wedges. In the far corner, construction materials and a sheet of plywood leaned against the wall. Apparently, the chamber wasn't finished.

Erica examined the inside of the door, hoping she could lock herself in the chamber until whoever was using the room returned. The door was actually composed of two sections, one that swung into the outer room, and a second insulating door that swung into the chamber. It was covered on the inside by more of the foam wedges. Both doors had handles on the inside, but neither had eyelets for a padlock. She could close the doors, but there was no way to lock them from the inside.

Faintly, she heard pounding outside the chamber.

Franco had stopped at the top of the stairs, seeing the door slam on the room at the end of the hall. He removed the walkie-talkie while wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his jacket and repeatedly pressed the button calling Wilson.

“Wilson here. Go ahead.”

“It’s her. Goddammit! The bitch maced me!”

“What! You idiot! I told you not to contact her without me.”

“She maced me when she came out of the library,” Franco had lied. “She started to run. I had to go after her.”

“Did she get away?”

“No, I’m in the physics building. I’ve got her trapped in one of the rooms on the second floor, but it’s going to be tougher getting her to the car now. Get over here and help me out.”

“On my way.”

Franco had run down to the room, pulling out his Glock 19. With the automatic raised, he gently pushed down on the lever. He heard the click of the latch disengaging and pushed the door slightly. No deadbolt.

He threw the full weight of his body against it, ready to crouch and duck another mace attack. He’d shoot her, but not to kill, much as he’d like to. Expecting to hit a yielding door, he wasn’t ready for the sudden stop almost immediately after the door had begun to open. His head smacked against the steel with a resounding thud, and he almost fell to his knees again.

Holding his head, he shook out the stars. Maybe his aim would be off just this once, and there would be a fatal accident. Lobec wouldn't like it, but tough shit. Franco had had just about enough of Erica Jensen.

He threw his shoulder against the door, this time anticipating the shock. On the third try, the door gave slightly. Three more times and it flew open.

He crouched as he'd originally intended, but no mace came. A quick look around the room. She wasn't in sight.

Then he heard it. A faint, almost nonexistent, beeping. It was coming from the direction of the open door of a large metal chamber in the opposite corner of the room. The sound of a doctor's pager. It abruptly stopped, and he realized the hospital must have paged the med student. Tough luck for her. It didn't matter, though. He would have found her anyway.

He eased over to the door and opened it wider. He peeked around the corner. The chamber was faintly lit, but he could tell that the Jensen woman was not in view. He crept up the stairs, his back to the door, the Glock held at arm's length.

As he stepped onto the wire mesh, he still couldn't see her. But he knew where she was. A 4 by 8 sheet of plywood leaned against the far corner, plenty of room for someone to hide behind.

"Miss Jensen, why don't you come out? I don't want to hurt you, but I will if I have to. And if you spray me again, I *will* hurt you."

No response. This bitch was tougher than he thought. He slowly walked over to the plywood, then hooked his foot under it and kicked it aside.

The woman wasn't there. Only two things sat on the wire mesh: a pager and a key.

Shit!

He whipped around to see the door swinging shut.

Erica pulled on the chamber's outer door as hard as she could, but the enormous metal frame was as heavy as it looked and only with effort started to shut. She didn't dare look into the chamber, but she heard the police impersonator curse as he realized what happened. The lock in her hand poked her skin, but she pulled harder.

The door was almost closed, traveling at a tremendous rate, when a hand shot through the opening. The man's weight fell against the other side of the door, but it wasn't enough to halt the inertia of the door's massive bulk. His hand was crushed as the door slammed it against the jamb. He let out a scream, and the weight momentarily lifted. The hand disappeared into the chamber.

Erica used the opportunity to latch the door. As she tried to thread the lock through the handle mechanism, gunshots rang out, and she almost fell from the stairs in surprise. She looked down and saw with relief that the bullets, unable to penetrate the thick door, only made small protrusions on her side. Her fumbling hands finally got the lock in place just as the man began pounding on the other side, and she closed it with a satisfying click.

Suspecting that she didn't have much time before his friends arrived, she collected her purse and headed for the exit. The impersonator's muted curses faded quickly as she ran down the hall.

CHAPTER 12

Clay Tarnwell leaned into the drive, never taking his eyes off the ball, following through with the form he'd learned at Pinehurst. As soon as the ball left the tee, he knew he'd sliced it. The ball curved gracefully away from the center of the fairway and toward the stand of ashes lining the right side of the rough. It bounced once and then came to rest a good 200 yards from the green. He'd be lucky to make a bogey on this hole, let alone par. It was a perfect shot, exactly where he'd wanted it.

A white-haired gentleman sporting a straw hat, lime green pants, and a well-rounded paunch started laughing as soon as the ball hit the ground.

"If I didn't know you any better, Clay," said the sweating man as he took his driver from the bag in the back of the golf cart, "I'd say you shanked that one on purpose."

"You're right, Rex," said Tarnwell, trying to sound disgusted. "And the next one is going in the left sand trap if I can make it. What do think? Would a 3 iron do it?"

Rex Hanson laughed again, and then lined up at the tee. After taking sufficient time to level his swing, he drove a beautiful shot at least fifty yards past Tarnwell's directly down the fairway.

Tarnwell shook his head as if to curse his luck, but he could have easily beaten his companion, probably by at least eight strokes. He played a four handicap but he had intentionally been missing the harder shots on the previous 12 holes. Now he was coming even with Hanson again and saw a good chance to stay behind for a while, so he took it.

Not that Tarnwell wasn't competitive. He was. Very. But only at one thing. Making money. All this he-man stuff was bullshit. Sure, he was good at it. A natural athlete all his life, Tarnwell had been gifted enough to play linebacker at the University of Michigan until a knee injury ended his career. He'd gotten a lot of sympathy at the time, but one thing nobody seemed to realize was that he didn't really care.

Football was a means to an end, the method of putting himself through school, his major in both business and chemistry. That was the ticket out of his father's shadow, the way to make even more than the vaunted Bernard Tarnwell ever dreamed of having. All his life, Clayton Tarnwell saw the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow, and he couldn't care less how beautiful that rainbow was. If it could lead him to the pot, fine. Otherwise, it was just in the way.

And losing to this shithead was just another means to that end. If he had to lose a few rounds of golf, so be it. As long as it made Rex Hanson happy and ready to close a deal, he'd piss into the wind for all he cared.

They climbed into the cart with Tarnwell driving. Another of Hanson's little ways of attempting to show who was in control. He never drove his own cars, preferring to leave that menial chore to his underlings.

Tarnwell was glad to drive, owning six vintage Ferraris himself, often driving one of them to work. Besides, he knew it would make Hanson happy.

“So, Clay,” said Hanson as they drove, “you really think you can pull this merger off? If you don’t, there’s no way I could help save you or your company. Your credit would be ruined. You wouldn’t be able to get a five dollar loan with ten dollars collateral.”

Tarnwell thought he would get this response, which is exactly why he was trying to butter the old man up by losing.

“Rex, I know what I’m doing. I’ve given this a lot of thought, and there’s just no way I can lose. Not with my ace. When the banks realize what this new invention means, they’ll be throwing money at me.”

“Clay, the only reason I’m here, letting you pretend you’re losing to me, is that your father was a good friend of mine. You were always a suck-up and a cheat. But you were also loyal to your father and extremely good at making money. I never understood why Bernie didn’t leave you his company. I suppose it was his attempt to teach you some values, late as it was, most likely the same reason he made you pay for your own education, but I was probably as surprised as you were. Now you’ve built up your own company, almost as successful as your father’s. I just don’t want to see you blow it, son.”

The line about being almost as successful as his father grated on Tarnwell, but he managed to hold back a sneer. His father had built up a mining company from scratch and then sold it for \$200 million. When his father died in Clayton Tarnwell’s senior year of college, the will left him with a pittance, less than \$500,000, with the rest going to charity. Tarnwell was furious, betrayed by his own father to whom he had shown unwavering devotion. He had used that money to start his own company, Tarnwell Mining and Chemical, just to show the world he was even better at making money than Bernard Tarnwell. Now he was a week away from proving that point.

“This buyout is important,” Tarnwell said. “If it doesn’t come through, it’ll take me two years to get up to full production on Adamas. Forrestal Chemical has the facilities I need now. I’ve been trying to buy those facilities, but they won’t sell. If I had them, I could be producing in two months. The only other choice is to buy the company. And without your support, I’ll never get the loans I need for the leveraged buyout.”

“You’re sure this Adamas process works? How has testing been?”

Tarnwell pulled to a stop near his ball. “Final validation is taking place as we speak. We should know the results by Tuesday. But I’ve seen the process myself. It works. Tarnwell Mining and Chemical already has an invention disclosure out, and the patent process will be well under way this week.”

“I certainly trust your business sense if nothing else. I know you wouldn’t do anything to con me.” Hanson looked at Tarnwell as if posing a question.

“Of course not. This is the wisest investment you’ll ever make.”

Hanson paused and then nodded. “I leave on a business trip Monday afternoon. Come to my office first thing Monday morning. We’ll talk to Wayne Haddam over at First Texas. I’m sure we’ll be able to work out a favorable agreement.”

“Thanks, Rex,” Tarnwell said as he climbed out of the cart. “You won’t be disappointed.”

“I better not be.”

CHAPTER 13

Kevin looked around nervously as Erica punched her code into the ATM. The vestibule was partially enclosed, but he could see Kirby Drive easily from his position, as easily as the passing motorists could see him. He didn't like being exposed like this, especially when using an electronic device that could be traced.

Erica removed the maximum \$300 from the receptacle and retrieved her card.

After she had picked Kevin up and told him what had happened at the university, they'd agreed that the people they were dealing with were probably resourceful enough to trace their credit cards. They hadn't discussed what to do next, but it seemed like a good idea to have as much cash on hand as possible, so they headed to an ATM that Erica didn't normally use. Since Barnett and Kaplan had taken Kevin's wallet, there was no way to get the \$86 in his checking account.

"It'll be another 24 hours before I can take any more out," Erica said.

"I hope you don't mind that we're doing this," said Kevin, as they walked toward the Honda.

“I’ve got some extra saved up. We’ll be OK.” He thought that the last phrase meant more than the money, perhaps trying to reassure herself that the entire situation would be all right. He could tell that she was still unnerved by her close call.

When they were back in the car, Erica sat staring at the steering wheel as if in a trance.

“What now?” she said. She had already called the hospital and told them she couldn’t come in for her ER rotation this afternoon, making up the excuse that there was a death in the family. Which almost came true.

“Start driving,” Kevin said. “If they’ve tapped into your account, they may know we just made a withdrawal from this location.”

Erica started the car and turned south onto Kirby. “What do you think the chances are that they’ll find this car? They probably know my license plate number by now.”

“As long as we stay away from anywhere we usually go,” Kevin said, “it’ll be coincidence if they see us. And if they find us on some random street, then either our luck is incredibly bad, or they have so much intelligence or manpower that we’ll never get away from them. The question is, how do we get into that safe deposit box on Monday?”

Erica seemed to come back to her senses and looked at him. “Ever since I found the key I’ve been thinking about that. And I only came up with two possibilities. We can either give the key to the police...”

“No way. As soon as we say it’s from Ward, it’ll get back to Robley. They’ll just think it’s another prank.”

“We could drop it off anonymously,” Erica said.

“What if the police just mail it to the bank? Who knows what’ll happen. It’s too risky.”

“Then the only other option is for you to use the key and open the safe deposit box.”

“Me?”

“Well, they’re not going to think I’m Michael Ward.”

“And you think I’ll do better?”

“One time you told me that you filled out so many forms for Dr. Ward that you probably signed his name better than he did.”

“That’s true, but so what? You think I’m going to walk in there and just sign my name and they’ll let me in? Come on!” Kevin threw his hands up.

“Why not? Banks are so big nowadays that the odds of the bank officer knowing any one customer are 100 to 1. And I’ve had a safe deposit box before. All they make you do is show them your ID and sign your name.”

“Hello McFly! One of those two is missing. I don’t even have my own driver’s license, let alone one that says Michael Ward.”

Erica rolled her eyes and gritted her teeth. “Fine. What do you want to do?”

Kevin started to say something and then stopped and closed his mouth.

“Are you through?”

Kevin knew he was letting his temper get out of hand. She was right to make him stop ranting and start thinking.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I’m just not in this kind of situation very often.”

“Me neither. But ER rotations make you deal with stress as efficiently as possible. Now, as I was about to say, we need to go get you a driver’s license, Dr. Ward.”

“And I guess you know how to do that,” Kevin said. He wasn’t being sarcastic. He knew she must have some sort of plan.

Erica just nodded and turned left, pointing the Honda towards the Astrodome.

* * *

As they passed the retracting gate of the Beechwood Manor apartment complex and entered its parking lot, Kevin’s thoughts returned to the flight from his own complex. So much had happened already that it seemed as if days had passed since he’d heard of Dr. Ward’s death. He glanced at the digital watch on his wrist. It had only been seven hours.

As they got out of the car, Kevin noticed a superficial similarity between his complex and this one. Perhaps they had been built by the same developer. But that’s where the similarity ended. The buildings here looked as if they hadn’t been painted in ten years, and the pool they walked past was dirty and full of leaves. He was amazed that the electric gate had still been working.

He still wasn’t sure that coming to this seedy area east of the Astrodome was a good idea. After leaving the bank, Erica had stopped to phone the guy they were about to meet to make sure that he was home. His name was Daryl Grotman, a University of Houston student she had treated a month ago for burns. Apparently, he had been concocting a contact explosive out of iodine and ammonia, one that was pressure sensitive. Kevin was familiar with the compound. Ammonium triiodide, powerful stuff.

Daryl said he had heard about it from another student and wanted to see if he could make it. During the mixing, which he conducted in his bedroom, he had the doors to his apartment open for ventilation and a breeze slammed the bedroom door shut. The change in air pressure was

enough to detonate the explosive. Luckily, he had been across the room at the time and only suffered burns to his arms. Still, the firefighters insisted that he go to the emergency room.

The guy didn't get out much, going on and on about every detail of his life as Erica bandaged him. He bragged to Erica about his side business and told her that if she ever needed any help, just call him. Erica hadn't taken it seriously. Patients often professed that kind of gratitude and made up all kinds of stories. But she couldn't forget the number Daryl had told her. 555-FAKE.

Luckily, Daryl had been there to answer their phone call. When she told him who she was, he remembered her immediately and said that there would be no problem helping them out. All they needed to do was stop and get a passport photo taken of Kevin, which they did on the way over.

As they walked up to 215G, they heard heavy metal blasting from the apartment. Kevin didn't recognize the band, but it was fairly hardcore. He wondered if the neighbors ever complained. Probably not.

After banging on the door three times, Erica tried the knob. It turned easily. She pushed it open.

Suddenly, as a chain stopped the door after only a few inches, the music turned off, and a shrill alarm began to wail. Erica jumped back in surprise, running into Kevin.

Just as suddenly, the alarm shut off, and they heard someone inside yelling, "Sorry! Sorry!"

The door shut again, the chain clinked, and then they were greeted by Daryl Grotman.

He was about the same height as Kevin, but at least twenty pounds thinner. To Kevin, he looked starved. Although he was a junior in college, Daryl looked almost ten years older because of a thinning crown and wild, wiry beard. The only clue to his age was excessive acne visible above his heavy, black-framed glasses and on the scarred cheeks above his beard. He wore

Birkenstock sandals, cutoff jeans shorts, and a black T-shirt festooned with tour dates for a band called Raging Sperm.

“There’s my doc! Look,” Daryl said, holding up his arms. “All healed thanks to you.”

“Hi again. This is the friend I was telling you about. Daryl Grotman, this is Kevin Hamilton.”

Daryl shook Kevin’s hand vigorously. “I hope you guys weren’t blown away by the alarm. I rigged the system myself. Been a lot of break-ins in this rat trap. I meant to turn it off ‘cause I knew you guys were coming over, but I got caught up with something. Come on in.”

Kevin followed Erica in and was so shocked, he practically stopped in his tracks. He was expecting to see pizza boxes littering the floor, trash everywhere, dishes piled in the sink. The way you think of a computer nerd living.

What met them was the cleanest, neatest apartment Kevin had ever seen. It wasn’t decorated to his taste, what with the posters of heavy metal bands like Butthole Surfers and Blood Junkies covering the walls and row upon alphabetically organized row of comic books. But otherwise, he could have walked into an issue of Better Homes and Gardens, albeit one which featured rooms with \$20,000 worth of computer equipment. Looking back at Daryl, Kevin noticed how spotless his clothes looked.

“Yeah, I know,” said Daryl. “Not what you pictured. I guess I’m just anal. Some of my friends think I’m kinda weird for it. Helps in my line of work, though.”

“What *is* your line of work?” asked Kevin.

“I thought Erica told you. I fake licenses. Sometimes other documents, passports, state IDs, but mostly licenses. I can do visas for six countries, but they take longer.”

“She did tell me. That’s why we’re here. But I didn’t think it was a business.”

“Well, it’s not something I’m going to do for the rest of my life. It sure helps pay the tuition, though. Computer science major, if you didn’t guess, although I’m getting a minor in criminal science.”

“Looks like you’re acing it,” Kevin muttered.

“How do you get so much business?” Erica asked, glaring at Kevin. “Aren’t you afraid of getting caught?”

“Not really. You see, I also work at one of the school’s mail rooms. My orders come through there from practically every school in Texas and Louisiana. All I do is pick out the envelopes addressed to my business name.”

“Which is?” Kevin said, knowing Daryl would tell them anyway.

“Dave Zugot. It makes it easy to pick them out of the pile. You know, I don’t do too many of these in person.” He pointed at Kevin. “You’ve got to be older than 21.”

“Actually, I need a different name on it.”

Daryl nodded as if familiar with the request. “Ah. Anyone in particular?”

“Yeah. A guy I’m trying to play a joke on.”

“Sure. Can I see the photos?”

Kevin handed them to him. After a quick inspection, Daryl slapped them onto a scanner and began to tap on the keyboard. Three minutes later, Kevin’s picture was on the computer monitor. A minute after that, Kevin’s face was superimposed over a Texas Department of Public Safety background curtain.

“Behold,” said Daryl, “the wonders of photo manipulation software in all its glory.”

“I have to admit,” said Kevin. “That’s pretty amazing. You’d never know it wasn’t taken at the DPS.”

Daryl smiled. “It slices, dices, juliennes, but wait there’s more.”

Erica pulled out her license and compared it to the picture on the screen. “That’s incredible. But how do you do the hologram on the plastic covering?”

“Not a problem. I’ve got a thousand just like that.” He showed them a box with hundreds of plastic sheaths, all carrying the holographic imprint of the state of Texas.

“Where did you...”

“That’s a little touchy. Let’s just say that there was a mixup at the printing plant and a few thousand too many were made. Now! How do you want the license to read?”

Kevin spoke. “Michael Jason Ward. Just make up the address and social security number. The phone book doesn’t have his new address yet, and I don’t know how we’d get his social security number.”

“You obviously haven’t gotten the picture, Kevin. It’s not a problem. Not many comp sci majors don’t know how to hack that kind of info. If you have a couple of minutes, we can make your license look like the real thing. It’ll take a little longer if you want his actual license number. The state computers are a little tougher than the credit bureaus.”

Kevin shook his head. “The social security number and address are good enough.”

Two minutes later, Kevin was looking at the credit record of his professor, complete with card numbers, outstanding loans, and personal information.

“Holy shit!” said Kevin. “Erica...”

“I see it.”

Kevin couldn't believe it. On top of payments on a Mercedes and a Lexus, Ward was three months into a home loan worth \$750,000. He was already a month behind.

"Man, you guys must be in some serious shit."

Kevin recoiled. "What do you mean?"

"Well, it's none of my business, but you must either be desperate, greedy, or weird to be impersonating a guy who died yesterday. And the last two don't fit Erica. Besides, a college professor doesn't make that kind of money."

Kevin and Erica exchanged worried looks.

"You'll still help us, won't you?" she asked.

"Hey, I'm not throwing any stones. Look around. I was just making an observation."

"We don't want to get you involved," said Kevin, his tension easing. "What I mean is, we *are* in a shitload of trouble, so you'll understand if we don't share much with you."

"No problem. I'm not sure I'd want to know anyway."

"Can you print that out for me?" Kevin said, pointing at the credit report on the monitor.

"It's already in the printer. So's your ID. All we need to do is have you sign it, and then laminate it."

"I'd like to ask another favor from you, Daryl," said Kevin, as he signed the fake license.

"Shoot." A homemade lamination heater gobbled up the paper license inserted into the holographic plastic sleeve.

"We were thinking earlier that we shouldn't be using our credit cards because the records might be available to the people that are after us."

“Smart move. If they have a halfway decent hacker, they can get into your credit card company’s database as easily as I accessed the credit bureau. Tracking you that way would be a cinch if you weren’t careful.”

Kevin looked at Erica, who furrowed her eyebrows in a puzzled expression. “Then maybe you can help us get a little breathing room.”

CHAPTER 14

After they finished their business with Daryl, Kevin and Erica needed to get supplies so they could hole up for the night. Kevin would have to treat his contacts, but his lens storage case and cleansers were at the apartment. They found a Wal-Mart and bought his supplies as well as a change of clothes for the two of them.

They'd decided not to call their friends, not only because they didn't want to endanger them, but also because they didn't want to go anywhere they might logically be found. That meant they had to lie low for the next day and a half. They would retrieve whatever was in the safe deposit box when the bank opened on Monday morning.

Erica wheeled the Honda into the back parking lot of the seedy-looking Tidal Moon motel. They would have stayed at a nicer place, but this was the first one they'd found that didn't require identification. The grimy man at the registration desk made them pay cash up front.

While Erica dumped their meager belongings on the bed, Kevin locked the door behind them, then peeked through the torn and spotted drapes. From their first floor viewpoint, he could see that it would be difficult to spot the car from the road. Satisfied, he pulled the drapes so they were completely closed. Although it was safe for now, he didn't want to get complacent.

Erica announced that she wanted to take a shower before she ate and began running water in the bathroom. Ravenous, Kevin opened the bag from Antone's and began munching on a shrimp po-boy.

As he ate and sipped his drink, he watched TV to see if he could find any more news on Dr. Ward or Herbert Stein. He saw stories about each of them, but nothing more than they had learned earlier. Apparently the police were still treating the fire as an accident without ruling out the possibility of arson.

Kevin sat dejected, listening to the water run in the bathroom. He tried to understand the reason for what was going on, but the more he thought about it, the more confused he got. He could now reasonably assume that Dr. Ward and his wife were murdered. But why? What was in the safe deposit box that somebody would kill for? How did Dr. Ward get the money to buy that house and car? And why did he write that email to Kevin? They wouldn't find out the answers to any of the questions until Monday morning.

The worst part was that he had dragged Erica into this with him. He thought about leaving, doing the rest of it himself, but how would that help? Erica was already involved up to the hilt. She wouldn't be any safer without him than she would be by staying with him. Besides, once they had more proof—whatever that was—together their story would be much more convincing than from either of them alone.

The water shut off, and Kevin heard Erica take the towel and begin to dry herself.

"Any news?" she said from the bathroom.

"No, nothing new."

She came out with a towel wrapped tightly around her, accentuating her figure. It barely reached her legs. Despite being exhausted, both mentally and physically, by the day's events, Kevin couldn't help feeling both turned-on and embarrassed at the same time. She grabbed the extra-long T-shirt she had bought and retreated to the bathroom.

"I'm starving," she said. "I hope the sandwiches are good."

"Of course they are. Haven't you ever had a po-boy?"

Erica came out of the bathroom, her hair still wet. The T-shirt was almost as revealing as the towel. "You forget. I didn't grow up in Texas." Using the wrapper as a place mat on the stained table, she sat and began to eat one of the sandwiches. "Hey, these are good."

"See. You should trust me."

"I'll take that under advisement."

"Good. Now it's my turn." Kevin took his shower while Erica finished her po-boy. After he was done, he put on a T-shirt and boxers from their stop at the store.

When he came out of the bathroom, Erica was lying in bed holding the remote.

"Now I remember why I stopped watching TV," she said, turning it off and putting the remote on the nightstand.

"I thought it was because of med school." Kevin pulled a pillow off the bed and walked over to the chair.

"That too. What are you doing?"

"Getting ready to go to sleep."

"Over there?"

"Yeah. Well, you know, one bed..." He shrugged. "I thought..."

“Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not going to make you sleep in that chair.”

“You sure?”

“I just took a shower, so I can’t smell too bad. Are you afraid I’m going to bite you?”

“No, just trying to be chivalrous.”

“Well, stop it. We’re both adults. Now come on.”

Kevin climbed into bed as Erica switched off the lamp. The bed seemed even smaller now that he was in it. Erica was only a foot away.

“Isn’t that more comfortable?” she said.

“Mm-hm,” Kevin responded, although he felt extremely uncomfortable. She was turned towards him, her light breathing raising the hairs on his neck, the warmth of her body flowing to his.

“Do you think we’ll get out of this?” she said, her voice groggy with fatigue.

Kevin wanted to lie and say that everything would be all right, but he didn’t think she was asking to be reassured. She wanted the truth. “I don’t know. If we can get into the safe deposit box, I think we have a shot at it.”

“Ha ha.”

“Sorry.”

“That’s okay. I’m too tired to think about it any more anyway.” Within a minute she was asleep. She had the med student gift for being able to sleep anywhere at any time.

Kevin gazed at her profile outlined by the weak light coming through a crack in the curtain and envied her. He stayed awake a long time.

* * *

“This is it,” Lobec said, pointing at the Best Western. The last of the twilight was dwindling. The clock on the bank across the street flashed 9:03.

“You sure?” Bern replied, turning the rental car into the motel’s parking lot. “Mitch said there were two along this strip.”

“He also said it was the one closest to the interstate. The next one is almost in downtown New Orleans. Furthermore, it matches the directions from the airport. Go in and see if they are here.”

Bern climbed out and lumbered into the lobby. Lobec saw him flash his police ID. That seemed to get the clerk’s attention, and he began tapping at the computer’s keyboard. After a few minutes, Bern trotted back out to the car.

“This is it, all right. But they haven’t checked in yet. Probably just getting some dinner first. I’ll bet we have them in less than two hours. What do you think?”

“I will be surprised if it’s this easy.”

“Man, you’re hard to please. Mitch said they made the reservation at this motel six hours ago, guaranteed it with the girl’s credit card. Then they stopped in Baton Rouge for gas two hours ago, also paid with the girl’s credit card. What more do you want?”

“I want them in this car with us. When that happens, I will be satisfied. Not a moment earlier.”

Lobec was right to be cautious. An hour and half passed with no sign of the couple. He was thinking that he’d wait another half hour and no more when his cellular phone beeped.

“Yes.”

“It’s Mitch. Thought you might like to know. Erica Jensen just canceled the reservation at the Best Western. She also just charged \$11.58 for gas in Biloxi, Mississippi five minutes ago.”

“Has she made any other reservations?”

“No. But if they stay at another motel without making a guaranteed reservation, all they’ll do is make an imprint tonight. It won’t be run through the machine until tomorrow morning.”

“That’s no good. They’ll be gone before we can get to it. They must be going this way for a reason. Check to see if they have any family or friends in the area.”

“I’m already searching the Biloxi area for matches.”

“No. Search Mississippi, then Alabama, Georgia, and Florida.” Lobec heard muffled curses at the end of the line. “Anything else?”

“Yeah. Jensen called the hospital to tell them she wouldn’t be in today or tomorrow. At their apartments, one call was made to each answering machine. The one to Hamilton’s was a guy named Nigel asking if he wanted to grab some dinner. The one to Jensen’s was a telemarketer. Neither machine was checked for messages.”

“Do we have the trace set up?”

“All ready. The machine doesn’t even have to answer. I love Caller ID.”

“Fine. Advise me when you have something.”

Lobec terminated the signal and began to dial another number.

“Who’re you calling?” Bern asked.

“The Gulfstream.”

“We going back to Houston?”

“No. Biloxi.”

CHAPTER 15

For the next day and a half, Kevin and Erica bided their time until the bank opened on Monday morning. They drove around or ate in quiet out of the way restaurants, any place where they wouldn't see familiar faces, then spent another awkward night in a motel.

Kevin had looked in the phone book on Sunday and found that there were seven First Texas branches within five miles of the campus. Luckily, Daryl was as skillful as he claimed and helped them find the correct branch. Ward had only one deposit box with First Texas, but no accounts or loans. The bank was located in the Village, next to the Rice University campus, and the safe deposit box had been leased only two months before. Ward had used a different bank from the one he normally patroned near South Texas. No one would know he had the box unless they knew where to look. At ten after nine on Monday, Erica stopped the Honda next to the huge bank's front entrance.

"This shouldn't take long," Kevin said, glancing at his watch. He was supposed to be at the graduate school an hour ago to meet with Dean Baker. "Damn!"

"What?"

“Nothing. I’m just ready for this whole business to be over with. I hope your idea works. The last thing we need is for them to call the police.”

“I guess it’s possible the bank officer knows Ward, but I doubt it. They get people opening and closing boxes all the time. This branch is so big, you probably won’t even get the same person that helped him lease the box.”

“Probably. Thanks.” Kevin pulled in a deep breath. “Cross your fingers.”

Kevin stepped out of the Honda and walked into the immense lobby. Even at this early hour, the bank was bustling with activity. Several lines were already forming at the teller windows, and well-dressed men and women moved about with determined authority. Kevin was dressed in a polo-type shirt, khaki pants, and loafers. He had bought the clothes yesterday in the hope that they would make him look more like someone who would have a safe deposit box.

Standing next to the central pillar, a security guard surveyed the lobby in slow glances. Kevin avoided his eyes and walked past. He clasped the fake ID in his pocket tightly.

He approached one of the dozen desks situated near the vault. Seated behind it was a young brunette with a name tag that said “Martha Warsett” and then below it “Management Trainee.” She looked up at Kevin and smile broadly.

“Can I help you, sir?”

“Yes,” Kevin said as he sat. “I would like to get into my safe deposit box.”

She turned toward the terminal on her desk. “Your name.”

This was it. “Michael Ward.” He bounced his foot, praying that she didn’t recognize the name.

She typed the name into the computer. After a second, she turned back to him. “Yes, Mr. Ward. Box 645.”

Kevin stifled a sigh of relief. She didn’t know who Ward really was.

As she opened a drawer to her left to retrieve some papers, she said, “I’ll just need to see two forms of ID and we’ll get you signed in.”

Kevin felt as if he’d been punched in the kidneys.

“I...I only brought my driver’s license.” He pulled the license out of his pocket and showed her.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Ward. We require two IDs. Several incidents of fraud have forced us to make that change. It’s for our customers’ safety. I hope you understand.”

Kevin didn’t want to chance going back to Daryl Grotman and getting another ID made. He’d risk coming back and getting the person who had opened the account for Ward. “I really need to get into my box. My tuition is due today, and I have a bond in my box that I need to cash. Is there any way you can make an exception?”

“I’m sorry, sir. Any form of ID will be acceptable. Credit card, student ID,...”

“I’ll have to go all the way back to my apartment, and by that time it’ll be too late...”

Kevin felt a hand grab his left shoulder. “What are you doing here?” a female voice said.

He spun and was stunned to see a short blonde with her hair pinned up, wearing glasses and a dark gray business jacket and skirt. He was speechless, primarily because he didn’t recall ever seeing her before.

“Don’t tell me you forgot me already. We met at Nigel’s party Friday. The jazz band was great, by the way. Sorry you missed it.”

The recollection of the tight black leather dress hit Kevin. He never would have recognized her if she hadn't spoken to him. Then he remembered her mentioning that she worked in a local bank.

He nodded. "I'm glad," he said, trying to regain his composure. He glanced at her name tag, which said "Heather Whitcomb" and underneath "Loan Officer." He hadn't remembered her name from the party. He hoped her memory was just as bad.

"I mean, I'm sorry too. Of course, I remember you, Heather."

"Is it Kenneth?" she said.

"No," Kevin said, smiling. "Mike. Michael Ward."

"Oops. I think I met about twenty people that night."

"That's okay. I cheated." He pointed to the name tag.

Heather looked down and chuckled. "I didn't know this was your bank. I've never seen you here before."

"I, uh, just have a safe deposit box here. I opened it a couple of months ago and haven't been here since."

Martha spoke. "Mr. Ward was trying to get into it, but he only had his driver's license. I was explaining our policy..."

"I think one ID will be enough for Mike."

"Maybe I should check with Mr. Halmin," Martha said, still unsure if she was doing the right thing.

"No, he'll just say the same thing. You don't have to be a stickler for the rules if you know the customer." Heather winked at Kevin.

“Thanks,” he said. “You just saved my life.”

“Can you remember my name now?” Heather said.

“I don’t think that’ll be a problem.”

“Then maybe I’ll see you around.”

She started across the lobby, glancing back as she did.

Kevin’s knees stopped shaking now that he had passed inspection. Martha led him to the vault, where she looked through a box of cards, removed one, and handed it to Kevin. On line one, it had Michael Ward’s signature and the date the box was leased. Line two was blank, meaning Ward had never reopened the box.

Kevin tried to nonchalantly sign and date the card. He had practiced the signature for two hours yesterday. As he returned the card to Martha, he thought the resemblance to the original was close enough. Martha replaced the card after a thorough inspection.

Ward’s box was one of the larger ones, about 10 inches across and 4 inches high. Kevin gave Martha the key, and she used it to remove the long box from its sheath. By the way she handled it, it looked fairly light, which he confirmed when she gave it to him. It rattled a little as he took it along with the key.

“Would you like a private booth?”

“Please.”

Once inside the booth, Kevin took a deep breath and lifted the lid.

At the front of the box lay an 8mm camcorder videotape, the kind they used in the lab to record experiments. He took it out. It had been rewound to the beginning. The label on the tape said “NV117.” He slipped the tape into his pocket.

Kevin tilted the box toward him, and a laboratory notebook slid to the front. He reached into the covered area at the back of the box, but nothing else was in it.

He carefully lifted the notebook out and turned it over. Three words were handwritten on the front cover. In all capital letters were the words “THE ADAMAS BLUEPRINT.” It was an odd title for a lab book.

He opened it. The front page looked as if it had been torn out. A date in June was printed at the top of the second page. The first line started with “Adamas—Greek for an impenetrably hard stone. To whom it may concern: Adamas is also the name of the process I’ve described in this notebook. Since you are reading this notebook...”

Kevin quickly read the next few paragraphs, stopping to reread every sentence to make sure he had understood it correctly, not wanting to believe it. He skipped to the pages detailing the technical aspects of the process. As he read the setup and methodology section, the only words running through his mind were “Holy shit!” Then he saw the data. After five minutes, he was almost convinced. Adamas probably worked.

Now he fully understood the danger they were in. The people that were after them would stop at nothing to get this notebook and kill them both for even knowing of its existence.

He shut the notebook, tucked it under his arm, and left the booth.

He passed Martha, who said, “Is that all, Mr. Ward?”

Kevin didn’t stop, but mumbled his thanks as he strode by her and out the bank exit.

He yanked the Honda’s door open. As he jumped into the car, Erica said, “There you are. I was beginning to get worried.”

“Let’s get out of here,” was the only thing he said.

As Erica drove, Kevin remained silent, turning over their next move in his mind.

“Okay. I can’t stand it anymore,” she said. “What did you find? You were in there for a long time. I thought they had spotted the fake license.”

“No. I had a little problem, but I got into the box.” He showed her the notebook, and she glanced at the cover.

“What’s Adamas?”

“You may not believe it. I’m not sure I believe it myself yet.”

“What is it? The formula for Coke?”

“No,” Kevin said, staring at the notebook. “But it’s probably worth just as much. It’s a blueprint, just like the title says. It has schematics, experimental data, methodology, everything.”

“A blueprint? For what?”

“For making diamonds.”

CHAPTER 16

Clayton Tarnwell burst through the left door of the laboratory, almost knocking over a technician carrying samples the other direction. The technician first cursed at him for using the wrong door, and then when he saw who it was, began to apologize profusely. Tarnwell kept walking as if the man weren't even there.

Following him was his mousy, balding chief financial officer, Milton Senders, still garbed in a plaid shirt and hiking boots, dabbing the top of his perspiring head with a handkerchief. The plane had been late in arriving, and he had raced over to the office without changing when he'd gotten his messages at home. He too didn't give a second glance at the sputtering technician. He was too busy doing his own sputtering.

"I...I'm sorry, Clay. There's no excuse. This should never have happened. ZurBank should have called..."

"It's too late for that, Senders. You're not going to weasel your way out of this. You gave me your word that Ward had no way of getting the money out." Tarnwell crashed through another door.

“But he couldn’t have if those assholes at ZurBank hadn’t been so stupid. The bank had specific instructions to notify us before making any transactions over \$10,000 involving the account. That would give us time to find out what he was up to. If he withdrew less than that, he’d have some spending money to play with, and he wouldn’t get suspicious. It should have been foolproof.”

“Then what happened? Ten million dollars didn’t just evaporate.” Tarnwell already had a headache, and this fool was just making it worse. Normally, four hours of sleep was enough for him, but he’d been up since Saturday following the operation to capture the Hamilton kid and getting ready to secure the loan to buy Forrestal Chemical. The loan talks with First Texas had gone smoothly, and the buyout was practically a done deal. The Forrestal board had the contract in front of them, and Tarnwell expected them to sign it any minute. He had no doubt they would; they’d never get a better deal than \$20 a share for a company that was currently trading at \$12 a share.

“I talked to Hermann Schultz at ZurBank after I finished the work on the Forrestal contract,” Senders said. “He faxed the detailed statements. The account isn’t empty. There’s about \$100,000 left, probably so we wouldn’t know he closed the account. Apparently on Friday he tried to make a withdrawal of \$15,000. When the bank told him it would take several hours to complete the transaction, Ward changed his mind and withdrew \$9000 instead. ZurBank didn’t notify us since it was below the \$10,000 limit.”

Tarnwell stopped at a third door, simply marked ‘Research’.

“What the hell are you getting at, Senders?”

“Beginning at 6:00 Friday morning Zurich time, Ward made 1100 withdrawals of \$9000 each.”

“What! How?”

“Electronically. He must have called the bank for the information on how to do it. It’s fairly simple to do over the computer when you have a password.”

“1100 withdrawals in one morning?”

“The computer registered one withdrawal every thirty seconds. It took about nine hours. He must have written a special program to do it.”

“Are you telling me that there was no cap on the amount that could be withdrawn?”

“We saw no need for it. You said you’d be willing to give up a few minor withdrawals to give Ward the illusion of a real account. And we had a helluva time getting ZurBank to help us as much as they did. There was no way we were going to get them to limit the total amount Ward could withdraw...”

“I don’t want to hear any more about how you screwed up, Senders. I want you to get the money back.”

The sweat on Senders’ balding pate grew even more profuse. “I can’t. It was transferred to an account in the Bahamas and then out of that account. That’s all we know. The money could be anywhere by now.”

“Fly to the Bahamas and talk to the bank...”

“It’s no good. We may have had some influence in ZurBank because of our holdings, but we’ll never get any help from the Bahamas. They’d laugh in our face. Unless we can find some information from Ward’s files, the money is gone.”

“You’d better damn well hope Mitch finds something in the files Lobec downloaded from Ward’s computer. I’m stretched thin as it is with this Forrestal deal. You know the balance sheet.” Tarnwell had already signed the contract and given it to the lawyers to finalize the deal. He had more important matters to tend to. He’d wine and dine the Forrestal board later.

Senders risked a tentative smile. “Now that we have the loan, the deal with Forrestal won’t be a problem, even without the ten million. And once we announce the patent on the Adamas process, our stock will triple. We’ll be able to pay off the loan the next day.”

Senders’ cellular phone rang.

“It’s probably Harris. I told him to call when the Forrestal board signed the contract.” Senders clicked the phone on.

Select people within the company like Senders knew about Adamas, but besides Lobec and Bern, no one knew the true origin of the process. Senders and the lawyers thought the research staff had come up with it, and the research staff thought it had been bought from an individual inventor. That’s why Tarnwell discouraged Senders from venturing into the research labs.

Tarnwell inserted an ID card into a wall reader. A light next to it turned from red to green, and the door swung inward.

Tarnwell said to Senders, “Wait here for me,” and went through. Just before the door shut, a hand shot through.

“I thought I told you to wait...” Tarnwell stopped when he saw Lobec open the door.

“Oh good, David, come in. Good news I hope.”

“No, the news is rather disturbing,” Lobec said without inflection, and then quieted as a short, pudgy man wearing a white lab coat approached them. His name was Dr. Bruno Lefler, the chief

scientist in charge of the Adamas project. Since they had obtained Michael Ward's notes the previous week, the staff had worked around the clock to set up the proper equipment and validate the process. They had to make sure it worked before the patent submission was complete.

Tarnwell knew it was only a formality.

He was annoyed to see Dr. Lefler frowning and carrying a three ring binder.

"Mr. Tarnwell," Lefler said, pushing one of his sleeves up, "I didn't know you were coming here. I was just about to call you. We have a problem."

"Lefler, this is top priority. If you don't have some equipment you need, get it. Don't worry about the cost this time."

"No, Mr. Tarnwell, we have everything we need to validate the process. It works exactly as it is described in this notebook you gave me."

"Then what's the problem?"

Lefler looked uneasily at Lobec, whom he'd never met. Tarnwell noticed his hesitation.

"Lefler, this is David Lobec, my chief of security. He knows all about Adamas. Now go ahead."

"As I was saying, the process works exactly as it is described. But we have produced only graphite, no diamond whatsoever, industrial-grade or gem quality."

Tarnwell turned to Lobec. "Is he joking? Did I hear him right? He has to be joking."

"Dr. Lefler appears to be serious, Mr. Tarnwell," Lobec said.

"Fuck!" Tarnwell glowered at Lefler. "Explain."

"I don't know if I can. I do know that key elements of the process have been left out. On the surface, I understand the direction that has been taken to alter the structure of the carbon-60 to

produce diamond, but after a certain point, these notes revert to a description of graphite synthesis that has been published in the literature for several years now and already has a patent pending. It almost looks as if someone plagiarized a journal article from that point on.”

“But I saw the process myself,” said Tarnwell. “I didn’t learn all of the details, but I remember enough from my chemistry degree to know that the overall idea was sound. I inspected the chamber before and after the experiment. It did produce diamond. The Adamas process worked.”

Tarnwell had even perused the copy of the notebook when Lobec recovered it to make sure it was the right one. Everything Ward had showed him was described in the notebook. There was no reason to think it wouldn’t work.

“Perhaps it did work when you saw it. But this,” Lefler said, waving the binder, “is not that process. You were duped.”

“That son of a bitch!” Tarnwell stared at Lobec. “Ward planted a fake notebook. That means he was telling the truth about hiding it. Maybe about the videotape too.”

Lefler looked at Tarnwell with a puzzled expression.

“Is this notebook worthless?” Tarnwell said to Lefler.

“No, not at all. It provides great insight into the general nature of the research. With a few years of experimentation, we might be able to develop the process ourselves.”

“A few years!”

“Perhaps two if we are very lucky and focus all of our resources...”

“Doctor,” Tarnwell said, “we don’t have even one month. We have a huge buyout that is dependent on Adamas being submitted for patent protection next week. If we don’t get it, this company’s credit won’t be worth squat.”

“Then I suggest you don’t make the buyout.”

Lefler was right. The entire pitch to First Texas was based on Adamas. If he made the buyout and Adamas was a failure or delayed, he’d have no way to make the payments on the loan. He’d be insolvent almost immediately. Bankrupt. Which meant he had to stop the deal.

Senders! Maybe he could catch him before the contract was signed and tell him to withdraw it. Tarnwell raced back to the door and yanked it open.

Senders was replacing the cellular phone in his pocket. Tarnwell’s stomach sank when he saw Senders’ huge smile.

“Good news, Clay.”

CHAPTER 17

“Diamonds?” Erica said. She wanted to know exactly what Kevin was talking about before they went to the police. She pulled into a parking spot along University Drive five blocks from the bank. A Kinko’s copy center was in front of them. “As in ‘Diamonds are a girl’s best friend’ diamonds?”

“Yes, this notebook tells you how to make real, honest-to-god diamonds. It also tells you how to coat any object with a diamond film.”

Erica shook her head. “How could you run an experiment for your professor without knowing you were making diamonds?”

“Because I wasn’t,” Kevin said. “The experiment we were working on the day I was fired was an investigation into high-temperature superconductors. The diamonds were made by mistake.”

She must have look as confused as she felt.

“Here,” Kevin said. “Let me read this to you.”

He opened the notebook to the first page and began reading aloud.

“‘Adamas—Greek for an impenetrably hard stone. To whom it may concern: Adamas is also the name of the process I’ve described in this notebook. Since you are reading this notebook, I have abandoned hope of claiming the Adamas process for myself. The Adamas Blueprint is my insurance, if you will. My lawyer, Herbert Stein, has been instructed to publish these notes on the Internet in the event of my death.’”

“Stein!” Erica said. “The guy who was murdered? The one in Ward’s email?”

“I know. Wait. It gets better. ‘To be fair, I should give credit to another person who helped me unwittingly in this project. Kevin Hamilton, a graduate student who worked for me, was assisting me with research into the superconductive properties of carbon 60.’”

“Carbon 60? What’s that?”

“Have you ever heard of Buckyballs?”

“I’ve heard the word.”

“In 1985, some astrophysicists and chemists came across it by accident while trying to simulate processes that produce interstellar dust. It’s only the third pure form of carbon after graphite and diamond. Since then, it’s been in the newspapers a lot because whole new classes of chemicals can be made with it. The discoverers won the Nobel prize.”

“Buckyball is a goofy name for a Nobel Prize-winning discovery.”

“The official name is Buckminsterfullerene, but nobody liked saying it. The molecule looks just like a soccer ball, so Buckyball stuck.”

“And what were you doing with the Buckyballs?”

“Trying to make high-temperature superconductors. As Ward explains it here, ‘Metal-doped fullerene crystals have been shown to be isotropically superconductive above 30 degrees Kelvin.’ That’s a high temperature for a superconductor—about 240 degrees Celsius below zero.”

Erica just shook her head and gave Kevin the look that told him he was not making sense.

“Okay, I’ll back up. Superconductors are materials that have no electrical resistance and therefore no heat loss. The applications for them are endless. We could make 300-mile-an-hour trains that levitate above magnetic rails. Electricity could be sent from one end of the country to another if there was no resistance in the power lines. The main limiting factor in the size and speed of computers is the ability of the microprocessors to shed heat. With superconductors, there would be no heat, so microprocessors could be made 1000 times smaller than they are now.”

“So what’s the catch?”

“Right now, all superconductors have to be cooled down to a temperature near absolute zero using liquid helium. The cooling process requires a room about the size of a bus, and the whole setup costs over a million dollars. But if we could find a way to make a high-temperature superconductor, we could use liquid nitrogen as a coolant, which is cheap and requires only a small amount of equipment. We were just doing basic research. We didn’t really expect to find anything besides directions for future research.”

“But you did find something,” Erica said.

Kevin nodded. “And I never knew it.” He went on reading. ““On April 21, Kevin and I were in the lab trying to introduce a variety of elements into the molecular matrix of carbon 60 when

the laser overloaded and almost destroyed the lab. Once we got the situation under control, Kevin had to leave for class and therefore never realized what had truly happened.

““While I was assessing the damage, I noticed something strange about the experimental chamber. A fine glaze had formed over the exterior surface of the test stand. At first I had no idea what it was, although I was curious. When I attempted to remove the target material from the test stand, I couldn’t budge it. I thought perhaps it was fused in place by heat, but on further inspection I could see no signs of melting. I unscrewed the entire test stand and examined it with an infrared spectrometer. Only then did the implications of the glaze become apparent.

““A unique combination of events during the accident, the details of which are described in the body of this document, resulted in a new and relatively inexpensive method for producing diamond. In refining the process over the course of the next several months, I was able to confirm that not only could a diamond film be produced to coat any object, but also that this new process, which I call Adamas, could produce significant quantities of gem-quality stones.

““I will not go into the details of why I didn’t tell Kevin of the discovery.”—Kevin muttered “Because you were an asshole” after reading the line—““Suffice it to say that he was not involved in any way with hiding it from the university.”” Kevin looked up from the book. “Typical of Ward. He takes responsibility only when it can’t hurt him any more.”

“You were a part of it from the beginning,” Erica said. “You’re a coinventor.”

“Which would have been cool if people weren’t trying to kill us.”

“Are you sure this isn’t about a diamond substitute?” Erica said. “Maybe this is all a mistake. Maybe Adamas is like cubic zirconia. It just looks like diamond.”

“No, Ward may have been a jerk,” Kevin said, leafing through the notebook, “but he was a damn good researcher. Look here. Ward talks about molecular fragmentation of C60 through a microwave discharge resulting in chemical vapor deposition of carbon. I thought about it only peripherally back in April, but I realize now that the method we were using to insert metallic ions into C60 molecules also forms the basis for chemical vapor deposition.”

Erica was completely lost. “What the hell did you just say?”

“Sorry.” Kevin flipped to another section. “I looked at this in the bank.” He pointed to a graph in the notebook. “See? Here’s what I mean. The infrared spectrometer data clearly shows a pure carbon matrix in the sample. Pure carbon. There’s no evidence of any other type of element, including zircon.”

“Which is in cubic zirconia?”

Kevin nodded. “Cubic zirconia only looks like diamond. It might be a good substitute for diamond in someone’s ring, but it doesn’t have the properties that make diamonds special.”

“Like its hardness?”

Kevin looked off in the distance, as if he were an awestruck farmer who was seeing a city skyline for the first time. “Right, but that’s only the start. Diamond is also transparent, it’s an almost perfect heat conductor, and it performs as a semiconductor at much higher temperatures than silicon. No other material in the world has that combination of properties.”

“So?”

He looked back at her, but the excitement was still there. “People have been trying to find a cheap way to synthesize diamond for the past fifty years. In the fifties, General Electric found a way of making artificial diamonds, but it’s still so expensive, it’s only used for things like special

industrial drills. And it's not pure enough for gems. The diamonds they can make now look like dirty glass. But imagine if someone came up with a new method for making diamonds, one that cost tens of dollars per carat rather than thousands of dollars. You could put a diamond film on almost anything you wanted. You could even make things out of diamond. The patent for something like that is worth millions."

"Or billions." She paused to let the enormity of the discovery sink in. "We have to take this to the police. Whoever's after us won't stop until they have that notebook."

"If I showed this to you, and you didn't know me from Adam, would you believe that this was a radical new discovery and not a bunch of hoohaw?"

He held up the notebook so she could see one of the pages with technical specifications on it. She noticed that the edge was jagged in between this page and the previous one.

"It looks like a page was ripped out," she said.

"I saw that, but I don't why he would do that." Kevin said, turning the notebook for a closer look. "The correct procedure is to cross out incorrect results."

Erica traced her index finger across the top of the page. "I think I can make out indentations of what he wrote."

"We'll find out what it says later. Look at the specifications."

Erica read starting from the first paragraph on the page. *To maintain a uniform face for vaporization, the metal-graphite composite target was supported over a water-cooled copper collector in a UHV chamber evacuated to 10 mTorr. The target was attached to a homemade liquid nitrogen cryostat, and a magnetic suspended turbo molecular pump...*

The words were meaningless to Erica. She gave him the look again.

“See what I mean?” he said. “Only a chemist would understand it.”

“So let’s take it to a chemist.”

“Who? I can’t go back to South Texas. You already found that out. And no professor’s going to believe some student who walks in off the street with this wacko story. Even if he looked at the notebook, he’d have to study it to get an idea of whether it would work or not.”

“Will it?” Erica said.

“I’m not sure. I think so.”

“Then what chemist do we call?”

“We can’t do that,” Kevin said. “The first thing a chemist would do is call someone else, probably someone at South Texas. Then we’re as good as caught. We need help from the police or the FBI or somebody like that. In case you don’t remember, people have been trying to kill us since Saturday morning.”

“What about making a copy of the notebook?” Erica said, pointing at the Kinko’s in front of them. “It could be *our* insurance.”

“We’d have to give it to someone else. Look where that got Stein. I don’t think I want that hanging over my head. Besides, it’s possible they don’t have Adamas yet. Remember, Ward said that they want it.”

“If they didn’t have it yet, then why would they try to kill us? Wouldn’t they kidnap us to tell them where it is?”

“You have a point.”

Erica shook her head, not knowing what to do next. “Nothing else was in the safe deposit box?”

“Shit!” Kevin said, reaching into his pocket. “I forgot about this.” He handed an 8mm videotape to her.

“This must be important if he put it in the box,” Erica said.

“I know. I guess I got so excited about the notebook, it slipped my mind.”

“Do you know what’s on it?” she said, flipping it in her hands.

“I have no idea. The notebook doesn’t say anything about it.”

She put the tape in her purse and started the Honda. “Then let’s find out.”

* * *

David Lobec closed the door behind him as he followed Tarnwell into the extravagant penthouse office. He knew Tarnwell meant to impress everyone who entered with its marble floors, teak woodwork, and bear and elk hunting trophies lining the walls, but Lobec found it overbearing, heavy-handed, and tasteless. It was a total contrast to the undecorated office Lobec maintained on the floor below.

“So how could these two kids be anywhere?” Tarnwell said, sitting at his desk. He clipped the end off a Cuban cigar and lit it. Instead of taking one of the chairs across from Tarnwell, Lobec sat on the sofa, away from the pungent smoke. “Last time I heard, you said they were buying gas in Florida.”

Lobec suppressed a substantial urge to roll his eyes. He had little patience for Tarnwell’s inadequacies. “As I was explaining, Mr. Tarnwell, they were only charging the cost of the gas to a Visa card. It seems that they had worked out exactly how long it would take to drive from one city to another and then billed the credit card accordingly. They could have led us on for a good

while longer, but they happened to choose an Exxon station in Tennessee that was undergoing repairs and had no working gas pumps.”

Tarnwell rolled the cigar in his forefingers. “We have got to find these kids, David. You heard what Lefler said.”

“As I said, the news is discouraging. We continue to survey all likely places they would turn up: the university, the medical school, known friends. We’ve also paid key people in each of those places to notify us if anything indicating the location of Mr. Hamilton and Ms. Jensen arises. But for all we know, they could still be in Houston.”

Tarnwell pounded with the cigar in hand, spraying ashes across the desk. “For Christ’s sake, David, don’t you have any good news for me?”

“One rather strange item we are looking into concerns Mr. Hamilton’s family. His South Texas University records show that his parents died while he was at Texas A&M and that he has no siblings. But during a routine cross check, Mitch could find no death certificate for Murray Hamilton, his father. In fact, his Texas construction license was renewed six months ago.”

“He’s alive?”

“That would be the obvious conclusion.”

“Do you think Kevin would try to contact him?”

“It seems unlikely since his own son listed him deceased on official school records. However, I cannot rule out the possibility. The license lists an address in Dallas.”

“Go to Dallas and find his father. Use the detective spiel. Find out if he knows where the kid is. But remember, now we need Hamilton alive. His girlfriend must have found the notebook in that library. We’ve got to get it before they do something that will ruin me. Like give it to the

police. I swear to you, if they bankrupt me because of this, you won't have to do the dirty work this time. I'll kill them myself."

CHAPTER 18

Kevin and Erica walked through the back-to-school signs beckoning from all corners of the Sears. They had no trouble navigating the aisles; the store had just opened and was virtually empty. A 'lite' station played Kenny G softly in the background, grating on Kevin's ears. Then he saw it ahead, the home electronics department.

The first thing that had occurred to Erica when she saw the tape was to find out what was on it. Kevin could kick himself for not thinking of the most obvious place to watch it. He had been trying to come up with ways of getting the camcorder from the lab when Erica had suggested a department store. The one at the other end of Sharpstown mall hadn't had a compatible camcorder to play their tape, so they were trying the Sears next.

They quickly found the row of camcorders lined up for display, all tethered to the shelf by thin metal cables. They looked for a compatible camcorder from which they could both watch the video at the same time. This time they found one, an expensive Sony 8mm that had both a small LCD screen and speakers. Kevin unslung the brand new backpack he'd bought to carry the notebook and videotape and fished out the tape. Kevin loaded it and pressed PLAY.

Nothing happened.

He tried pressing it a couple more times. Still nothing. Kevin checked the battery. It was inserted correctly and the battery LED seemed strongly lit. This camcorder was much different than the old one they used in the lab, so he began to inspect the Sony more carefully, holding it up to the light to better read all of the labels. *There must be thirty buttons on this damned thing*, he thought. *I'll never figure this out...*

"May I help you," a deep voice said behind them.

They turned to see a towering black man dressed in a dark gray suit. He wore a Sears name tag that said 'Phil'.

When Kevin hesitated, Erica spoke. "Yes, we were trying to figure out how this one works. We brought our own tape so that we could compare the performance of this camcorder to others we're considering."

Phil took the Sony from Kevin. "Videotaping with this camcorder is very simple. You just press this button..."

Kevin put his hand on Phil's arm when he realized he was about to tape over what was on there. "No, wait!"

Phil gave him a slightly startled look.

"What I mean is," Kevin went on, "the picture quality of the LCD panel is very important to us, so we brought a tape we previously made."

"I see," Phil said. "In that case, you have to move this switch here to Playback and then press PLAY. See?" He gave the camcorder back to Kevin.

"Perhaps you could tell me what price range and features you were looking for," Phil continued. "Some of the features of this camcorder include video editing, a remote control,..."

“Thanks a lot,” said Erica. “I think we just want to see the tape for now.”

Phil, sensing that they wanted to have some time alone, told them where he’d be and left.

Kevin pressed the PLAY button.

A few seconds of static and then an image of a room filled with an array of technical equipment appeared on the screen. In the middle of the room, a man was hunched over one of the instruments with his back toward the camera. In the corner of the screen, the time and the date ‘January 20’ glowed in red.

“That’s Ward’s lab!” Kevin said.

A second later, Kevin saw himself walk away from the camera. Through the speakers, he heard himself say, “It’s rolling.”

The second man in the video turned toward Kevin and said, “Good. Then let’s get going. We’ve got a lot to do today.” The man was Michael Ward.

Kevin turned to Erica. “The next day, I wanted to watch this to see if we could tell what happened, but Ward told me he taped over it. Asshole.”

The next twenty minutes was more setup, so Kevin fast forwarded through the tape. It was almost amusing seeing himself and Ward rushing around at high speed assembling apparatus. When it reached a point near to the start of the experiment, he put the tape back in playback mode.

Kevin and Erica watched hunched over the four-inch wide screen.

Ward, standing at the computer control terminal, asked Kevin if they were ready. Kevin, who was standing near the test chamber, nodded affirmative as he walked back to the control terminal. Ward pushed a button on the keyboard.

At first, nothing seemed to happen. Kevin was peering at the CRT display while Ward looked at the test chamber. Suddenly, Kevin was yelling “Shut down! Shut down! Overload!” and a bright flash blanked out the screen. When it cleared, a piece of apparatus on the far side of the room was burning and smoke billowed to the ceiling. Ward frantically flipped switches on the emergency shutoff panel, while Kevin raced across the room, yanked a fire extinguisher from the wall, and blasted the fire until it was out.

The next ten minutes were spent trying to ascertain what went wrong with the equipment. Kevin again fast forwarded through it, then hit PLAY.

“I think this is where I turned off the camera. I had a class to get to.”

Almost as he said it, the on-camera Kevin glanced at the camcorder and said, “Oh yeah.” He walked toward the camera and the screen returned to static. The two of them watched the static for a few moments, and then Kevin stopped the tape.

“This isn’t going to help very much,” said Erica. “Why would Ward hide it with the notebook?”

“He must have just wanted a record of the events leading up to the discovery. Maybe he wanted it as evidence. I don’t know.”

Footsteps approached from behind. They turned to see Phil.

“Well, what do you think? Does it have everything you wanted?”

“No,” said Kevin. “It’s not what we were hoping for.”

* * *

As they dejectedly walked back to the car through the mall to avoid the heat outside, Kevin tentatively reached for Erica’s hand.

“We’ll get out of this somehow,” he said.

“I know.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” she said confidently.

“I’m glad one of us does, because I was just saying that. As far as I can tell, we’re screwed.”

They passed a window display at Helzberg’s Diamonds and Erica stopped. A neat row of diamond rings and pendants rested on the velvet shelves. A picture of an enormous blue diamond hung above the display. In big letters at the top, it said, “Why not get her the next best thing?” In smaller letters at the bottom, the caption read, “The Hope diamond. At 49.5 carats, it’s the world’s largest blue diamond.”

“It’s hard to believe,” she said, “that people would kill for something that makes rocks.”

“No it’s not. Look at how much some of these stones are going for.” He pointed at a 1 carat diamond ring on sale for \$2499. “Besides, they’re more than rocks. Think of what the car companies alone would pay for windows not just coated with diamond, but actually made of diamond. Windows that never break, never scratch. Not to mention tools that never wear out, unbreakable dishware, faster computers. Any one of those things would make somebody rich. But together? That person would have more money than God.”

“Then why didn’t Ward just keep it for himself?”

“I’ve been wondering about that, and I think I know why. There was no way he could use it and make any money.”

“What do you mean?”

“The way I see it, there are only two methods for making money off of this. One, you could make the diamonds yourself. But to make them in any substantial quantity, he’d have to have his own manufacturing plant, distribution sources, patent attorneys. In other words, he had to have money to begin with. I don’t think there was any way he’d be able to convince the patent office that he’d come up with the process independent of the university. And if he had used university property to do the research, South Texas would own the patent. Ward would get his name on the patent, but the university would make all the money.”

“And if he made diamonds on the sly with the university equipment,” Erica said, “he couldn’t make them too big or he wouldn’t be able to sell them. And how do you sell a lot of small diamonds?”

“Right. After a while, he’d probably get caught. The only way he was able to work on it as long as he did was to fire me and get me out of the lab. By the end of summer, he would have had to hire new students. It would have been suspicious if he didn’t. And there’s no way he could take all of that specialized equipment. It would have been missed. Which leads to the second way of making money. Sell the process. That way, he could make millions all at once, and the university would never know it came from him.”

“But whoever he sold it to didn’t want anyone else to know.”

“Including Ward,” Kevin said. “They didn’t want to take the chance he’d talk. Now we’re the ones who these guys are hunting down, and the police won’t believe us.” He threw his hands up in exasperation.

Erica pointed at the ad in the window. “I bet if we strolled in with something as big as the Hope diamond they’d believe us.”

“Yeah, they’d probably...” Then Kevin stopped abruptly. That was it! Why not?

“Come on,” he said, yanking on Erica’s hand. She struggled to keep up with him.

“Where are we going?” she said.

“To find a telephone.”

CHAPTER 19

“Hello, this is the operator. May I speak to Ted Ishio?”

“That’s me.”

“I have a collect person-to-person call from Kevin Hamilton. Will you accept?”

“Sure I will! Kevin?”

“One moment, please.”

The line clicked.

“Ted, it’s Kevin!”

“Hey, I was just thinking about you. I sent an email to you Friday.”

“I know. I read it.”

“What’s going on? Where are you?”

“I’m in Houston.”

“Forget to pay the phone bill?”

“No. Listen, Ted, I wouldn’t call you like this, but we are in a hell of a lot of trouble.”

“Who’s we?”

“Erica Jensen. A friend. She’s with me now. We’re at Sharpstown mall.”

Ted laughed. “Kevin, if your car is broken down again, AAA is probably the place to call.”

“I’m serious, Ted. This is life and death. We need your help.”

There was a pause and then the tone in Ted’s voice sobered. “What can I do?” There was nothing more Kevin needed to do to convince him. Their relationship had been like that for the last three years, providing help whenever it was needed, no questions asked.

Still, Kevin held his breath before continuing, hoping Ted would have faith in him.

“Some men are trying to kill us.”

“What?”

“I know it sounds crazy, but it’s true. We have something they want.”

“Have you gone to the police?”

“We’ve tried, but they aren’t going to help us. Ted, listen. Believe me when I tell you that the less you know the better. You might not believe it anyway. We need a favor.”

“Name it. Anything.”

“I want to use your lab for a few days.”

The other end of the line was silent. Kevin waited. Finally, he couldn’t stand it.

“Ted? Are you still there?”

“Kevin, I don’t know. I’m just an assistant professor, for God’s sake. I’ve only been here two months...”

“I know it’s a lot to ask, Ted, but this is our only shot. If you don’t help us, we are going to die.”

There were another few seconds of hesitation. Erica gave Kevin a questioning look and he shrugged.

“When can you get here?”

Kevin sighed with relief. “Tomorrow. We’re in Erica’s car.”

Ted gave Kevin directions to his house, and Kevin relayed them to Erica so she could write them down. “What kind of equipment do you need?” Ted said when he was finished with the directions.

From memory, Kevin went down the list of items he’d need. “An infrared spectrometer, a turbo-molecular pump, a blue-light laser, a liquid nitrogen cryostat,...” He named a dozen other items.

“There’s a problem. The lab has everything you just named except one. We had a catastrophic failure in our laser last month. It’s totally shot.”

“What’s wrong with it? Can it be fixed?”

“No way. We’re getting a new one, but there’s a buying freeze for the next two weeks.”

Kevin’s heart sank. “You couldn’t bend the rules and get it any sooner, could you?”

“Kevin, I just started working here. I’m going out on a limb letting you use the lab in the first place. I’ll try to get it sooner, but there are no guarantees.”

“That’s all I ask.”

“Don’t worry, man. You can hang low here until we get the laser. In the meantime, it’ll be just like last year.”

“Yeah. Thanks, Ted. You’re a lifesaver. Literally.”

“Just make sure you get here tomorrow. We leave at 6:00 Wednesday morning for Minneapolis.”

“Right, the conference. Don’t worry. We’ll be there.”

“Drive safely.”

Kevin hung up.

“It sounded like he was willing to help us,” Erica said.

Someone was waiting for the phone so they began walking toward the car.

“He is. He’ll let me run the process in his lab.”

“You don’t look too happy about it.”

“Their laser is broken, and they won’t be able to replace it for at least two weeks. Without it, we can’t make any diamonds.”

“Two weeks! They might find us by then.”

“I know. But what other choice do we have? He’s the only person I know who could and would do this for us.”

“What if you had this laser? How long would it take to make enough diamond?”

“Probably three days, depending on how much we want.”

“Do you know where we could get one?”

“I think so, but it doesn’t matter. Those lasers cost about \$10,000.”

“And we could buy one ourselves?”

“Buy one ourselves?” Kevin asked incredulously. “I just told you they are ten *thousand* dollars.”

“I heard you. Just tell me if we could buy one ourselves today if we had the money.”

“Probably. There’s a warehouse in Dallas. I ordered one from there last year. The only problem was, it took three weeks to get what I ordered.”

“Then we’ll have to go there in person,” Erica said. “Can you find it or should we call first?”

“What are you talking about? I don’t think they’ll let us put a \$10,000 laser on a credit card.”

Erica steered Kevin to a bench in the middle of the mall. She sat, and Kevin followed suit. She had an earnest look on her face, and Kevin had no idea what to expect. He waited while she searched for words.

“Remember when I told you that I missed the party Friday because of some personal business?” she finally said.

Kevin nodded, looking into her eyes. They seemed tortured somehow.

She hesitated again.

“This is harder than I thought it would be. I haven’t told anyone this in...”—she looked up, thinking—“four years, I guess.”

Kevin kept silent, not wanting to interrupt what was obviously difficult for her to say.

“About ten years ago, when I was a senior in high school, I was on the varsity diving team. I was pretty good, enough that I won some of the meets, and my parents were big fans. They would come to almost every meet, even if it was 20 miles away like some of them were.

“The last meet of the year was at Jefferson high school 15 miles outside of Kansas City. It was a big meet because Jefferson was one of the best teams, and if we beat them, we were going to the district championships. I rode the bus with the other girls, but I saw my parents in the audience just before I went up for my first dive. They were sitting in the front row like they always were, clapping and yelling as my name was read off.

“We ended up beating Jefferson that night. I don’t remember what the score was, but it was very close, and we didn’t know until the last dive who would win. Naturally we were ecstatic, screaming that teenage girl squeal, jumping around like lunatics. My parents wanted to take me

out to celebrate, but I was so excited I wanted to ride the bus with the other girls and get pizza with them.

“They understood, and I still remember watching them as the bus pulled away. My dad was still wearing his gray suit pants and white dress shirt from work, but he had on the baseball cap that I’d given him two years earlier which had our team name, the Brookside High Blazers. And my mom usually wore something that matched the red and white school colors. That night it was a red blouse with white slacks. My mom was waving a school banner, and my dad gave me a thumbs up as we left. We must have been a sight, sticking our heads out of the bus windows, yelling, waving our arms. Everyone else was already talking about the district meet, but the only thing I was thinking at that moment was how proud I was that they had been there to see me. Of course, five seconds later I was screaming again with the other girls.”

Erica smiled as she said it, but her eyes began to glisten with tears.

“It was a Friday, and of course we stayed out late partying. My friend Amy didn’t drop me off at home until two in the morning, way past my curfew. I tiptoed straight to my room, hoping I wouldn’t wake my parents.

“About an hour later, I heard a banging at the front door. It went on for a while, and I started to wonder why my father wasn’t answering it. I got up and looked in my parents room, but nobody was there. The bed hadn’t even been slept in. Then I heard my name being called, and I ran downstairs thinking that my parents had locked themselves out somehow. I was so sleepy that it didn’t occur to me to wonder why they were still out at that hour.

“When I opened the door, I was surprised to see a sheriff’s deputy standing on the porch. He told me that my parents had been in an accident and that I should put some clothes on so that we

could go to the hospital. I asked if they were all right. The deputy said they'd be OK, but I knew he was lying. He kept telling me to hurry, and when I tried to call my grandparents, he said there wasn't enough time.

"A doctor at the hospital told me everything. As my parents were on their way home from the meet, a drunk in a pickup ran a stop sign and broadsided their car at 60 miles an hour. My mother and the drunk driver were killed instantly, but my dad revived enough at the hospital to tell them to come find me. He died fifteen minutes before I got there.

"The next three days were a blur. My dad's brother, Uncle Rick, took care of the funeral arrangements. A bunch of my cousins and aunts and uncles were there, but I still felt alone. I wasn't very close to any of them, since none of them lived in Kansas City. Then I found out about the insurance. My dad had a policy worth about a million dollars. That's why we can buy a \$10,000 laser. All I have to do is call my broker and transfer the money."

When Erica had gotten to the part about the accident, Kevin's expression was a mixture of sadness and understanding. But when she mentioned the money, his jaw dropped in amazement.

When he realized how he looked, he tried to explain.

"I'm sorry. I just...I mean, I guess I know why you didn't tell me, but I had no idea you had that much money. Your clothes and townhouse are a lot nicer than the other med students', but I just assumed your parents were paying for them."

"In a way, they are."

Something tugged at the back of Kevin's mind. "But on Saturday, you said you missed the party because of money problems. I thought you missed a car payment or something."

“I *did* miss the party because of money problems. I was speaking to my lawyer for about two hours. You know good old Uncle Rick? He was made executor of the trust that the insurance money was put into. I found out this year that he’s been siphoning money from it ever since.”

“How much?”

“Close to three hundred thousand dollars.”

“Holy shit!”

“Yeah, I was totally oblivious until I told my broker that I wanted to start getting the monthly statements myself. Up to that point, Uncle Rick was getting the statements and telling me how I was doing. Last summer, I attended a seminar for med students called “Managing your money: A doctor’s guide to investment,” and I decided I should start understanding how my finances worked. I didn’t think to tell my uncle, since I was just going to monitor the statements. After I saw some weird withdrawals from the account, withdrawals that I didn’t make, I asked for a total accounting of the finances for the last seven years. That’s when it all came out. I’ve been involved in litigation with him ever since.”

“I don’t know what to say. That’s a lot to take in.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about my parents before.”

“I understand,” Kevin said, patting her hand. He hesitated, trying to decide whether to tell her about his father and the problem with the school loans. No, this wasn’t the right time. It might seem like he was asking for money. Once this was over he’d tell her. “Are you sure it’s okay to use your money for the laser?”

“Do you want to wait two weeks to get another one?”

“I’m not the waiting type.”

* * *

They headed back to the pay phones and Kevin called information for the 800 number of LuminOptics in Dallas. He didn't bother writing it down and dialed. Kevin explained to the sales representative what he needed. After five minutes of listening to Kevin trying to convince him that he was not joking, Erica was worried that they wouldn't be able to get one, but apparently Kevin finally won him over. He haggled with the sales rep over the price and then hung up.

"Well?" she said.

"I talked him into selling me their last laser in stock if we came to pick it up today, with a fair markup for the sales rep's trouble of course. I don't think I totally convinced him, though. He said it had already been promised to another customer, and if we don't buy it today, it'll be on the first UPS truck tomorrow morning. We have to be there by six o'clock to get it."

"That should give us plenty of time." Erica looked at her watch. "It's only about ten thirty now. We can get to Dallas in about four hours or so."

"Yeah, but the warehouse is on the other side of Dallas. That's another hour. As long as we don't get stuck in rush hour, we'll be okay."

Erica was the next to use the phone. She called her broker to arrange the transfer. When she was told it would be no problem, she sighed and thanked the gods of electronic transactions. Once she had the confirmation number written down, she was ready to pick up the cashier's check at any branch of her local bank.

They looked in the phone book and found a branch just outside the mall. In twenty minutes, they had the cashier's check in hand and were headed toward I-45 north. Erica had still not

caught up on her sleep from the week before, so she dozed while Kevin drove and listened to NPR.

A nudge from Kevin woke her. She saw a sign saying “Dallas 15 miles” and looked at her watch. It was a little past 2:30. They’d made good time.

For some reason, Kevin was slowing down.

“We stopping?” Erica said, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

Kevin jabbed his thumb toward the rear window. “It’s not my decision.”

She turned and felt her stomach somersault. Behind them were the flashing lights of a state police car.

CHAPTER 20

Kevin clenched the steering wheel tightly, feeling as if he were going to hyperventilate.

“Do you think it’s them?” Erica said.

“I don’t see how it could be. Why would they find us on the outskirts of Dallas? No, it’s got to be the real police.”

“Thank God.”

A short siren sounded behind them.

“I didn’t say that was necessarily a good thing. Remember, I don’t have my license with me.”

Kevin began to slow down.

“Were you speeding?”

“I don’t know. I did speed up to pass a semi a few miles back.”

“They won’t take us in just because you don’t have your license with you.”

It sounded as if Erica was trying to reassure herself, but Kevin was thinking the same thing. If they were forced to go down to the station with the officer, it would be possible for their pursuers to learn their location.

The Honda rolled to a stop along the freeway shoulder. They waited for the officer to approach the car, but no one got out. A minute later, a second patrol car came to a stop behind the first. A female trooper wearing the standard wide-brimmed hat climbed out of the second patrol car and walked up to the first, leaning into the driver's window. Several times she looked in the direction of the Honda.

"What the hell is going on?" Kevin said, puzzled.

Erica shrugged and shook her head.

The door of the first patrol car opened, and a male officer got out, placing his baton through a belt loop. Kevin unrolled the window as both police officers walked towards him.

Both officers wore dark aviator sunglasses, giving them a menacing appearance. The male officer's expression seemed to be practiced indifference, but Kevin noticed the officer's right hand was not far from his pistol. He leaned forward to look into the car. When he spoke, a monotone issued from smoke-stained teeth.

"Sir, may I see your driver's license? And ma'am, I'd like to see some identification from you as well."

The female officer stood on the passenger side of the Honda.

"I'm sorry, officer," Kevin said as he handed her Erica's license, "I don't have my license with me." There was no reason to tell him why he didn't have it. He sure as hell wasn't going to give him the license with Ward's name on it, which was still in Kevin's pocket.

The officer took Erica's license. "Then may I see some other form of identification?"

He shook his head, embarrassed. "I don't have my wallet."

The officer looked up at the other officer and then back at Kevin. His expression never wavered. “What’s your name, sir?”

“Kevin Hamilton.”

“Mr. Hamilton, Miss Jensen, could you please step out of the vehicle?”

Kevin got out thinking that he and Erica would follow them back to one of the patrol cars, but what the officer said next shocked him.

“Now face the vehicle and put your hands on the hood.”

“Are you serious?” Erica’s eyes widened.

“On the hood, sir. You too, miss.” His voice continued in the polite monotone, but Kevin saw the serious look on his face. His hand was now hovering over the pistol.

Kevin did as he was told and faced Erica, who was leaning on the other side of the car’s hood. The officer patted his back and chest and then ran his hands up and down his legs. He tried not to squirm at the uncomfortable personal nature of the search, focusing on Erica’s face. He knew that her shocked expression must have mirrored his own.

The officer reached into Kevin’s pocket and pulled out the driver’s license with Ward’s name on it.

“What’s this?” the officer said. “This says your name is Michael Ward.”

“I can explain that,” Kevin said.

“I’m sure you can.”

Kevin heard a click from behind and felt the cool metal of handcuffs encircle his wrists.

“What the hell is this is all about?” Kevin said as his hands were shackled.

“Mr. Ward, I stopped you for exceeding the speed limit...”

“I’ve been stopped for speeding before and I’ve never been searched! And my name is Hamilton, not Ward.”

Erica made a face for him to be quiet.

“You are under arrest for grand theft auto,” the officer continued calmly. “This vehicle has been reported stolen.”

“What?” Kevin said. “That’s impossible!”

“Officer,” Erica said, “it can’t be stolen. This is my car.”

“It was also reported that one of the occupants may be impersonating the owner of the car. The only identification Mr. Hamilton”--the officer sarcastically drawled the name--“has been able to produce is one for someone named Michael Ward. I’d say that’s sufficient evidence to make you suspects. You have the right to remain silent...”

Kevin listened to the litany of rights he had so often heard on hundreds of TV shows, almost unable to comprehend that they were now applying to him. He didn’t respond when the officer seemed to be asking him a question.

“What?” he said.

“I said, do you understand these rights?”

They both answered yes.

“This is ridiculous,” Kevin said. “How can we be under arrest for stealing her car? It’s her car!”

“Sir, please calm down.”

“How can I be calm? I’m under arrest!”

“Officer,” Erica said, “there’s obviously some sort of mistake. All of my identification is in my purse. If you’ll just check it, you’ll see...”

“I’m sorry, ma’am. I’ll take your purse with us, but this isn’t something we’ll be able to investigate here.”

Kevin remembered the backpack with the notebook and videotape.

“I need my backpack too,” he said. “I can’t leave it in the car.”

“What’s in it?” the officer asked.

“Some very important papers of mine and a videotape. It’ll be ruined if it stays out in this heat.”

The officer looked at Kevin for a few seconds. Kevin was about to say something else when the officer opened the Honda and retrieved the purse and the backpack.

“Where are we going?” Erica said.

“The local state police headquarters.”

“What about my car?”

“I’ll call for a tow truck and have the vehicle taken to the impound lot,” the female officer said. Kevin noticed that she didn’t say “your vehicle.”

Thirty minutes later they entered the state police barracks at Hutchins, Texas.

* * *

After three hours of bureaucratic forms, backtalk, and fact checking, the state police were finally convinced that Erica Jensen was, in fact, who she said she was. Relieved about the error being resolved, she gladly took back her belongings from Officer Brady, the patrolman who had

stopped them. She looked at her watch. It was already 5:20. They had less than an hour before the warehouse closed.

“I’m sorry about the misunderstanding, Miss Jensen,” Brady said. “You can be sure that we will be looking into this matter to make sure this kind of thing doesn’t happen again.”

“Does this mean we’re free to go?”

“You are, Miss Jensen. But I checked the identification with Michael Ward’s name on it.” He jerked a thumb at Kevin, who was sitting at the desk of Officer Anson, the patrolwoman assisting Brady. “There is someone with that name and social security number, but the license number is for someone named Maria Gonzalez. Therefore, it’s a fake, not stolen. He claims he had it made as a joke. I’d be willing to let it go at that, but I still don’t have any identification for him.”

Erica sighed with relief when she realized they hadn’t made a connection to Ward’s death. “He was only speeding. That shouldn’t be a big deal.”

“He was also driving without a license and in possession of a fake driver’s license. Until I can confirm his true identity, he will have to remain here.” He must have seen her about to object again. “Under these odd circumstances, I have to be sure that there are no outstanding warrants for Mr. Hamilton’s arrest.” He said Kevin’s name with a slight, but detectable air of skepticism.

“Then, if he shows you some ID, he can go, too?”

“A picture ID is necessary. If he can produce that, then yes, he will be free to go.”

“OK. Where can I pick up my Honda?”

At the mention of her car, an embarrassed look crossed Brady’s face and he seemed reluctant to continue.

“It was taken to the stolen vehicle impound lot,” he said after a pause.

“So?”

“There’s a problem.”

“Of course there is,” Erica said, exasperated.

“I just talked to the lot. You can’t retrieve the car until tomorrow morning.”

“What!”

“I’m sorry, but with the state budget cuts, the lot’s only open until five o’clock. I tried to get them to make an exception, but they wouldn’t.”

Erica stood up without saying a word and walked to Officer Anson’s desk with Brady. Kevin looked as mad as she felt.

“What do I have to do to convince you that I’m not a criminal?” said Kevin, directing the question to both Anson and Brady.

“As I was telling Miss Jensen,” Brady said, “all we need is a picture ID. A copy can be faxed to us if it’s verified by another police authority.”

“And if I don’t produce one?”

“We can keep you here up to 24 hours for a misdemeanor. After that, we have to release you.”

Kevin looked at Erica, who knew what he was thinking. Every minute in the police station was dangerous. If the men after them could tap into police databases, they’d know where to find them. Not to mention that in half an hour, they’d lose the chance at getting a laser for the next several weeks.

“Erica can go, can’t she?”

“Of course,” Brady said. “She’s been cleared...”

Erica interrupted. “No, I can’t.” She told Kevin about the car.

Kevin fiddled with a paper clip from Officer Anson’s desk, staring at it as he did so with a look of desperation. Erica wanted to pluck the paper clip from his hand and make him look at her, but she knew it was his way of occupying his hands while he thought.

Just as Brady seemed to get tired of waiting, Kevin said, “All right.”

“What?” Erica said.

“There’s only one thing I can think of.”

“What?”

“Something I’d really rather not do.”

“Will you stop that and say something meaningful?” Erica said, irritated with his obtuseness.

“I have a passport at home. I got it about six years ago, but I never used it.”

“At home? You mean, in Houston.”

“No, my home here, in Dallas. I forgot to bring it with me to South Texas. I know exactly where it is. The top drawer in my old desk, unless my father threw it out.”

“You still have a house in Dallas?” This didn’t make any sense. Kevin’s parents were dead. Why would he still have a house here?

“Yes. It’s about twenty minutes from here.”

She didn’t have time to probe him about it. “We only have 30 minutes. How do I get there and get your passport?”

“You don’t have to. It’ll be faster if my father brings it.”

* * *

It was a flimsy profile of Murray Hamilton, but it was all Mitch Hornung could do on such short notice. David Lobec looked up from the file and buzzed the Gulfstream's cockpit.

"What is our ETA?" he asked above the jet engine's drone.

The intercom came to life. "It's supposed to be thirty-three minutes until we touchdown, Mr. Lobec, but we may be delayed by a thunderstorm moving through the area."

"Get us down as soon as you can. Make sure the car is ready for us."

"Yes, sir."

Lobec had chosen Love Field because it was fifteen minutes closer to Murray Hamilton's home in eastern Dallas than DFW was. An inconspicuous Taurus would be waiting for them on the tarmac.

The closer proximity, however, was no longer a factor. Hank Vincent, the local contractor Lobec had hired to track Murray Hamilton, called 20 minutes ago to tell them that Hamilton had left his house and was heading toward southern Dallas. Lobec had instructed Vincent to follow at a discreet distance and to report back when Hamilton had reached his destination.

"Do you really think Hamilton's father is going to know where he is?" Richard Bern said. "I mean, the guy has him listed as dead in his grad school records." He sat across from Lobec, facing the other way. His feet were propped up on the leather upholstery, and he had the seat fully reclined. Besides them and the two crewmembers in the cockpit, the ten passenger jet was empty.

"I don't know the reason for the Hamiltons' estrangement, but I have learned that the first place people in trouble turn is to their families. Mr. Hamilton may believe we would not find out that his father is still alive."

“Hamilton and his girlfriend could be in Guatemala for all we know. This is a shot in the dark.”

What Bern said was true. Lobec thought reporting the girl’s car as stolen might prove useful, but so far the car had not been found.

“If you have a better suggestion as to how we could use our time to search for Mr. Hamilton and Miss Jensen, I would appreciate enlightenment.”

Bern furrowed his brow, and Lobec could see him desperately trying to elicit a monumental plan. There would be none. Bern was a fairly capable assistant, but he would never command his own operations.

“In that case, Mr. Bern, we will continue with our present objective.” Lobec handed him the file. “You will see that the elder Hamilton is a member of the NRA and a card-carrying Republican. He is licensed by the state to carry a concealed weapon and regularly hunts deer and quail. What does this suggest to you regarding our approach to Mr. Hamilton?”

Bern skimmed the three page file and then held a picture of the subject up to the light. It was a driver’s license photo showing a man in his late fifties who did not carry his years well. Decades of smoking and drinking had left his cheeks and jowls sagging and wrinkled. Although he was not bald, the hair he did have was thinning, limp, and stringy. Nothing in the photo revealed that the man was actually 6’2” and weighed close to 230 pounds, which indicated to Lobec that most of the weight was muscle developed during his years as a construction worker.

Bern dropped the photo back into the folder and said, “I don’t know. But I bet this guy ain’t going to trust a couple of cops telling him his son’s wanted by the law.”

“Exactly, Mr. Bern. Very good. Therefore, we will need to take an entirely different approach. Your cover will be...”

The plane’s intercom buzzed. Lobec picked up the handset.

“Yes.”

“I have a Mr. Vincent on the line for you,” said the pilot.

“Put him through.”

After a click, the contractor tailing Murray Hamilton spoke from the other end, using a name Lobec had given him through their previous work together.

“Mr. Gale?” Vincent said, drawling the syllables together.

“You have something to report, Mr. Vincent?”

“Mr. Gale, I don’t know why, but Murray Hamilton just came to a stop in the parking lot of the Hutchins state police barracks.”

CHAPTER 21

At one end of the squad room, Kevin and Erica sat on a wooden bench. Kevin stared at the clock. It said 5:41.

Erica clenched Kevin's right knee, stopping its bounce. Kevin hadn't realized until then that he'd been tapping his hand in rhythm with his bouncing leg. He knew the nervous habit drove Erica crazy, but it was always unconscious. He gave her a half-hearted smile.

Since he had told the officers that his father was bringing the identification within the half hour, they'd let him wait with Erica in the squad room instead of in a holding cell with the drunks. When Kevin had called his father, the conversation had been short. Although Kevin detected some surprise in his father's voice when he'd told him where he and Erica were, his father hadn't asked any questions. Kevin just told him what he needed, and his father said it would take about 25 to 30 minutes to get to Hutchins and then hung up.

Knowing that they wouldn't get to the warehouse by six o'clock, Erica had called the sales representative at LuminOptics. Fortunately for them, he'd told her, he was staying late. If they got there by seven, they could still get the laser. It would be tight. The warehouse was forty-five

minutes away, and Dallas rush hour traffic, which lasted at least until seven, could easily double the travel time.

It had been 15 minutes since Kevin had talked to his father. In that time, he hadn't said much to Erica, and she didn't seem willing to prod him about it.

Still clenching Kevin's knee, Erica spoke in a voice that was a mixture of concern and annoyance. "Why didn't you tell me about your father? When I first met you, you told me your parents were dead."

Now he knew why she hadn't asked him any questions. She'd been fuming. "That was a part of my life I wanted to forget about. I told everyone that, not just you. In fact, I was supposed to be at the graduate school this morning to explain why I lied about it on my financial aid form. Dean Baker was giving me one last chance. I guess that's gone now."

"No, I mean when I told you about my family this morning. I think I deserved a little honesty in return."

"I didn't want you to think I was telling you that just so you'd give me money. Besides, your situation was different. Your parents obviously loved you. Why should I tell about how crappy my father was?"

Erica's voice was angry. "Why should I bare my soul to you if you aren't going to do the same with me?"

"Okay." Kevin concentrated on the clock in front of them. "You want a little honesty? Here it is. My father was a drunk for the better part of my childhood. He had an accident on a construction site when I was 15 and collected disability for the next ten years, drinking half of it because he didn't have anything better to do. He never wanted me to go to college, thought it

was a waste of time and wouldn't pay for it. He wanted me to go into construction, be a real man. The only reason I went to college was because of my mother, who *is* dead. Cancer, five years ago. Her funeral was the last time I talked to my father until today." He turned to face Erica. "Not like your story, is it?"

Erica, who had been looking straight ahead instead of at Kevin, raised her eyebrows. She nodded in that direction and tapped Kevin's arm. "That's got to be him," she said.

Kevin looked up. Next to the front door at the other end of the squad room was Murray Hamilton, and Kevin realized why Erica had been so sure it was him. The figure striding toward them was the same height as Kevin, but his frame, built from years of hard construction work, was massive, clothed in a denim shirt, jeans, and work boots. Although his body differed from Kevin's wiry sinew, Murray Hamilton's square-jawed face, Roman nose, and wide hazel eyes would instantly be connected to Kevin's by all but the most casual observer. Only the stubble-covered wrinkles and thinning hair kept him from looking like Kevin's older brother.

Kevin and Erica rose just as Murray reached them, coming to an abrupt stop in front of them. He stood without saying a word, just looking into Kevin's eyes.

Finally, Kevin broke the silence. "Hello, dad."

"I might have known," Murray said, "that the only reason you would call me was because you were in trouble."

Kevin expected his father to throw the passport at him, turn, and walk out as quickly as he'd come in.

"But I'm glad you did," Murray said and grasped Kevin in a tight hug.

Kevin was flabbergasted. His father had never been an affectionate man; in fact, Kevin could recall only a few times in his life when his father had hugged him, and even then it had been when he was much younger. Now it seemed as if his father would never let go. Still, Kevin couldn't bring himself to return the affection.

Murray released him and held his shoulders at arm's length.

"You look good," said Murray. "You've lost some weight, haven't you?"

"A little."

"And putting muscle on those bones, I see," Murray said, squeezing Kevin's shoulders.

"Did you find the passport?" Kevin asked without emotion.

"I got it right here." Murray pulled the passport from his hip pocket. Kevin took it, opened it to check, and then called Officer Brady over to them.

Brady studied the passport carefully. After about thirty seconds, he said, "All right, Mr. Hamilton. It looks like everything is in order."

"Does that mean we can go?" Kevin said.

"Yes, but I'm confiscating the fake ID. Because of all the trouble we've caused you and Miss Jensen, I've decided to drop the charges against you. Just watch your speed from now on." He nodded to Erica. "Have a good day, Miss Jensen. Let me know if you have any trouble getting your car." Brady put on his hat and walked out the front entrance.

"Now do you mind telling me what this is all about?" Murray said.

"It's no big deal. Thanks for the favor. See you later." Kevin turned as if to walk away.

“Kevin!” Erica said. “What’s wrong with you?” She turned toward Murray, extending her hand. “Hi, Mr. Hamilton. My name’s Erica Jensen. We really appreciate you going to all this trouble.”

Murray took her hand and smiled, showing teeth yellowed from years of smoking. “No trouble at all. Pleased to meet you.”

“It shouldn’t have been any trouble getting off the couch and coming over,” Kevin mumbled.

“Actually, you’re lucky you caught me at home. I was just about to go back out to my job site when you called.”

“Grabbing a beer during your break?”

“No,” Murray said calmly. “When I said my job site, I meant the one my company is contracting. My company is Hamilton Construction.”

Kevin looked at him in disbelief. This man who he hadn’t spoken to in five years, who’d been a drunk and lousy provider all his life, was now trying to tell Kevin that he had his own company.

“You’re kidding.”

“Had it three years now. I tried to tell you, but you wouldn’t return my calls.”

“Why should I have called you? You never gave me any reason to. You never cared about me or what I was interested in.”

Murray studied his shoes. “Nick, I know I was an asshole when you were in high school. I was wrong about you going to college, too. You seem to be doing pretty well for yourself. But before she died, your mother made me promise that I’d try to patch things up between us. I’m trying.”

Kevin said nothing. He wasn't sure why his dad was acting this way, but he wasn't going to let him redeem himself that easily, not after what he and his mother had gone through.

"Nick?" Erica said.

Murray turned to her and then, realizing she'd been talking to him, a look of understanding crossed his face.

"I forgot. He's going by Kevin now. Began using his middle name when he got to college. I don't think he ever liked being called Nick, though it still fits him in my mind."

"My mother called me Nicholas."

"I think you hated that just as much. Now, what's this about your car?"

Erica tucked her hair behind her right ear. "It seems that the impound lot where my car is won't be open until tomorrow morning. And we need to be somewhere by seven o'clock tonight."

"Well, the least I could do is give you a ride."

Erica started to speak, but Kevin interrupted her.

"Thanks, but we'll get there just fine."

"Kevin," Erica said, "it's almost 5:45. We'll be lucky to make it there as it is."

"We can get there ourselves. We don't need any more help from him."

Erica started to protest again, but Murray put his hand on her arm.

"Miss Jensen, it's a long story between us. If he doesn't want my help, that's the way it is. Like I said, I tried." He turned back to Kevin. "Good-bye, Nick—I mean, Kevin. Give me a call sometime." With that, he walked out the front door into the dingy, gray afternoon.

Erica whirled on Kevin with narrowed eyes. “Kevin, I don’t know what problems your family has had, but in thirty seconds, we’ll see our last chance to get the laser drive away.”

“We’ll get a cab,” Kevin said, trying to ignore her logic.

“It will take the cab a half-hour to get here, if it’ll even come out this far.”

“Then we’ll call the sales rep again. Get him to wait for us a little longer.” He saw the look on Erica’s face and tried to preempt her. “He is a drunken bum who didn’t even tell me that my mother had cancer until a week before she died.”

“I’m sorry about that. That was a terrible thing to do. You can hate him all you want, but we need his help.”

Kevin looked at the acoustic tiling in the ceiling and let out a huge sigh. “All right, but as soon as we can get your car, we’re gone.”

Erica nodded and grabbed Kevin’s hand as she started to run for the door. Kevin began to go with her, then stopped, feeling as if he were missing something. Suddenly, he remembered and ran back to Officer Olsen’s desk to pick up his backpack.

When he turned around, Erica was already running toward the station’s parking lot. He followed her outside, hoping that his father was already gone.

* * *

Minutes after completing the first call from Hank Vincent, David Lobec’s planning was interrupted yet again by the contractor. He’d given explicit instructions to Vincent that he was merely to follow Murray Hamilton. Under no circumstances was he to jeopardize his discreet observation by letting the subject know he was being followed. Now the simpleton couldn’t seem to follow even those unsophisticated instructions.

“Mr. Vincent, I believe I was clear in our last communication. We will call you when we reached the ground to obtain a report regarding the subject’s whereabouts.”

“Yes, Mr. Gale, I understood your instructions, but I do believe I may have some further information which you may be interested in.”

“What is it?”

“Well, I know my job is to just follow this Hamilton fellow, but I did catch the drift that you were looking for someone.”

“We may be,” Lobec said cautiously. “Why do you ask?”

“Would this someone actually be two someones comprised of a couple in their twenties, the guy about six two with short dark hair and his girlfriend a tan five-eight brunette.”

Lobec didn’t want to let the man know any more than he needed to, but he seemed to be leading somewhere. “As a matter of fact, we would be interest in determining the location of two people who fit that description.”

“I’d say you just determined it. Thirty seconds ago, they walked up to Murray Hamilton’s truck.”

CHAPTER 22

Luckily, Murray Hamilton had still been out in the parking lot when Erica ran out, ready to chase down the road after him if she had to. He was sitting in the driver's seat, talking on a cellular phone.

The truck was a huge red two-door Chevy double-wide, pervasive in Texas. Erica had seen the pickup, with its distinctive rear fenders covering pairs of wheels on each side, only a few times before coming to the state. Now it seemed like she saw them everywhere.

The cargo bed liner was empty, but the dings and scratches in the paint testified to hard use in the construction business. A large toolbox straddled the bed directly behind the cab, which was extra long and probably had jump seats to carry two extra people on short trips.

When she walked toward the dualie, she could overhear a heated conversation through the open driver's side window. She began to make out Murray's gruff voice clearly as she got closer.

"No, goddammit, you tell him that if he doesn't have the concrete on site by 8:00 tomorrow morning, I'll have to go with another supplier. This is Dorman's last chance. I've had it up to my ears with that guy."

Just then he caught Erica in his peripheral vision and waved for her to approach the truck. Papers were strewn across the front seat, and a Palm Pilot was on his lap.

“You got that, Charlie? No excuses. Listen, I gotta go. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Mr. Hamilton?” Erica said.

“Please, call me Murray,” he said, stepping out of the cab.

“Murray,” she said, looking in Kevin’s direction. He was behind her about twenty feet, studying the traffic going by, obviously trying to ignore her and his father. She lowered her voice slightly. “We really need the ride. It’s very important that we get to a place on the North side of Dallas called LuminOptics by 7:00. With the weather looking the way it is”--she looked up at the darkening sky--“I’m not sure we can make it anyway.”

“We can make it,” Murray said confidently, even though Erica hadn’t told him where LuminOptics was.

She stole another glance at Kevin. “I’ve convinced Kevin to let you help us, but he probably isn’t going to be very talkative.”

Murray considered it for a moment, then said, “I guess there’s not much I can do about that. He’s probably not going to listen to me either, so you’d better tell him to get in. I’ll just clean the seat off for y’all.”

As he stowed the cellular phone and portable computer under the seat, Erica walked back to Kevin.

“He said he’ll take us there.

“Happy happy, joy joy,” Kevin said with no trace of humor.

“It’ll take an hour to get there. I think you can handle it.”

“All right, but he can leave as soon as we’re there. We’ll call a cab and find another motel until we can get your car.”

“Don’t you think it might be better if we stay at his...”

“No.”

There didn’t seem to be a point in arguing, so Erica walked around the Chevy and climbed in, knowing that Kevin would want to sit as far away from Murray as possible. She had figured that the truck would reek of smoke, but the cab smelled surprisingly fresh, with just a hint of masculine sweat.

Murray began to pull a map from the door pocket. “So let’s see where we’re going.”

“You don’t need that,” Kevin said. “I know where it is.”

“I see you haven’t lost your sense of direction,” Murray said. Murray was referring to Kevin’s ability to look at a map once and never refer to it again, even on long trips, a gift of photographic memory that Erica envied.

“But,” Murray continued, “do you know the best way to get there in rush hour traffic? You haven’t driven in Dallas for years.”

“Fine,” Kevin said. “It’s just off I-635 at Abrams Rd. Taking I-45 to highway 75 should be the quickest way, but you probably know better.”

“Until we get to downtown it is, but the North Dallas Toll Road will be faster from that point on. I think I can swing a few dollars for such a special occasion.”

As Murray began driving toward the interstate, an awkward silence pervaded the cab. It was a couple of minutes before the silence was broken.

Like Erica, Kevin must have noticed the fresh aroma in the pickup. “What’d you do? Quit smoking?”

“As a matter of fact, it’ll be four years this October.” He lowered his voice slightly, indicating that he was speaking to Erica. “I was a two pack a day smoker since I was a teenager. Except for losing Nick’s mother, it was the hardest thing I ever went through.”

Erica cringed, waiting for Kevin to correct his name, but he was quiet.

“So Nick,” Murray said, “what are your hobbies now? I know you don’t shoot anymore.”

Erica glanced at Kevin, puzzled.

“Not since high school,” Kevin said.

“Shooting?” Erica said. “As in guns.”

“Nick didn’t tell you?”

“Dad! She isn’t interested.”

But Murray went on. “I used to take Nick hunting. He was a good shot, so I got him to compete. He did damn well until he dropped it, even won a few trophies. I still have them at home if you ever want them, Nick, but I do get a kick out of showing them to people.”

“What kind of guns?” Erica asked.

“Pistol mostly. Rifle and shotgun, too, but all his trophies were for pistol. If he’d practiced like I wanted him to, he would’ve been even better. It was about the only thing he was good at when he was a teenager, that and those damn video games. And thank God he was, because he sure as hell wasn’t going to win awards in any other sports.”

Kevin let an exasperated sigh, but said nothing.

Erica kept quiet, not wanting to push it, but Murray didn’t seem to need encouragement.

“I mean, if he’d started lifting weights like I told him to, he’d have made one hell of a linebacker. But he was never interested, didn’t mind staying an overweight wimp. That’s why I was so surprised when I saw him today. First time he’s looked normal in his whole life.”

It seemed like the conversation was taking a turn that would upset Kevin, so Erica tried to change the subject.

“So, Murray, do you live on this side of town?”

Outbound traffic on the other side of the freeway was jammed, but luckily the direction they were headed moved along smoothly.

“No, we live out on the east side actually. Or I should say I do. Nick’s mother died about five years ago.”

“I’m sorry,” Erica said.

“Five years may seem like a long time to you since you’re so young. But to me I remember her like it was almost yesterday.”

At that, Kevin let out a dismissive cluck.

“What was that for?” said Murray.

“You could barely remember your name at the time. How could you possibly remember mom?”

“You mean the drinking? I gave that up when I found out your mother had pancreatic cancer.” Erica winced internally, knowing how vicious pancreatic cancer was. Kevin’s mother probably didn’t live long after the diagnosis. “I didn’t have time after that to sit around drinking beer.”

“Yeah, I know how busy you were,” Kevin said. “You didn’t even have time to call me and tell me she was sick. You knew for two months, and you didn’t have the decency to tell me. I wouldn’t have known except for that fluke call from the hospital.”

“I know your mother explained to you why I didn’t tell you.”

“What? That she didn’t want to disrupt my studies? Bullshit! She said that to cover your ass.”

“Nick, I tried to come clean at the funeral, but you wouldn’t listen. Jesus, why would I want to keep something like that from you? I begged her to let me tell you, but she never would have forgiven me. She thought your education was too important to screw up.”

“You thought it wasn’t serious, and you thought I’d overreact when I found out. She told me she didn’t even get chemotherapy, for God’s sake.”

“And I thought you knew your mother better than that. She read up on pancreatic cancer. She didn’t want to go through all that chemotherapy crap just to live another month. It wasn’t her way.”

“Whatever you want to believe,” Kevin said.

“Boy, you *must* be in big trouble to let me help you.”

“To tell the truth,” Erica said, “we are. Someone should probably know in case...something happens.”

“Well, it can’t be trouble with the police, seeing as how they just let you go. Do you kids owe money to someone?”

Kevin looked out the side window, brooding. Erica knew that the issues between him and Murray weren’t going to be worked out on this short trip, so she let Kevin sulk.

“No, it’s not that simple. Some men are after us. We think we know why, but we still don’t know who. They want something that we have. The place you’re taking us has equipment that will help us get out of this.”

“Okay,” said Murray. He seemed reluctant to go into any more depth on the subject, and Erica didn’t push it.

Up ahead, a sign showed the exit for the North Dallas Toll Road.

“How long until we get there,” Erica said. Her watch read 6:22. Rain was just starting to spatter against the windshield.

“About 30 minutes if we don’t hit any traffic. I’d go faster, but the toll road always has plenty of cops during rush hour. We’d never make it if we got stopped.”

Erica smiled. “I think I’ve had enough of the police for one afternoon.”

* * *

Thirty minutes later, they were still ten minutes from LuminOptics. A wreck on the toll road had slowed traffic, but it could have been worse. Erica had been stuck in traffic for an hour several times while she had been in Houston, and she’d heard Dallas was no better.

At 7:03 they pulled into the almost deserted LuminOptics parking lot. The facility was located in the middle of Greenmont, a long, dead-end street off Abrams Rd. Similar squat warehouse-type buildings lined the street. Like LuminOptics, most of the parking lots allowed open access to the street, but a ten-foot-high chain-link fence separated the rear delivery lot from the front, as well as the LuminOptics lot from the one next to it.

Only one car remained in the lot, and Erica prayed that it was the sales rep’s. Activity at the other buildings along the street was nonexistent.

Murray stopped the pickup in front of the building. It was pouring now. Kevin hopped out, scurried through the rain to the front alcove, and knocked on the door. A man in his early fifties opened it. Erica cracked the window.

“You Kevin Hamilton?” the man said.

Erica was relieved; it was the same wavering voice she’d spoken with this afternoon.

“Yes, and that’s Erica Jensen,” he said, pointing toward the truck.

“I was about to give up on you two,” the sales rep said. “I was just locking up the place when you knocked. Come on in.”

Kevin ran back to the truck and picked up his backpack.

“All right,” he said to Murray. “We can take it from here. Have a good life.” Kevin began to turn and walk away.

“Will you call me sometime...Kevin?” Murray asked.

Kevin turned back and stared at him. “I don’t know,” Kevin said, surprising Erica because it wasn’t a flat refusal. Then he walked into LuminOptics.

“What are you going to do now?” Murray said.

“We can call a cab. We’ll be all right now. Thanks for getting us here in time.”

“I was glad to do it. And I’d like to ask you to do something to return the favor.”

“Sure, anything.”

“I didn’t want to tell Nick this to shame him into calling me, but I have cancer. Lung cancer. I guess I didn’t give up cigarettes soon enough.”

“What’s the prognosis?”

“Oh, I’ve probably got a year left at least. But you have to promise not to tell him. I don’t want his pity. Just try and get him to call me. I have my friends and the business, but he’s my only family.”

Erica saw sincerity in his wide hazel eyes.

“I’ll do my best.”

“I knew you would. You seem like a fine match for Nick. Don’t let him lose you.”

“We’re just friends.”

“No you aren’t. I can tell. It’s in the way you take care of him. If you’re not together now, it’s just a matter of time.” He winked.

“Goodbye, Murray.”

Erica shook his hand and climbed out of the truck. She smiled and waved to him as he drove back toward the freeway. Then she went to look for Kevin.

Like most Texas buildings during the summer, the LuminOptics offices were chilly from the air conditioning. A receptionist’s desk stood in the first room. Through the doorway, she could see a hall with open offices on either side. She headed to the only one that still had its light on.

When she entered the office, the sales rep nodded and then returned his attention to Kevin, who was examining a piece of equipment. It looked like a telescope, about three feet long and six inches in diameter, cradled in a receptacle.

“Is he gone?” Kevin said without looking up.

“Yes. Is this what we need?”

The sales rep chimed in. “I believe so. The model XXP-2400 blue light laser. The most reliable in the industry.”

“Yeah, it looks okay,” Kevin said. “Do you have the check?”

Erica pulled the cashier’s check out of her purse and handed it to the sales rep, who examined it as closely as Kevin had studied the laser.

“I’ll just need to make a call and verify this.”

After the sales rep left the room, Kevin began boxing up the laser.

“Why’d you have to be so hard on him?”

“What are you talking about?”

“He seemed like he was trying to make amends with you.”

“Oh, you mean my dad.”

“Who else would I mean?”

“I don’t know. I guess I’ve been bottling up everything for so long, it had to come out somehow.”

“Then you don’t hate him?”

“I never *hated* him,” Kevin said.

“You could’ve fooled me.”

“Well, maybe I did. Now, I just try not to think about him. But seeing him brings up all these memories. It’s more painful than anything else.”

“Then you’ll call him?”

“I don’t know. We’ll see. Right now, we’ve got to call a cab.”

While Kevin finished repacking the laser tightly in its box, Erica used the yellow pages and telephone on the desk. She gave the address to the cab company and hung up.

“They said it’ll be twenty to thirty minutes,” she said as the sales rep returned with a large smile on his face.

“The check cleared with no problem,” he said. “Is everything to your satisfaction?”

“Yes, thanks.”

The sales rep put on his coat and escorted them to the front door, helping Kevin carry the laser. They placed it gently on the cement outside the building under the awning to protect the laser from the rain, which was now coming down in sheets. The sales rep locked the door.

“I’m sorry I can’t let you wait inside,” he said.

“That’s all right,” Erica said. “You’ve done enough already. Our cab will be here soon.”

The sales rep looked curious and then shrugged. The circumstances *were* rather strange, Erica thought. But the money seemed to quiet him, and he climbed into his car.

A minute after the sales rep drove away, a Taurus turned onto Greenmont. Erica didn’t pay much attention to it; it was probably an employee returning from dinner for some late night work at one of the other offices on the block. She was about to ask Kevin where they were going to go when the Taurus suddenly veered into the LuminOptics parking lot.

“Oh shit!” Kevin said almost under his breath. The next word was shouted. “Run!”

Erica’s stomach dropped when she realized Kevin’s terror. Kevin grabbed her hand and sprinted toward the far end of the parking lot, the downpour drenching them almost immediately. The Taurus drove straight at them as if it were going to run them down. Kevin and Erica tried angling away from the chain link fence separating them from the parking lot next door, but the Taurus skidded to a stop ten feet in front of them, blocking the only way out of the enclosed lot.

A smiling man with perfectly coiffed black hair lowered the passenger window. In the driver's seat sat a beefy younger man with a crewcut. Her focus left the black-haired man's grinning face when he lifted a pistol above the window sill.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hamilton," he said. "You can't know how happy I am to see you."

CHAPTER 23

Kevin couldn't believe he was seeing them again. But his eyes weren't deceiving him. In the car before him were Barnett and Kaplan, the fake policemen from Houston.

"I can tell you are surprised, Mr. Hamilton," Barnett said. "We will have plenty of time to answer your questions." His gaze shifted to Erica. "And I'm glad I finally get to meet Miss Jensen. You know, you both had us worried for a while. The trick with your credit cards was quite ingenious. I will be interested to find out whose idea that was. Now, please open the back door slowly and climb in."

Kevin looked at Erica with dismay. If he tried something stupid, like charging them, he'd only get shot. He was about to tell Erica to do what the man said when an engine roared from his left.

He turned in time to see his dad's truck hurtling toward the Taurus from behind. In the next second, as he and Erica scrambled to get back, the pickup smashed into the Taurus, collapsing its trunk and catapulting it into the chain link fence twenty feet to their right. The Taurus hit the fence straight on and careened backward, coming to rest about five feet from the fence, its engine stalled.

They wasted no time and ran to the truck. Even with such a heavy impact, only minor damage showed on the truck's front bumper. Murray was already opening the passenger door.

"Hurry!" he yelled.

Erica got in first, then Kevin.

"Nick, the glove compartment! My gun!"

Kevin opened it and found a Glock 17 in a leather holster. He hesitated and then saw groggy movement behind the Taurus' limp airbags. Quickly, he unsnapped the holster and drew the Glock. His dad was heading toward the parking lot exit.

"Wait! The laser! Dad, we need to go back!"

His dad threw him a surprised glance. "What are you talking about?"

"The company entrance. We have to go back." When he saw that his dad wasn't turning the wheel, he yelled. "Go back!"

"I must be nuts," Murray said. He yanked the wheel around and headed back to the LuminOptics front door, where the boxed laser was still sitting. As they screeched to a halt, Kevin glanced back at the Taurus. Shit! He could hear the engine beginning to crank. The passenger door opened. The man he knew only as Barnett climbed out. Blood streamed down his face.

"Dad! Put the truck between that package and the car."

Murray pulled the truck's front up to the awning, its left side to the Taurus, and Kevin jumped out of the truck.

"Everybody use this door."

Erica and Murray followed him. Just as they did, he heard the pop of a pistol. Kevin chambered a round.

“Get down!” He rose above the truck’s bed and fired three quick shots in the direction of the Taurus to give them some cover.

“Erica, help dad put the laser in the back of the cab. I’ll try and slow them down.”

He scooted to the back of the Chevy and peered around to see Barnett getting back in the Taurus. Even with the trunk shortened by half, it was moving. The rear suspension had obviously come through the impact unscathed. He couldn’t let them get any closer, and he sure as hell didn’t want a second car chase in as many days, especially not with this lumbering Chevy truck.

Kevin propped his right wrist in his left hand and sighted carefully through the notch on the Glock’s barrel, letting the old habits come back. Even through the rain, the Taurus’ right rear tire was sharply in focus as it came in his direction and then blurred as he focused on the Glock’s front sight. Gently, he squeezed the trigger.

The right rear tire blew out with a satisfying pop, sending the Taurus spinning to the right. Kevin quickly repeated the motions, but the car was now moving much more wildly. This time it took two shots to take out the left rear tire.

Kevin turned to see his dad and Erica maneuvering the box into the cab’s rear storage area. They’d be finished any second.

He’d kept the Glock pointed at the Taurus and now saw its passengers scrambling out the other side. He realized that he’d unconsciously kept count of his bullets, just as he used to. He’d fired six. If his dad had a full clip in there, there should be 5 rounds left.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw first his dad and then Erica crawl into the truck cab. Kevin fired two more rounds and bolted for the open door. He dove, pulling the door shut behind him.

“Go!”

He stayed on the floor as his dad backed up ten feet and then slammed the truck into Drive. Bullets plinked into the driver’s side of the truck and then the rear as they raced toward the parking lot exit farthest from the gunmen.

The truck veered crazily to the left as it sped onto the road, its rear end sliding to the right on the slick pavement. Kevin sat up in the seat. He could see his dad fighting to bring the Chevy under control, steering into the skid.

The truck’s nose shifted back to the right, pointing them straight at a shallow drainage ditch running along the opposite side of the road. But Murray was no longer attempting to turn the wheel. His hands rested almost lazily on the bottom arc.

Trying to avoid plunging into the ditch head on, Kevin reached across and knocked the wheel counterclockwise. The truck again veered to the left, all six tires skidding. The Chevy tilted sideways, sending mud spraying to their right, and came to a rest with its right tires at the bottom of the ditch.

Kevin was about to yell at his father when he saw Erica’s bloodstained left hand.

“He’s been shot,” Erica said. “Left side, no visible exit wound.”

“Shit!” Kevin said, crawling over the back of the seat so he could get to his father. Then he remembered the gunmen. Barnett and Kaplan were still out there.

He leaned back to look toward the LuminOptics parking lot through the rear window. They were running towards the truck, pistols held in front of them. *Bastards!* Kevin thought and yanked open the rear sliding glass. He shifted the pistol to his left hand and fired.

The gunmen dove behind the low retaining wall separating the drainage ditch on the other side from the parking lot.

“Kevin!” Erica yelled. “He’s hemorrhaging. We need to get him to a hospital now!”

He looked at the driver’s door and saw blood dripping from the armrest.

“You take care of him,” he said. “I’ll drive.”

He kept aim on the retaining wall as Erica dragged Murray to the right. She was straining mightily, but gravity was on her side.

“Okay!” she said when she was in position.

He fired the last of the bullets and jumped into the driver’s seat. The truck had stalled, so he had to waste precious seconds shifting it into Park, turning the engine over, and shifting it back into Drive. In the rearview mirror, he saw a head poking around the end of the retaining wall only a hundred feet behind them.

He slammed the accelerator down, but the rear wheel spun in the muddy ditch. Shit! The rear was a live axle; if one wheel was spinning the other wouldn’t turn. He looked down, praying he would find what he was looking for. At first, he panicked, not seeing it. *He’s got to have it!* Kevin thought. *Where the hell is the knob?* Then he realized he was looking for the wrong thing. It wasn’t a shifter. It was a rocker switch on the console.

“Thank God!” he said and engaged the four-wheel drive system.

He pushed on the gas again. This time all six tires bit into the ground. The truck wanted to stay pointed straight ahead so he had to force the wheel to the left. The truck bounced as it came out of the ditch and level on the pavement. Looking in the side mirror, Kevin floored it.

Barnett and Kaplan were racing toward them, lifting their pistols to fire.

“Down!” he yelled and heard the hail of bullets hitting the truck bed’s rear door.

They continued accelerating and Kevin raised his head. The gunmen were now 100 yards behind them. Their pistols were now at their sides, knowing that they were too far away to take an accurate shot. Kevin came to the T intersection and turned right without stopping.

“I think we’re okay now. You can sit up.” His father was slumped against Erica. He wasn’t unconscious as Kevin had earlier thought, but he was on the verge. Erica unbuttoned Murray’s shirt, which was soaked in blood.

“How is he?” Kevin said.

“It’s hard to tell. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

“Should we stop and try to do something for him?” He began to slow down.

“No, I’ve got some pressure on it now. I couldn’t apply it as well when I was crouched down. The most important thing is to get to a hospital as soon as we can. Do you know where one is?”

“I think so. I saw one on the way here. It can’t be more than five minutes from here.”

Kevin wasn’t paying as much attention to the road as he should have been, and the truck hit a foot-deep pothole. The impact jarred Murray awake.

“What? Where are we?”

“It’s all right, dad. You just rest. You’ve been shot. We’re taking you to the hospital.”

“I surprise you?” Murray slurred the words.

“Yeah, you did. Thanks. Now just be quiet. Erica’s taking care of you.”

“After I dropped you off, I saw a car that was near my house this afternoon. Looked like the guy was watching you. I decided to hide and see what he wanted. Trouble.”

“You did real well, Murray,” Erica said. “Don’t try to talk.”

“Saw their guns. Saw them chase you. Had to do something. I...” Suddenly, he began to wheeze, trying to take in huge breaths with great difficulty.

“Damn!” Erica said.

“What? What is it?”

“It sounds like a hemothorax.”

“English!”

“I can’t tell for sure, but I think he’s got a collapsed lung. It’s okay, Murray. Just try to breathe normally. We’ll make you feel better in a few minutes.”

“What do we do?” Kevin asked.

“We can’t do anything. Just get to the hospital.”

Murray continued to gulp for air, clutching his chest. As the truck sailed through a green light doing seventy, Kevin spotted a blue sign with a large capital H. Below it, another blue sign said two miles.

* * *

Dr. Jake Hammersmith studied the board, looking to see who could be admitted to make more room in Community North’s ER. In his new position as chief resident, he had to make the tough decisions. Maybe he could get Neurology to take the head trauma in room 3. It was really

a toss-up; the man was babbling about miniature robots living in his brain, but Psych had already said they wouldn't take him without insurance. Maybe if...

The ER door burst open and a man ran in, skidding to a halt in front of Jake. The man was covered in blood.

"I need help!"

"It'll be okay," Jake said as examined him for wounds. "What happened to you."

"Not me! My dad! He's outside! Come on!" The man ran toward the door, waving for Jake to follow.

"Peter!" Jake yelled. "Get a gurney outside, stat!"

He ran outside with the man. Peter was right behind him with the gurney.

A huge dualie was parked with the driver's side next to the ER door. "What happened?" Jake said as he climbed into the truck.

A woman in the passenger seat had her arms around a large man who was unconscious. Both were soaked with blood.

"At least one gunshot wound to his chest," the woman said. "He's lost over two pints of blood. Possible hemothorax."

"How about you two?" Jake said.

"It's his blood," she said. "We're fine."

Jake removed the bundle of torn clothing the woman had been using as a compress. He tore away the man's shirt and inspected the wound. "You a doctor?" he asked the woman.

"Not yet. Just started my fourth year at South Texas."

"What's your name?"

“Erica.” She pointed at her male companion. “This is the patient’s son, Kevin.”

Jake didn’t waste time with formalities. “Kevin, is he on any medications?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s possible,” said Erica. “He has lung cancer.”

Kevin’s eyes widened. “What? How do you know that?”

Before she could answer, Jake said, “Kevin, what’s your father’s name?”

“Murray.”

Jake lightly slapped Murray’s face. “Murray, can you hear me?”

Murray nodded groggily, still struggling for air. Then he passed out again.

They carried Murray from the truck and placed him on the gurney. Jake kept pressure on the wound, knowing it wasn’t going to do much more than keep the gurney clean.

In seconds, they burst into the trauma room. Kevin started to follow them in. Jake was about to ask him to leave when Erica pulled him outside.

“They’ll take care of him,” he heard her say. “We’ll just be in the way.”

An orderly moved the portable curtained partition so the trauma scene couldn’t be viewed from the hall. Still, Jake knew that Kevin and Erica would be able to hear the commotion.

“On my count!” he said. “One, two, three!” They lifted Murray onto the trauma table, and the five doctors and nurses in the room were on him immediately, starting IVs, hooking him up to instruments, and intubating him.

Jake put the stethoscope to Murray’s chest listening for breath sounds. The med student was right about the hemothorax. Breath sounds were present on the right, absent on the left. Blood filling the chest cavity on Murray’s left was not letting his lung inflate.

“I need a chest tube,” Jake said. He kept talking while he inserted the chest tube. “Call the OR. Get a surgeon and a perfusionist ready.”

Once Jake had the tube in, blood came out in a torrent. For a moment, it seemed to subside but then it resumed.

“I’m losing the pulse,” one of the nurses said. “BP 60 over 40.”

“Tamponade?” the intern said.

“Let’s find out!” Jake said. “Where’s the pericardiocentesis tray?” If the bullet had nicked one of the coronary arteries, the pericardial sac would be filling with blood, resulting in cardiac arrest.

Jake eased a needle into the pericardial sac and withdrew the plunger. It filled with blood immediately. “Good call,” Jake said to the intern. The pressure of the blood on the heart wasn’t letting it pump. Jake continued to remove the blood. “Where’s Kirk?” Kirk Mannheim was the surgical resident on call.

“I paged him a minute ago, Dr. Hammersmith. Haven’t seen him.”

“No pulse,” said a nurse.

“Damn!” Jake said. “Start CPR. Give me an amp of epi. And get the paddles over here.”

For the next fifteen minutes, they continued to attempt resuscitation, but the blood loss had been too great. After listening for a heartbeat for the required 60 seconds, Jake had to call it. Time of death was 7:41 PM.

Jake threw his scrubs away and went to break the news to Murray’s son. He was surprised to see that Kevin and Erica weren’t still standing on the other side of the partition. He went to the waiting area, but they weren’t there either.

Jake stopped one of the orderlies.

“Did you see where this guy’s son and the med student went?”

“I think so. They went outside five minutes ago.” The orderly pointed at the ER loading doors.

Jake walked out onto the ambulance platform, thinking that he would see them smoking a cigarette or crying on the truck’s tailgate. He looked around for a minute, but the dualie was gone. They were nowhere to be seen.

It wasn’t until an hour later when the police came to investigate the shooting that Jake realized Kevin and Erica weren’t coming back.

CHAPTER 24

Soft lighting bathed the Houston Grill dining room as white-gloved waiters flitted around the room like bees tending the hive. The private dinner club was unusually crowded for a Monday evening due to an oil convention in town for the week. Executives found it a convenient way to elegantly entertain guests while charging it to their companies' tab and taking the full allowable tax deduction. Many of the groups would later head to one of the numerous "gentlemen's clubs" on Houston's west side for further tax-deductible entertainment.

Clayton Tarnwell not only found the gentlemen's clubs--actually high-class strip joints--to be useful for convincing business associates to partner with Tarnwell Mining and Chemical, but they were also a frequent source of his overnight companionship. The dinner club was adequate, but Tarnwell was not a gourmet. All he needed was a good steak, which he had finished twenty minutes ago. Since then, all he had been thinking about was getting on with the evening's entertainment.

Milton Senders, the only one Tarnwell had invited from his company, knew about Tarnwell's eagerness to get to the gentlemen's club, so he hadn't ordered dessert. Unfortunately, the three

executives from Forrestal Chemical ate with infuriating leisure, lingering over Bananas Foster and their third bottle of Dom Perignon '57.

Eight days, Tarnwell thought, suppressing what would have been an out of place smile. Eight days from now, Clayton Tarnwell would be making his speech to the stockholders of both Tarnwell Mining and Chemical and Forrestal to praise the synergy the two companies brought to the merger. A speech in which he was to announce a revolutionary new process that would take advantage of each of the companies' skills and make billions of dollars. Of course, he wouldn't mention that it would also make him one of the wealthiest men on the face of the earth. His skin began to tingle at the thought.

Tarnwell suggested they continue the celebration of the merger at Ladies Inc., his favorite club. Diedre and Pauline were supposed to be working tonight, and he couldn't resist thinking about how willing and adept they had been the last time he'd had them over to his River Oaks mansion.

As Tarnwell got up from the table, the thoughts of the girls vanished, as did his anticipatory tingling. David Lobec stood waiting for him in the lobby. As usual, Lobec's expression conveyed nothing about the success or failure of the operation.

"Gentlemen, I have to take care of some other business for a few minutes. Mr. Senders will escort you in my limo to our next destination. I'll meet you there as soon as I can."

Tarnwell walked the three staggering Forrestal executives and Senders to the elevator. When they were safely on, Tarnwell headed for the stairwell, followed closely by Lobec.

When they got to the third floor, Lobec said, "This way," and went through the door to the parking garage.

After entering the relative security of Lobec's new Pontiac, Tarnwell got his first close-up view of him. A thin bandage stretched across Lobec's nose, which seemed swollen, and an ugly blue and green bruise circled his left eye.

"What the hell happened to you?" Tarnwell said.

"Which club?"

"Ladies."

Lobec put the car in gear and drove toward the exit. "Mr. Hamilton is proving more troublesome than we had anticipated."

"You mean, this Hamilton kid's father did this to you?"

"Yes, but I was referring to Kevin Hamilton. He was in Dallas today."

Tarnwell tensed. "Tell me you got him."

"I can't."

"At least tell me you got Adamas."

Lobec shook his head.

"Goddammit! Did you even see Kevin Hamilton?"

"En route to Dallas, I received a call..."

"Answer my question."

Lobec sighed. "Yes, I did."

"All right," Tarnwell said. "See how easy that was. Now tell me how you found him."

Lobec logically stepped through the events leading up to his confrontation with the Hamiltons and the Jensen girl. When he got to the part about Murray Hamilton ramming the Taurus, Tarnwell exploded.

“You mean, you let them get away because you got snuck up from behind?”

Lobec looked slightly embarrassed, an expression Tarnwell had never seen on Lobec before. He definitely liked it.

“Although I was concentrating on the two students, I should never have let that happen. It was raining heavily, and neither Mr. Bern nor I could hear his truck approach. I realized only later that Mr. Hamilton must have spotted our Dallas operative, Mr. Vincent, as he drove past. I believe Mr. Vincent was not careful while following Mr. Hamilton. He was parked much too close to the building where we found Kevin Hamilton. I suppose the elder Hamilton spotted Mr. Vincent and became suspicious because he was watching the LuminOptics building and speaking on a cellular phone. After Mr. Vincent left, he must have seen us pursue Kevin Hamilton and Miss Jensen across the parking lot.”

“You’ve taken care of that idiot Vincent, I assume.”

“Yes, I have,” Lobec said. Tarnwell knew that meant Vincent was now dead for not only failing Lobec, but allowing Lobec to get injured because of it.

“So then what?”

After detailing the shootout, Lobec said, “It was not until this evening that I learned of Kevin Hamilton’s record of marksmanship in high school. He was very efficient in disabling our car.”

“Did you hit any of them?”

“Murray Hamilton was driving the pickup and was the easiest shot. I suspected at the time that we had hit him because the truck was steered into a ditch.”

“You checked the hospitals?”

“Of course. Murray Hamilton was brought to Community Hospital North and died of a gunshot wound to the chest this afternoon. Kevin Hamilton and Miss Jensen left before they could be questioned by the police.”

“And we have no idea where they are now.” It was a statement rather than a question since Lobec was now here instead of out searching for them.

“That is correct.”

Tarnwell threw his hands up in disgust. “Well, you just fucked this up all the way around, haven’t you?”

“Failure is not something I prize.”

“What now?”

“We continue our operation as planned. We’ve tapped both of their phones in case they try to retrieve messages from their answering machines. Their known friends are under surveillance, and we are still searching for other people with whom they may seek refuge. Tomorrow I will return to LuminOptics and determine why they were there.”

“Have you questioned their friends?”

“We have discreetly attempted to find out if they have knowledge of Mr. Hamilton and Miss Jensen’s whereabouts, but we did not want to raise undue suspicion. I believe that the lower profile we maintain, the better.”

“There’s no time for that. Question all of them. I want you to see to it personally. Tell them you’re the police and that their friends are wanted for questioning. Something like that. I really don’t care. But we need to find them now. If I don’t have the formula for that process by next week, I’m ruined.”

“In the long run, it is best that we try to be as discreet as possible. If for some reason I am connected to them, it may prove difficult to explain, particularly since I am an employee of yours.”

“I said I don’t care. That’s your problem. We have to find them.”

Lobec continued to protest. “In addition, our resources could be applied better elsewhere...”

Tarnwell banged on the Pontiac’s dashboard. “Maybe I’ve been sending the wrong message to you, David. This is not a partnership. You do what I say. As my chief of security, you can give your advice, once. I’ll listen. But I am the boss. I make the decision. Is that perfectly clear?”

“Of course, Mr. Tarnwell.” Lobec pulled to a stop inside the Ladies Inc. car port, which glittered with light. Porsches and Mercedes lined the most visible valet parking spots.

A doorman opened Tarnwell’s door and welcomed him by name. Tarnwell didn’t acknowledge the man or get out.

“David, I bought you because you produce results. Therefore, I expect results. You’re too much of a professional for all of these excuses. In fact, you should feel a little degraded.”

Another embarrassed look from Lobec, but this time almost controlled. Tarnwell smiled inwardly.

“You can be assured,” Lobec said, “that Mr. Hamilton and Adamas will not elude me again.”

Tarnwell clapped him on the shoulder. “You sure know how to sweet talk me.” He unfolded his towering frame from the Pontiac and saw the posters advertising this week’s main attraction, a nightly performance by Diedre and Pauline. Even though Adamas wasn’t in the bag, at least he

had something to look forward to. Again, Tarnwell felt an overwhelming urge to smile. This time, he did.

CHAPTER 25

Erica turned up the truck's fan, hoping to speed up the evaporation of water from the truck's upholstery. The first thing she and Kevin had done after leaving the hospital was to head for a self-service car wash and spray the blood out of the interior with a high pressure hose. Even though they had vacuumed up most of the water, and after 18 hours of drying, the seats were still squishy.

Since the car wash, they had been driving toward Ted Ishio's house in Blacksburg, Virginia, stopping only to gas up the thirsty Chevy pickup. Most of the drive had been spent with one of them driving while the other slept. It was Erica's turn at the wheel now, and Kevin dozed, his head against a pillow they had bought for the trip. Meals consisted of fast food sandwiches, fries, and soft drinks dispensed from drive-through windows. Erica grew tired of the greasy fare, but like Kevin, she wanted to put as much mileage between them and Texas as they could. The prospect of getting a more balanced meal at Ted and Janice Ishio's home almost made her drool.

As they crossed the border from Tennessee into Virginia, a sign on I-81 indicated only 105 miles to Roanoke. Kevin had told her earlier that Blacksburg was about 45 minutes southwest of Roanoke. Out of their 16 hour trip, they had about an hour and half to go.

Erica looked at the fuel gauge. The 30-gallon tank was still half full; she'd be able to drive the rest of the way there easily.

She didn't want to disturb Kevin, who had been unusually silent during the parts of the trip when they'd both been awake. His silence was beginning to worry her because she didn't know how to gauge his reaction to his father's death. She had spent more time with him in the last four days than anyone else since her ex, and in that time they had become quite close. Even when they had been hiding out on Sunday, they had laughed a lot, telling jokes to pass the time. Now he was withdrawn, retreating from her contact.

Which made her wonder about something else. Why he hadn't tried to make a pass at her during one of the motel stays? Lord knows, she'd given him enough opportunity. Maybe she was being too subtle, although in med school she had never been accused of that. She finally decided that he really was just being a gentleman, and that if the situation arose again, she'd have to make her intentions clear.

A semi came up fast behind them, moving into the passing lane. The minivan in front of it wouldn't yield, and the truck blasted its air horn. Kevin jerked. In one fluid motion, he opened the glove compartment with his left hand and plucked the pistol from its interior with his right. He looked around wild-eyed, ready to shoot.

"What the hell?" he said.

"It's okay! It's just a truck. Put that away before you shoot me by mistake."

He calmed almost immediately, sitting back in his seat. "I was dreaming about Barnett and his friend. They began shooting at us. I had the pistol in my hand, but I couldn't raise it fast enough

to shoot back. It just moved inch by inch. It was taking forever. I was so...frustrated. I didn't know what else to do. All I could do was look at my damn hand not responding."

She patted his knee, not knowing what to say.

"I want you to learn how to use this," Kevin said.

Erica was taken aback. "I couldn't..."

"Yes, you can. It's easy. You slide the chamber back like this." He demonstrated the maneuver, popping a bullet out onto the seat next to him. "There's no safety, so all you have to do is pull the trigger."

"Will you be careful with that," Erica said, realizing the gun was now ready to fire. "Just put it away."

Kevin pushed a button with his thumb and the ammunition clip dropped into his lap. It was the full spare his father had kept in the glove compartment. After removing the round from the chamber and reloading the clip with the two ejected bullets, he inserted the clip into the pistol grip, and put the Glock back in the glove compartment.

"We'll do it tomorrow," he said.

"No. I don't care if I never hold a gun. I've seen what they do every day for the past three months in the ER. If you want to keep it for protection, fine. But I'm not touching it."

"Fine." He rubbed his eyes. "Where are we?"

"We just crossed the Virginia border. How do you feel?"

"Like my neck has been in a vise. Have you got any aspirin?"

"I think so. In my purse."

Kevin rummaged around until he found a small bottle of Tylenol. “Close enough,” he said and washed down two tablets with the melted ice from a McDonald’s cup.

“I meant emotionally, how do you feel?”

Kevin said nothing, prompting Erica to wonder if she had done the right thing by prodding him. She was surprised when he finally spoke.

“I feel a lot different than when my mother died. My mother was great. She’s the one who always encouraged me to keep up with school, even when I was depressed about being different than some of the more popular kids. I remember one time when I came home crying because Barney Williams and his buddies beat me up for being a teacher’s pet. She told me that being smart was nothing to be ashamed of, that it was the other kids who should be ashamed for not trying their hardest to do well.

“I remember that because my father was in the room and the next thing he said was ‘Nick, if you don’t stand up for yourself like a real man, it doesn’t matter how smart you are. You’re still a wimp, and wimps don’t get any respect.’ I guess in his own macho way he was just trying to make me stronger, but it made me feel like a loser at the time. The only time I really liked him was when we went hunting together by ourselves. Around my mom or his friends, he always had to act tough, but when we were alone, he was actually kind of a funny guy.” Kevin paused. “If we had only left the LuminOptics parking lot instead of going back for the laser, I might have found out how much he’d really changed. Maybe I should have told him to keep driving instead of turning around.”

“You’re not blaming yourself for that, are you?”

“Maybe I am a little. There’s no reason to, but it’s hard not feel that way. I know we needed the laser, and looking back on it I probably would have done the same thing. It’s just hard to make yourself really believe that. You probably think I’m heartless.”

“For what?”

“For not crying or grieving like a son should.”

“It sounds to me like you are.”

Kevin didn’t answer, instead going silent again. Erica thought she should keep up the conversation, so she brought up something they hadn’t discussed yet.

“What are we going to do with the diamond when it’s finished?” she asked.

“The one we’re going to make at Virginia Tech? I suppose we’ll give it to the authorities.”

“Which authorities? You mean the police? We haven’t had much luck with them so far.”

“You’re right. I hadn’t thought about it. We need someone who will believe us and give us protection. And I don’t think the police are going to believe two poor twentysomethings with a big diamond. They’ll probably lock us up for theft and then try to find out where we got it. Hell, we still don’t even know who’s after us.”

Erica had an idea. “What about the Washington Post? This story is so strange, they might believe it.”

“And by the time the full story comes out, we’ll be dead. They’ll start checking facts and the next thing you know, Barnett and his buddy will be all over us. No, we need someone powerful, someone who has the ability to protect us, and we need the evidence confirmed at the same time.” Suddenly, Kevin’s face lit up brighter than it had been in days. “I’ve got it.”

“What?”

“The Washington Post.”

“You just said that was a bad idea.”

“Right, but we are going to be close to Washington.”

“So?”

“Do you know who Frederick Sutter is?”

“The name’s familiar.”

“You still vote in Kansas, don’t you?”

Erica nodded, completely missing what he was getting at.

“Frederick Sutter is the new congressman for the Fourth District in Texas. I met him at an STU awards banquet about five months ago. Apparently, he’s on the Board of Trustees for the university. I sat next to him and we had a nice conversation. He told me to visit him if I was ever in Washington.”

“You want to tell this story to a congressman?”

“Why not? He seemed honest for a politician. Together, I’m sure we can convince him, and if we do, he’d probably be able to get help from the FBI to protect us.”

Erica furrowed her eyebrows. It seemed like an awfully long shot.

“Erica, we are going to get only one chance at this. Once we go to the authorities, these people are going to know where to find us. Our luck has been crappy so far, and I don’t think it’ll be getting any better.”

She digested what he proposed. After several miles, she said, “There’s only one problem with your plan. If we do get in to see Congressman Sutter, how do we convince him that we’re not

holding a big piece of glass? I know I wouldn't be able to tell a real diamond just by looking at it."

A smile curled the corner of Kevin's lip. "You know what else is in Washington?"

"What?"

"The Smithsonian."

* * *

Two hours later, Kevin was carrying the laser through the fifth floor of Jacobson Hall at Virginia Tech with the help of his friend, Ted Ishio. Ted, whose father was Japanese and mother was Irish, had an exotic look strangers found hard to place. He was half a head shorter than Kevin and wore a wind-breaker over a polo-style shirt, the tail of which hung over his jeans.

"I wish I'd thought about getting the cart," Ted said. "I'm starting to sweat like I was OJ on the witness stand."

"It's your fault," Kevin said, knowing that Ted, who was in great shape, was exaggerating. "I've never heard of anybody wearing a jacket in September."

"I didn't either when I was in Texas. I'd never been north of Oklahoma until I came here. But they say it's like this all summer."

Actually, Kevin had been grateful when they'd stepped out of the truck into the cool mountain air. Blacksburg was nestled about 2000 feet high in the Appalachians of southwest Virginia and was protected from the blistering summer heat by the mountains. When they'd arrived at Ted's house at 10:00, Kevin and Erica hadn't been out of the truck since Knoxville, Tennessee, where the temperature had been 95, so they were surprised by the 60 degree evening.

Since Ted and Janice would be leaving early the next morning, Kevin had wanted to start getting the lab set up before they left. At the very least, he had to make sure he had the correct keys for everything and that he knew any idiosyncrasies with the rest of the equipment. Erica, who'd been exhausted from driving, decided to turn in for the night.

"Are you sure you didn't get the extra heavy model?" Ted asked with exaggerated huffing.

"Oh, quit your whining. You told me it wasn't far."

"It's not." Ted slowed, pulling a key chain from his pocket. "Here we are."

They put the package with the laser down, and Ted unlocked a heavy metal door, then opened it and flicked on a light switch. He propped it open with his leg while they picked up the package.

Once inside, Kevin could see why Ted had been so excited about the assistant professor position at Virginia Tech. A huge laboratory, probably 40 feet by 60 feet, housed an impressive array of shiny new equipment. At one end, a row of three Silicon Graphics workstations lined a wall. Normally, the wall and desks would be festooned with all sorts of personal artifacts by the grad students using the lab. Except for a few scattered papers and instruction manuals, the surfaces were empty.

"Nice, huh?" Ted said. "I told you they had only the best stuff here."

"No students yet?"

"The semester just started this week. All my students are new, and I didn't want them around the lab until I got back. I wish I wasn't going, but my paper got accepted at the conference before I ever got the job."

"Chomping at the bit?"

“That and the fact that Miami is playing here this weekend. Janice wanted to visit her parents while we were in Minneapolis, so we’re staying there until Sunday. Hey, the faculty gets discount season tickets to the football games. Since we won’t be using ours, do you want them? It’s been sold out for months.”

“I think I’ll be too busy. Besides, I’m not sure Erica likes football.”

“I don’t envy you then.”

“About Erica?”

“No, I mean the renovations to the stadium parking lot aren’t done yet. Everybody’s going to have to park in the commuter lots, one of which is right outside this building. By 10:00 Saturday morning, there are going to be 75,000 rabid Miami and Tech fans in this town.”

“Great. Just what we need.”

“Stay in here and you’ll be fine. Now, let’s take a little tour of my new domain.”

After about twenty minutes, Kevin felt more comfortable in the lab. All of the equipment was familiar to him, and he could have the Adamas process set up by the end of the day tomorrow.

Ted handed Kevin a set of keys hanging from a black Harley-Davidson keychain. Ted pointed to the keys as he spoke. “The first one is to my office. I’ll show you where that is in a minute. The next one is to the deadbolt on the lab door. This one is to the cabinets over on the far end. And this one is the key to the building. They lock the front doors around six. The other keys are to rooms you won’t need to get into.”

“Are you sure no one’s going to ask me what I’m doing here?”

“You know what it’s like during the conference. Almost all the professors will be there. The people who are left will just think I’ve got a new student. Say that if anybody asks.”

Ted locked up the lab and led Kevin down the linoleum-lined hall to another beat up wooden door. He opened it to reveal a cramped office sparsely furnished with two bookshelves and the requisite metal desk. Books were still piled in boxes on the floor, and papers overflowed the desk space not occupied by the Macintosh. Kevin bit his lip and nodded his head.

“I know. It’s not exactly what I was hoping for,” said Ted. “But it hasn’t got that homey touch yet. One thing I do have, though, is a view.”

Ted raised the venetian blinds. From directly below the window to about a hundred yards out stretched the commuter lot he had talked about. Past the expansive lot, however, was a splendid mountain vista brightly lit by the full moon and dotted by lights from scattered houses.

“Bet you have fun riding your bike here,” said Kevin, thinking of the unrelenting flatness of Houston. Ted was an avid road cyclist and would routinely bike 75 miles in a weekend.

“You know it. Even after two months, my legs are still killing me from all these hills.”

Ted paused as if he didn’t know how to say something. “You sure you don’t want to go to the police?”

Kevin hadn’t told Ted about the run-in with the police yesterday or the death of his father. He worried that it might make Ted rethink letting Kevin use the lab.

“No. At least not yet. Maybe when we’re done in the lab.”

“How long will you need it?”

“Two days. Maybe a little longer. We’ll be out of here by Sunday night.”

“No problem. Stay as long as you need.” Ted didn’t ask more about why Kevin wanted the lab, but Kevin could tell he was curious.

“Anything else you need?” Ted asked. “I saw you brought a cellular phone and laptop with you, but if you need to use my computer, you’re more than welcome.”

“We won’t be using the cellular phone. Call us paranoid, but it may be traced.”

That brought a raised eyebrow from Ted, but he didn’t pursue it. “You can use ours if you want while we’re gone. I got one of those deals. You know, get the phone free, sign up for two years’ service. Don’t worry about using it. We get 30 minutes a month included.”

“Aren’t you the yuppie?”

“Actually, I was going to tell you in a couple of weeks anyway, but since you’re here, I might as well tell you now. I got it for Janice, so I wouldn’t be worried. She’s pregnant.”

Kevin’s jaw dropped. Then he grabbed Ted’s hand and shook it furiously.

“Congratulations, you stud. I knew you had it in you, but I didn’t know it would be so soon.”

“Don’t mention it to Janice. She wants to wait until she’s past three months.”

“No problem,” said Kevin. “But you have to let me buy you a beer on the way home.” He was too tired to get any work done tonight anyway.

Ted looked at his watch. “I think we can find an open bar at 11:00 in a college town.”

CHAPTER 26

In a neighborhood near the Rice University campus, Bern drove as Lobec searched for a house at 1509 Albans. It was 1:00 pm on Thursday, and Lobec knew he was running out of time. The longer Kevin Hamilton and Erica Jensen remained at large, the greater the chance that he would never be able to recover the Adamas notebook, that they would turn it over to the police or someone else who may eventually understand the significance of it. Then the chase would be over. Every minute was valuable, and he and Mr. Bern were wasting it by following his arrogant boss's orders.

Lobec hadn't thought even Tarnwell would be foolish enough to bet everything on an untested technology. Then Tarnwell had proclaimed to the shareholders and press that he would announce a revolutionary new process next Tuesday, five days from now. With Adamas, his net worth would triple overnight. But if Tarnwell didn't have the invention in hand at the time of the press conference, the stock would plummet, leaving him with no way to service the debt on the new company. It was all or nothing. Lobec supposed he shouldn't have been surprised.

Despite Tarnwell's orders, Lobec had taken time to find out why Murray Hamilton had left his son and Erica Jensen at LuminOptics. After some monetary persuasion, the sales representative told Lobec they had purchased a laser at well above list price.

The reason for the purchase was immediately obvious to Lobec. They had obtained the laser in order to repeat the Adamas experiment, to produce enough diamond for evidence. It was possible that Kevin Hamilton did not even believe that the process worked. All of which led to the conclusion that they would acquire the rest of the equipment necessary and find somewhere to run the experiment. If Lobec found that place, he would find them.

Instead of looking for that place as they should, some of his men were staking out various locations throughout the city or maintaining phone taps, and the rest of his team, including Lobec and Bern, was interviewing anyone in Houston connected with Hamilton or Jensen. Although he did not agree with the tactic, they had learned some information. The hospital confirmed that Erica Jensen had called the school on Tuesday to tell them she would not be in the rest of the week, giving the excuse that she had a death in the family.

They had also learned from the transaction for the laser that Miss Jensen had a sizable insurance payout from the death of her parents and had used it to cut a check for the laser. It also explained how they were able to get by without the use of credit cards. She had merely made another withdrawal from an automated teller machine in Dallas the same day Lobec tried to capture them. With the additional three hundred dollars, they wouldn't need to withdraw money for at least several more days. Lobec had instructed Mitch to report Murray Hamilton's pickup truck stolen, but he didn't have much faith in the ruse working twice. His quarry could be anywhere in the contiguous United States by now.

“Here it is,” said Lobec, spying the number “1509” through the leaves of a live oak.

Bern stopped the car in front of the house. They got out and prepared their identification as they walked toward the door. Lobec carefully touched his throbbing nose. No one had mentioned his injuries, but he did observe several curious looks during the interviews.

After two rings, the door opened to reveal a six foot tall black man.

“Are you Nigel Hudson?” asked Lobec.

“Yes,” the man said warily.

Lobec flipped open his wallet. “My name is Detective Trumball, and this is my partner, Detective Braddock. May we have a few words with you?”

“About what?”

“We need to discuss a friend of yours. His name is Kevin Hamilton.”

Hudson eyed Lobec and Bern suspiciously. “All right,” he said after the hesitation. “Come on in.”

Good. This interview was already going as well as their other interviews. Perhaps this one would be more productive. If Lobec worded his questions correctly, he would know if this man had communicated with Kevin Hamilton. All he needed was one clue. Then he would have them.

* * *

At 1:00 pm on Thursday, Erica was driving Murray’s dualie down Tom’s Creek Boulevard away from Virginia Tech. She was alone. Kevin was in the lab, and Janice and Ted Ishio had left early Wednesday morning for Minnesota.

The first thing Erica and Kevin did yesterday was make two phone calls. The first call had been to Congressman Sutter’s office to make an appointment for next week. The only opening

the congressman had was on Monday morning at 8:00; he was supposed to leave the next day for a two week junket overseas. Since Kevin thought he would be done even sooner than Sunday, he'd told the secretary, Marian, that Monday would be fine.

The second call had been to the Smithsonian. At first, Erica had been uncomfortable pretending to be Marian, but she quickly grew into the role and thought her performance was convincing. The favor she had asked was somewhat unusual, but the man she talked with didn't seem very surprised and agreed to her request. His matter-of-fact tone led Erica to believe he would do it.

The rest of the day had been mundane, consisting primarily of moving equipment and adjusting settings per Kevin's direction. Research had never been interesting to her, and the stuffy lab hadn't changed her mind. Eating greasy take-out pizza all day didn't help the situation. Since the setup was finished and Kevin didn't need her help any more, she was taking the opportunity to get some food that was not made primarily of saturated fats.

Ted and Janice had been planning to be gone for several days, and they'd let their store of food dwindle, especially the fresh fruits and vegetables Erica craved. The obvious solution was the immense grocery now in front of her. It was one of the new ones that had a pharmacy, a full-service bank, a deli, and anything else they could cram in.

The lot was packed with cars of students just returned for the fall semester loading up on supplies. Erica had to park on the fringe, but it didn't bother her. She was looking forward to the walk, amazed that on a sunny September day the temperature hadn't been higher than 75 degrees. Maybe later she'd walk around Ted and Janice's neighborhood.

When she saw the other students entering and leaving the store, she felt a pang of guilt for neglecting her own studies. But there was nothing she could do. At least this mess would all be over on Monday.

Erica followed two teenage girls into the store. She grabbed one of the shopping baskets piled at the front and dropped her purse into it. At the entrance to the produce section, a woman was holding a tray with bits of food. The teenagers each took a piece and popped them into their mouths. Erica hadn't eaten since breakfast, so she walked over to the woman.

She held the tray up for Erica. "Would you like to try a sample of NYC brand coffee cake?"

"I'd love to. I'm starving."

"The pieces on the left have walnuts and the ones on the right don't. Take one of each. If you like it, you can pick up a box from aisle 12."

"Thanks."

Munching on the coffee cake, Erica headed into the produce section. As she popped the second piece of cake into her mouth, she thought she might actually buy some.

A salad was her top priority though, so she stopped and picked a head of Romaine lettuce, a bundle of carrots, two tomatoes, and a cucumber. Next was a stalk of broccoli. She only needed one since Kevin hated broccoli. She wrapped the broccoli in a tear-off plastic sack and went in search of the pasta aisle. The thought of marinara sauce with a light sprinkle of parmesan made her mouth water, and she looked for a sign marked "Italian foods".

As she rounded the corner into the grocery store's back row, she saw the two teenagers standing by a dispenser containing cold drinks. They were facing away from Erica. Both were

short and thin, one with dark, curly hair, the other with a blonde crop cut. The dark-haired girl seemed to be comforting the blonde. As Erica got closer, she could hear what they were saying.

“Tory?” the dark-haired girl said in a voice that was tinged with fear. “What’s the matter?”

Tory shook her head. She seemed to be clutching her throat. Immediately, Erica thought the girl was choking. But then Tory turned around, and Erica knew that the situation was much worse.

Tory’s face was bright red, and her lips, cheeks, and neck were grossly swollen. Her eyes were beginning to shut because of the swelling. The hissing sound was Tory gasping for breath through her constricting throat. It was a textbook case of a severe allergic reaction. If nothing was done in the next few minutes to halt the reaction, Tory would go into shock and die.

When the dark-haired girl saw Tory’s face, she screamed. A dozen eyes turned in the teenagers’ direction, and without thinking, Erica ran over to them, as did a man who looked like a student.

“What’s wrong with her?” the student asked.

“I don’t know,” said the dark-haired teenager. “She was fine just a minute ago.”

“She’s having an allergic reaction,” Erica said, coming to a stop in front of the girls and dropping her hand basket to the ground.

“You,” she said, pointing at the student, “go call 911 and tell them it’s an emergency.”

She turned back to the teenagers. “Is she allergic to something in that cake you just ate?” she said to the dark-haired girl.

“Tory asked about nuts, but the woman said there weren’t any.”

Erica put one hand on Tory's shoulder and lifted her head. The swelling was spreading rapidly. Tory's face was now the color of one of the ripe tomatoes in Erica's basket.

Severe allergies to nuts were fairly common; 100 people in the U.S. die from them every year. And sometimes the allergic person didn't even have to eat nuts. The cake without walnuts might have had a nut oil, which would produce the same effect.

Tory lunged forward, panicking because she couldn't breathe. She stumbled over Erica's basket, scattering the fruit and the contents of her purse across the linoleum floor.

Erica clasped Tory's shoulders hard, knowing the only way to save her was to give her the dose of epinephrine people with severe allergies like hers were supposed to carry.

"Tory, I know what the problem is and I'm going to help you. But you need to calm down." Tory shook her head, but didn't resist.

"What's your name?" Erica said to the dark-haired girl as she held on to Tory.

"Maggie."

"Maggie, I'm Erica. I need you to help me get Tory lying down. If she passes out and collapses, she might injure herself."

"Are you a doctor?" Maggie said.

"Yes," Erica said, knowing that telling Maggie she was a med student would only cause problems. On the other hand, if you told people you were a doctor, they immediately trusted your abilities. "Now, grab her other side."

Gently, they moved Tory to the floor. Her breath was now coming in shallow, ragged gasps.

"Where's her epi pin?" Erica said, beginning to search Tory's pockets.

Maggie looked at her, puzzled. "Her what?"

“Her epinephrine. With her allergy, she should always be carrying it.”

“I don’t...”

“Damn!” Erica said. All she found were Tory’s driver’s license and seven dollars in cash. She wasn’t surprised; both of the severe allergic reactions she’d seen in the ER resulted from the patients not carrying their epi kits.

“Damn!” Erica yelled. “Did they call the paramedics?”

“They’re on their way,” someone said.

“How long?”

“They didn’t say. Maybe five minutes?” The response was more question than answer.

The nearest EMS unit could be all the way across town for all she knew. She had to do something, otherwise Tory would asphyxiate in minutes. Even if she didn’t, it wouldn’t take long for the girl to sustain irreversible brain damage. In an emergency room, a tracheotomy might have been an option, but under these conditions and with her lack of experience, she could just as easily kill the girl. Erica’s only choice was to stop the swelling before it got any worse.

By now, a few more of the students had gathered around the scene. An obese man wearing a tie and name tag shouldered some of the students aside.

“What’s going on here?” he said in a gruff voice.

“Are you the manager?” Erica said.

“Yes. Is the kid all right?”

“No, she’s about to go into shock.”

“Who are you?”

"I'm a doctor," Erica said, not wanting to waste time explaining. "Go to the front of the store and make an announcement over the PA. Ask if there is anyone in the store who is allergic to bees and carries epinephrine..." Suddenly, Erica realized that was unnecessary. She remembered the sign on the front of the store that said "Pharmacy."

"Forget that. Is the pharmacy open?"

"Sure," the manager replied.

"Good. Go to there and ask the pharmacist for an adult epi kit."

"A what?" the manager said, obviously confused.

"An kit of epinephrine for..." It was going to take too long to explain. The manager still had a bewildered look on his face, and if he brought back the wrong thing, it might be too late.

"Never mind," Erica said. "Where's the pharmacy?"

The manager pointed at the far end of the store.

"Maggie," Erica said. "Don't let Tory get up. Keep her still. I'll be back in a minute."

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to get some medicine." She stood and faced the manager.

"Come with me," she said and sprinted down the aisle toward the pharmacy.

Ten seconds later she skidded to a stop at the pharmacy counter. A man in his early thirties was sorting pills near the back. When she hit the counter, he looked up, startled.

"I need...an epi kit," Erica said, gasping for breath more from the stress than the exertion.

For a moment, the man was taken aback. Then he said calmly, "And your name?"

“No,” Erica said. “This isn’t a prescription.” As she said it, the manager caught up with her at the counter, huffing like he could have a heart attack any minute. Judging from his weight, it was a distinct possibility.

His eyes on the manager, the pharmacist said, “Epinephrine is not an over-the-counter drug. I need a prescription...”

“Listen,” she said. “A girl on the other side of the store had a severe allergic reaction to that coffee cake the woman was serving by the registers. If she doesn’t get epinephrine in the next few minutes, she will die.” She glanced at the manager. “Do you understand?”

The manager’s eyes widened at the implications of a huge lawsuit. He looked at the pharmacist. “I saw the kid. Her face was swollen like a balloon. This woman is a doctor. Get her whatever she needs, right now.”

The pharmacist nodded. He hurried to the last shelf on the right and grabbed a box near the top. He gave it to Erica, who ripped open the package and withdrew a small syringe.

To the manager, she said, “I want you to go to the front of the store and wait for the paramedics so you can show them where we are.”

Without waiting for a response, she ran to Tory.

Erica approached the crowd and shoved two people aside. “Everybody back up!” she yelled. The dozen people surrounding her complied.

Erica kneeled next to the prone teenager. By now Tory was no longer moving, and her breath came in short, shallow hisses. Erica propped her head back to look down her throat. It was what she feared. In seconds, the throat would be completely constricted.

Maggie was now almost hysterical. “Erica, do something, please! She’s dying!”

“She’s not going to die,” Erica said as calmly as possible. She stuck the syringe’s needle into Tory’s left quadricep and pushed the plunger to its stop. The epinephrine would quickly flow from the thigh muscle into the femoral vein and then straight to the heart. She removed the needle and stuck it into one of the tomatoes lying on the floor.

The only thing Erica could do now was tilt Tory’s head back to clear the airway as much as possible. Cradling Tory’s neck with her left hand, Erica gently pushed her forehead back. She leaned down and put her ear next to Tory’s mouth. It was only the faintest of puffs, but she was still breathing. Erica hoped the epi had come soon enough.

Erica looked into Maggie’s tearful eyes. “She’s going to be all right,” she said confidently, even though she wasn’t sure. But the words had the desired effect. Maggie nodded and tried to smile.

Two minutes later, she heard sirens blaring and then the honk of a piercing air horn. They were silenced as an EMS unit squealed to a stop in front of the store. The paramedics would be in here any second. Then another siren grew louder. The police, Erica thought with alarm. When they got here, they would certainly want a statement from Erica, including her name. She had to leave.

The contents of her purse were still scattered across the floor. She hurriedly scooped them up and stuffed them back in her purse. As she finished, the crowd parted and two paramedics holding emergency boxes pushed their way through.

Erica got up and spoke to one of them while he opened the box on the floor. “Anaphylactic reaction. Severe throat constriction causing stridor. A dose of epi was administered via left quad.”

Before he could ask any questions, she ducked past the crowd. As she ran down the aisle, she could hear shouts behind her. “Hey! Who was that? Come back!”

At the cash registers, she slowed to a walk when she saw a policeman. He was talking to the store manager, who had his back to Erica. She held her face down to avoid being recognized. As inconspicuously as possible, she turned away as the policeman followed the manager toward the rear of the store. She continued walking with her purse clenched tightly to her stomach and made it through the store’s front door without being noticed. Outside, clusters of people were talking and pointing at the emergency vehicles. No one looked at her. Although she was almost hyperventilating, Erica ran.

CHAPTER 27

Kevin gnawed on a leftover piece of pepperoni pizza as he studied the figures on the computer screen in front of him. The graph of the spectroscopic analysis showed an impurity in the carbon of 0.01%, primarily in the form of methane and other organic molecules. He wasn't surprised that there was some impurity. Instead of requiring a pure vacuum, the process produced the greatest yield when performed in a vapor of hydrogen gas. Still, to the naked eye, or even under a high-powered loupe, no flaws in the material would be evident unless one had been introduced artificially. Just as the Adamas Blueprint said, the process produced clear, flawless diamond.

Kevin shook his head, still in a mild state of disbelief that it really worked. He walked over to the test chamber and stared through the door's porthole. The specimen sat in the middle of the chamber, imperceptibly acquiring new coatings of diamond every time the laser's light flashed, coatings that were fused to the previous layer with the strength of the world's hardest known substance. Because of this fusion process, the layers were not detectable. It was a single crystal.

Kevin's contacts were bothering him, as they often did when he stayed up late. He rubbed his eyes and looked at his watch. Almost half past midnight.

"Ready for bed?"

Kevin whipped around, startled by the voice behind him. Erica's head peeked past the lab's open door.

"Hey stranger. I didn't hear you. What are you doing here?"

Erica came in the rest of the way and closed the door behind her.

"That's a nice greeting. And when I came all the way over here to find out how you were doing."

"Sorry. Been a long day I guess."

"I know what you mean." Erica walked over to peer into the chamber. When she saw the specimen, she gasped and then chuckled. "So that's how we're going to prove it's an artificial diamond."

"It was the only thing I could come up with."

"I like it," Erica said. "How much *do* we have?" She pulled up a stool and sat next to him.

"Not as much as I'd hoped. It looks like we might get 40 grams by Sunday."

"How many carats is that?"

"I was wondering that myself, so I went and found a dictionary in Ted's office. One carat equals 200 milligrams."

After the slightest pause for a calculation, Erica exclaimed, "That's 200 carats!"

"Yeah. I figured it would be enough to prove our point."

"Liz Taylor might not be impressed."

"She wasn't. I've already got her order for a 300 carat diamond."

"You have to spend that alimony somehow. How did she know where to find you?"

"Smell. She can detect the scent of large diamonds from as far away as a thousand miles."

“Is it a hypersensitivity to all jewels?”

Kevin nodded. “Large amounts of shiny objects.”

“That must explain her irresistible urge to be near Michael Jackson.”

He wanted to laugh, but he was too tired. He smiled, then couldn’t stifle a yawn.

“You need to get some rest,” Erica said. “You’ve barely slept the last two nights.”

“I’m all right.” He rotated his head around and then rubbed his neck. The lack of exercise was starting to get to him. “What did you do all afternoon?”

Erica took over rubbing his neck and moved down to his shoulders. He moaned appreciatively. It was just what he needed, and her hands were obviously skilled in the art of massage.

“The reason I’m here,” she said, “is that I couldn’t sleep. Something happened today. I wasn’t going to tell you because I knew it would upset you, but I thought you should know.”

“What?” Kevin’s mind raced through a number of possibilities, all bad.

“Relax. You’re tensing up.”

“No kidding.”

“I won’t go on unless you relax.”

“All right,” he said reluctantly.

“Good. Today, when I went to the store, there was an emergency. A girl, a teenager, had a reaction to something she ate.”

“And?”

“She was severely allergic and went into anaphylactic shock.”

“What’s that?”

“Sorry. The body acts as if the allergen were a poison. In her case, her throat swelled shut.”

“Wow! Did she live? Is she going to be okay?”

“I’m not sure, but I think so.”

“That’s good...Wait a minute. What does this have to do with you?”

Erica took a deep breath. “I was right there when it happened. By the time anyone noticed, she couldn’t breathe. I guess my instincts took over, otherwise she would have died right in front of me. I had to help. She was suffocating.”

“What did you do?”

She stopped the massage and pulled out a newspaper out of her purse. The banner said *Roanoke Times and World News*. It was folded over, showing a story on the bottom of the front page.

Kevin read the story twice before he looked up.

“Don’t tell me the unidentified woman was you.”

Erica nodded.

“Are you insane? What were you trying to prove?”

“If I had waited until the paramedics arrived, she would have been brain-damaged.”

“But the police. They were there...”

Erica shook her head. “I got away before they could talk to me.”

“Do you realize the risk you took?” Kevin said, his voice rising.

“Like I said, it didn’t seem like I had a choice. It all happened pretty fast.”

“Erica, we have been just one step ahead of these...psychos, whoever they are. What if the police had arrested you?” Kevin was off the stool now, pacing.

“What would you have wanted me to do? Let that girl die?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Of course not.”

“Oh, I’m the one being ridiculous.”

“You could have waited.”

“No, I couldn’t.”

“Are you sure? How do you know? You’re not a doctor yet.”

“I’ve spent the last three months in the ER. It was a judgment call. I made it. That’s my profession. Deal with it.”

“Your heroics have lousy timing.”

“I’m sorry emergencies aren’t more convenient for you.” Erica stood and picked up her purse.

Kevin grabbed her sinewy shoulders. “Don’t you get it? If you got taken to jail and Barnett found you there, he’d kill you in a minute.”

She looked up at him, her wide green eyes boring into his. “So?”

Kevin’s voice was almost a whisper. “So I couldn’t stand to lose you too.” Then, before he realized what he was doing, he pulled her toward him in a rush and kissed her deeply. Instead of pulling away as he thought she might, Erica returned the kiss even more forcefully. Kevin felt her breasts pleasantly compressed against his chest and inhaled the light scent of fresh soap from her skin. He cradled her head in one palm, holding her to him with the other. Their hips ground together, making him aware of his sudden desire.

After what seemed like an hour but had to have been only a few seconds, Kevin released her and held her hands.

“Why didn’t you do that in the motel?” Erica said.

“I wasn’t sure then.”

“About whether you wanted to?”

“No. About whether *you* wanted to.”

“Are you sure now?”

“Oh yeah.”

Erica looked at the equipment. “Can this stuff stay unattended for an hour or so?” Then she looked back at him with a curled smile.

Kevin punched a large red EMERGENCY STOP button, and the whine of the machinery ground to a halt. “Yes.”

Ted’s house was only five minutes away. It was the longest five-minute drive Kevin ever took.

CHAPTER 28

“STU Financial Aid and Student Affairs, this is Teri, may I help you?” The sentence was recited with the boredom of innumerable repetition.

The answering voice spoke in a dreadful southern drawl. She sounded young, maybe a teenager. “Hi, my name’s Maggie Burleson. I was told you were the right person to talk to.”

“What can I help you with?” Teri Linley glanced at the wall clock. Only two hours until the weekend. Friday afternoons were always the slowest. She hoped it wouldn’t take as long to get out of here as last Friday did.

“Yesterday, a friend of mine had an emergency. She ate some cake with peanut oil in it and had an allergic reaction.”

“Are you sure you need this office?”

“No, but this is who they told me to call to find a student. One of the people at the emergency was a South Texas student. Her name is Erica Jensen.”

Teri perked up at the name. It was one of the two she’d been told to be on the alert for. That priggish black-haired guy had told her she’d get a hundred dollars if she could tell him where Erica Jensen was.

“Go on, Mrs. Burleson.”

A giggle erupted from the other end. “I’m not married.”

Teri was impatient. A hundred dollars would make the weekend a lot more fun. “You said you saw Erica Jensen, Maggie?”

“Yeah. I was wondering if you could tell me her number.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that, Maggie. We’re not allowed to give out that information for confidentiality reasons. Where did you say you were?”

“It...the emergency happened in Blacksburg.”

Blacksburg? Where the hell was that? “Blacksburg, Texas?”

“No, Blacksburg, Virginia. Uh, I really need to talk to her.”

Teri decided to take another approach. “Maggie, I shouldn’t be doing this, but Erica is a friend of mine. If you tell me the message, I’ll make sure she gets it and calls you back.”

The line was silent for a few seconds. “She a friend of yours?”

“We’re in the fourth year of med school together. I just work here for extra money.” When Maggie hesitated, Teri said, “In fact, I’m going to pick up Erica at the airport tomorrow when she gets back from visiting her relatives in Virginia.”

“All right,” Maggie said, the apprehension apparent in her voice. “You should be proud of Erica. She saved my friend’s life yesterday. The doctors at the hospital said Tory, my friend, might have died if Erica hadn’t given her epinephrine.” She said the word slowly, trying to pronounce it properly.

“Oh my gosh! Is Erica with you now?” Teri impressed herself at how well she was doing. She was definitely earning that hundred dollars.

“No, and that’s why I was calling. Erica ran off just as the paramedics and police got there. Just after she left, I found her medical student badge. It must have fell out when Tory knocked her purse over. I put it in my pocket without telling the police. I been wondering all day whether I should tell them or not, but I figured there was some reason she ran away so fast without telling anyone her last name. That’s why I’m trying to call her, to see if I can tell the police.”

“No!” Teri said, too forcefully. She lowered her voice. “No, you did the right thing. I’ll give Erica the message. She probably just wanted her privacy.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“The ID has an address printed on the back. Just mail it there. She’ll get it back. Thank you very much for your help, Maggie.”

“I was pretty scared yesterday, but Erica helped me a lot. I’m glad I’m able to help her.”

* * *

On Fridays at 6:15, the hospital’s parking garage was about as empty as it ever got. David Lobec motioned for Bern to wait in the car while he got out to meet with Teri Linley. As he expected, she wasn’t going to give the information over the phone when a hundred dollars was on the line.

Through the Friday rush hour traffic, it had taken them almost an hour to get there after her phone call. Her Fiero was parked in front of them at the deserted end of the garage’s fourth level.

A big-haired girl in her twenties got out of the two-seater and approached him. On the other side, a young man opened the door and got out. He wore a body-builder’s tank top and had the physique to match it. Obviously he was the boyfriend along for protection. He puffed up to his full six foot height and casually leaned on the open door.

“Do you have the money?” she said.

Lobec pulled five twenties out of his pocket and handed the bills over to her. “Where was she sighted?”

“It’ll cost you two hundred.”

Lobec didn’t blink. “The offered price was one hundred. I suggest you take it.”

“It sounded on the phone like you really want this information, and by the looks of you, you can afford it. Two hundred or you don’t get it.” She held out her hand for the money.

Without moving his eyes from hers, Lobec grabbed her hand like a viper snatching its prey and pulled her towards him, twisting her arm back with his right hand. She gasped, but was too surprised to scream.

“You’ll tell me now for a hundred or you’ll tell me for nothing after I’ve broken your arm. Which shall it be?”

Out of his peripheral vision, Lobec saw the body-builder throw a punch at his head. He ducked under it and slammed his left fist into the man’s crotch in the same movement. Teri Linley began screaming. As the man doubled over, Lobec threw his elbow into the amateur’s face. Teeth cracked with the impact. The man groaned and vomited, spitting up blood.

Bern was still sitting in the car, smiling. According to the usual procedure, Bern was only to assist if Lobec’s attacker drew a weapon.

Lobec grabbed the woman’s face. “Now stop screaming.”

The woman, wide-eyed at her groaning boyfriend lying on the ground, exhaled in jittery sobs.

“Good. Unfortunately, I will now have to repeat myself. Where was she sighted?”

“B..B.Blacksburg, Virginia. Please, God, don’t hurt me.”

“You can help matters by answering my questions. Why was she there?”

Teri Linley’s words came out in a rush. “A girl said Erica Jensen saved her friend’s life and ran off before she gave her name to the police or anyone else. The girl found her South Texas ID. It had Erica’s name on it. That’s all I know, I swear!”

“When?”

“Yesterday. She didn’t say what time.”

“And you’re very sure it was Blacksburg, Virginia?”

“Yes, yes!”

“Thank you,” Lobec said, releasing her arm, satisfied that she was telling the truth. “I hope you’ve learned a valuable lesson in negotiation.”

The woman looked at him as if he were crazy.

Lobec smiled. “Never bargain when you don’t have the advantage.”

* * *

As Bern drove out of the garage, Lobec opened his cell phone and dialed.

“We going to Blacksburg?” Bern asked.

“No, I am calling Mitch Hornung.”

“What for? The girl just said she was in Blacksburg.”

“Exactly. She *was* in Blacksburg. Yesterday. For any number of possible reasons. She and Mr. Hamilton could easily have been passing through on their way to another location. Before we go on another potential wild goose chase, I want to find out if there is any reason they would stay there.”

After five rings, the line clicked. It switched to Hornung's beeper answering machine. Lobec entered the cell phone's number so that it would read out on Hornung's beeper display.

During the next three hours, Bern and Lobec tried calling the people they had already met with for information about anyone Kevin might know in Blacksburg. Relatives, friends, schoolmates from grade school on up, anyone Erica and Kevin had ever been in contact with. The few people who were home on a Friday night were useless. Finally, Hornung answered the page. Lobec was livid. Though he was the best hacker money could buy, Hornung's lack of dependability had always been a problem.

"Mr. Hornung, I gave specific instructions that you were to be on call at all times until this matter was resolved."

"Sorry, man. I was with Monica." He said it as if it were supposed to mean something to Lobec.

"That is irrelevant. Mr. Bern and I will be at your computer in fifteen minutes. Meet us there."

"But Monica..."

"Do as I say, Mr. Hornung. I am not always this pleasant."

When Mitch Hornung arrived at his office exactly fifteen minutes later, Lobec explained the problem.

"Man, I don't know. This could take a while." Hornung looked at the screen in front of him. "Says here that Blacksburg has a population of 22,921, but including all the students at Virginia Tech and the people in the surrounding area, we're talking over 100,000."

“I didn’t say it would be easy,” said Lobec. “But I could go to this town and never find them if I don’t know where to look.”

“So you’re saying you want me to compare every name in that town to the name of every person either of these two have ever met and see if I get a match?”

“That is the gist of it.”

“These guys must have screwed Tarnwell out of some serious cash.”

“More than even you have,” Lobec whispered into Hornung’s ear. Hornung smiled at Lobec, but when he saw Lobec was serious, his smile faltered. He quickly turned to the computer and began tapping on the mouse.

* * *

Given the task, Lobec wasn’t expecting an answer until well into the next day. But Hornung was good, which was why Tarnwell let him get away with skimming a few measly thousand each month. At three in the morning, he said, “Bingo.”

Lobec instantly got up from the couch where he was lightly dozing and went over to Hornung’s computer. Bern followed from the chair he was sleeping on. “You have something?” Lobec said.

“I got lucky. The only reason I found it so quickly was because the name was a little odd. Theodore Ishio. Both Hamilton and Jensen are getting graduate degrees, so I thought maybe one of them knew a student at Virginia Tech. Then I broadened the search to include professors. Guess where Theodore Ishio, the new assistant professor in chemistry, got his Ph.D.”

“South Texas?” Bern said.

“Very good, Dick,” Hornung said. “That only took you a few seconds.”

Bern grabbed Hornung's arm. "Why you little..."

Lobec held up his hand. "That's enough." Bern let go, and Lobec turned to Hornung.

"When did he graduate?"

"This past summer. Looks like he and Hamilton went to school together for a couple of years. Ishio's got a vita about a mile long posted on the Web. He and Hamilton are even coauthors on one of the papers cited in the vita."

"What is Theodore Ishio's address?"

Seconds later the address was feeding into the laser printer on the desk.

Lobec picked up Hornung's phone. No commercial flights would be leaving either one of Houston's airports for several hours. But he knew that Tarnwell's plane would be returning soon. "Yes, this is Lobec. Has the Gulfstream arrived from Washington?...Six o'clock?...No, tell them I'll need it as soon as it arrives. I want to leave Intercontinental by seven...Then get another flight crew. And find the nearest airport to Blacksburg, Virginia."

CHAPTER 29

It was Saturday, and the sun shone brightly through a cloudless sky. The commuter parking lot was still filling with cars, many with Virginia Tech banners flying from their antennas. Erica was surprised how many of the cars had University of Miami flags. She didn't know much about football, but for the past week, the entire town had been consumed by the impending game, and she supposed that Miami fans would be equally ardent. The faculty lot had filled hours ago, and it didn't look like many spots were left in the commuter lot. It was 12:25. The game would probably be starting soon, since most of the tailgaters were packing up their barbecues and heading toward the stadium.

The door to Ted Ishio's office opened. Erica turned away from the window to see Kevin enter and close the door behind him.

"How's it look?" he asked. "Crazy?"

"I'll say. I'm glad we aren't in it."

"I will be in a little while. I'm starving, and the last of the pizza is gone."

"We could get another one delivered," she said.

"No, I'm sick of pizza, if you can believe it. I'm going to Wendy's. You want anything?"

Erica was feeling slightly claustrophobic and wanted to go with him, but they had already agreed that she should show her face in public as little as possible to avoid running into someone who might recognize her from the grocery store incident.

“A grilled chicken salad if they have it. Vinaigrette dressing on the side, please.”

“Okay, but first I have something to show you.” The look on his face was noncommittal as to whether it was a good something or a bad something.

“What?”

“Come with me.”

He led her to the lab. It was totally quiet for the first time in days. None of the equipment was running.

“What’s wrong?” Erica said. “Is something broken?”

“Nope. I ran out of raw material to make more buckyballs, but I think what we have is enough. Take a look in the chamber.”

Erica went over to the chamber’s window. She gasped when she saw the specimen. She hadn’t seen it since Thursday night, and it was now ten times the size it was then.

“By my calculations,” Kevin said, “it should weigh between 35 and 40 grams.” He tapped the Adamas Blueprint, which was lying on the workbench. “Looks like old Mike and I had ourselves a winner.”

Erica smiled and shook her head. “This is incredible. You’re going to be famous.”

“Maybe. I know I won’t be rich. The university will own the patent. I guess I can see why Ward tried to sell it instead. I have to say, it’s hard not to be tempted.”

Kevin saw how she was looking at him.

"I'm not saying I *agree* with him," he said, "just that I can understand why he did it."

"So what do we do now?" she said.

"The only thing left is to remove the specimen from the chamber and take it to Washington.

The chamber is still hot. It'll be an hour or so before we can take it out."

"How?" She had been gone during that part of the setup.

"I soldered the target to the top of a quarter-inch diameter nut. Then I just screwed it on to a bolt that was out of the laser's path. Not pretty, but it worked. All you do is unscrew it. If you'd like, I'll let you do the honors when the chamber's cooled."

Erica did a slight curtsy. "It would be my privilege."

"Now, before my stomach implodes," Kevin said, "I am going to get some food." He handed her Ted's keychain. "Keep both rooms locked, even if you're just going to the bathroom."

"I think I'll hang out in the office. At least I can get some sun there."

"Oh, and one more thing before I leave." He drew her to him and kissed her, then drew his lips down her neck. The feeling was delicious. "While I'm gone, you can think about how we'll pass the time until we leave tomorrow."

With a wink, Kevin was gone.

* * *

"Mr. Lobec, I've got something." Francowiak handed a notebook to Lobec. He flipped it open.

"This isn't it. Keep looking." They'd been in Ted Ishio's house for over an hour and had nothing to show for it. The house had been searched from top to bottom, and they'd found no sign of the notebook. They had, however, found the bed in the guest bedroom unmade. A

Northwest Airlines itinerary on the kitchen counter said the Ishio's had left three days ago and wouldn't be back until Monday. Strange then that the towels in the bathroom were still wet after all that time. Strange, that is, unless the Ishios had houseguests.

Bern walked up to him. "We've been all over this house twice. We would have found it by now if it was here."

Lobec looked around at the torn furniture and papers strewn around the living room. "I think you are right, Mr. Bern. I was hoping they would be careless, but one of them must be keeping the notebook close at hand. Have you been successful in determining where Mr. Ishio's office and laboratory on campus are?"

"Yeah. It was in a personal phone book in the den upstairs. 504 Jacobson Hall is his office. The lab is 514."

"I expect Mr. Hamilton has put Mr. Ishio's lab to good use in his absence." Lobec turned to find Francowiak. "You stay here in case they come back. Call us if they do. Capture them, but do not kill them. We have to make sure we have the notebook before that happens." Lobec opened the front door and turned back to Bern. "Shall we go take a look at Virginia Tech?"

* * *

It had been 20 minutes since Kevin left, and Erica was beginning to wonder where he was. The lot was almost devoid of people now, the last few making their way to the game.

The sound of thunder rattled the windows, startling Erica, who peered out at the sunny sky in amazement. Then she remembered something she'd read in the school paper during her long stretches of boredom in this room. A cannon was fired by the corps of cadets every time Virginia Tech scored. They must have just gotten a touchdown.

Erica found herself absently tapping on the desk and stopped. She chuckled, amused that she was starting to pick up Kevin's bad habits. It was the first time in years she didn't have to study, and now she didn't know what to do with herself except stare out of the window, imagining everything that could go wrong in the next two days. What if their appointment got canceled? What if Congressman Sutter didn't believe them? Would the Washington Post help them? And most of all, what if they were found by Barnett and Kaplan?

As the thunder faded, Erica heard a new sound. It was faint at first, but grew steadily louder. The sound of dress shoes on the linoleum hallway outside the door, two pairs. Both had the slow rhythm of men's loafers marching in lockstep rather than the quick staccato of women's heels. They were probably fifty feet away by now.

They suddenly stopped, to her left, just about where the lab would be. Erica pressed her ear against the door. She heard low mumbles. Definitely two men. Odd that someone would be dressed up on a Saturday, especially the Saturday of a big game. One of them knocked on a door.

She thought, *What if it's them?* But that was absurd. Nobody knew where they were except Ted and Janice, and they were in Minneapolis. No, she was just being paranoid.

So why don't you open the door and take a look?

She put her hand on the doorknob. More footsteps. Another knock, this time closer. More mumbling.

She hesitated. *You're just being silly. Just a couple of students trying to find one of their friends.*

How many students do you know that wear loafers on a Saturday?

Even if it was them, what was she going to do about it? Her purse was in the lab along with her mace. The gun was in the truck's glove compartment, although all she'd do with it would be to try and bluff them. No, might as well open the door now while she had a chance to run.

Erica turned the knob as quietly as she could, waiting to pull the door toward her until the latch was totally disengaged. The door was hinged on her right, so she'd have to stick her head out to see who it was. She eased the door inward and peered down the hall to the right. No one was in the field of view. As the door opened wide enough for her body, she yanked the door open, slid to the right and turned in one motion, tensing her muscles for flight.

When she saw the two men, she almost ran, but then she realized they were wearing dark blue maintenance uniforms and both had on tool belts. They turned at the sound of the door hitting her back. One was about Kevin's height, blond, and had a gap where a tooth should have been. The other was about five inches shorter, with dark hair and a pug nose. Neither of them was the one who had ambushed them in Dallas, the man with the black hair and steely gray eyes. Both smiled when they saw her. The taller one spoke with a heavy Virginia accent.

"Excuse me, Miss. We're looking for Dr. Haber. He said he was going to be in one of these labs, but we can't find him."

Erica let out the breath she didn't know she'd been holding.

"Miss?" the man repeated.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I'm not really familiar with this building."

"I thought he said 519, but..."

A door opened beyond the two maintenance men, and a pudgy, bald man stepped out.

“Thank god your here,” he said in a thick German accent. “I was in the back of the lab, but I thought I heard knocking. The air conditioning is completely broken now. Come. The equipment will be ruined soon otherwise.”

“I think we found him,” said the blond, and the two men followed Dr. Haber into the lab.

Erica retreated into the office and closed the door, chiding herself for being so foolish. The phone rang. Kevin had told her to answer Ted’s phone in case it was him. If it was somebody else, she could just take a message and let the person think it was an answering service.

“Hello?” she said.

Kevin’s voice answered. “Hey, it’s me. I had a hell of a time just getting some food.”

“What happened?”

“I’ll tell you when I get up there.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m in the truck. Ted’s cell phone was here, so I thought I’d put it to good use. I’ve been looking for a parking spot for the last ten minutes. Can you see one from up there?”

Erica smiled and went to the window, scanning the parking lot for a second. There he was. The huge dualie was slowly turning a corner and heading up the fourth row from the building.

“Yeah, I see one. You’ll have to go up the next row and come over to the other side of the lot. It’s almost at the back. I think you’ll be able to fit.”

“Okay, I’m on my way.”

After a few more instructions, Kevin found the spot.

“Thanks,” he said as he opened the truck door. “This is kind of cool. I’ve never used a cell phone before.” He waved and began walking toward the building.

“Can you see me?” she said, waving back.

“Sure. The fourth window from the right.”

“I’m glad you’re back.”

“Hungry?”

“That’s not the only reason.”

“Oh really?”

“That’s not what I meant. Where were you?”

He held up a white bag and pointed at it. “You’re the reason I’m late.”

“Me?”

“I made sure and checked the order after I came out of the drive-through. They messed yours up and I had to go back in and wait to get it right.” He was about halfway to the building. Another car pulled into the parking lot.

“That was awfully thoughtful of...” Erica froze. The car, a brown Taurus, stopped about seventy-five feet from Kevin and its occupants got out. Both were dressed in suits, the driver a beefy guy with a crew cut, the passenger with jet black hair and sunglasses. They were far away, but she thought of the moment in Dallas when another Taurus had stopped in front of them in that rainy LuminOptics parking lot. Even though it seemed impossible, she had no doubt. It was them.

“Kevin!” she yelled. “Get down!”

His bewildered voice replied. “What? What are you talking about?”

“Oh my god! It’s them! Barnett and Kaplan! Get down before they see you.”

“Shit!” Kevin dropped to his knees behind a blue sports car, but it was too late. They saw him. Barnett and Kaplan crouched down, drew guns from their jackets, and began creeping toward Kevin.

CHAPTER 30

The commuter parking lot had eight rows parallel to the building, with four lanes connecting each row. A hedge-lined central divider split the 1500-foot-long rows, leaving only one way between the two halves. Entrances to the lot were on either side, as well as in front of the building she was in and to the street bordering the far side.

In the fourth row, about 300 feet to Erica's left, Kevin crouched behind the sports car, the bag of food spilled at his feet. Kaplan, the burly one, edged one row toward the building and continued moving in Kevin's direction. Barnett circled around the other way with the fluid motions of a practiced hunter.

"Are they still there?"

"Yes," Erica said. "Stay down."

She searched the lot for other people. There had to be someone left. There! To her far right were a couple of stragglers walking toward the stadium. Then she realized they would be of no use. Even if she could get their attention, what could they possibly do to help?

"Kevin. I'm going to hang up and call the police."

“No,” he whispered. “There isn’t time. They’ll find me before the police get here. You have to tell me where they are so I can get back to the truck.”

He was right. If she hung up, Kevin would have no way of knowing where they were. As long as they didn’t know she was up in the office spying on them, she and Kevin had an advantage.

“Where are they?” he said. “Why didn’t they just run over and get me?”

“Five days ago you shot at them. Would you take a chance on running at someone with a gun?”

“Good point. Only one problem. The gun’s in the truck.”

“I was afraid of that,” Erica said. “Okay, start moving toward the back of the blue car, and when I tell you, run to the next row.”

“Okay.”

He scooted to the back of the car, which was flush with the open space of the next row, and began to peer around the corner.

“Don’t do that!” Erica said. “Keep your head down. Let me be your eyes. I’ll tell you when it’s okay.”

The parking spaces in each row were offset. It looked to Erica like it would be difficult to see between cars beyond more than one row. As long as Kevin kept ahead of them, he had a chance.

Barnett nodded to Kaplan and they raced to the next row, only one away from Kevin’s.

“Now!” Erica said.

With a gait that would have been comical in any other situation, Kevin scuttled like a crab to the next row. Kaplan ducked behind a sedan and Barnett stood behind a minivan. Then Barnett flattened himself on the ground.

“Kevin! Barnett’s trying to look under the cars for your feet.” Kevin was almost to the next row. “Get behind the tire of that green car you’re coming to.”

Kevin ran the last few feet and huddled against the green car beside its front tire.

“What’s he doing...”

“Shh! He’s only about fifty feet from you now. He’s still down.” Barnett’s head rose into view. “Now he’s getting up. I don’t think he saw you. No, he’s pointing to the left of you and peeking around the minivan toward his partner.” Suddenly, Kaplan began running toward the back of the lot. Erica heard Kevin curse under his breath. “Move back!” she yelled.

Kevin edged toward the open part of the row.

“No! I mean in between the two cars in your row.”

Kevin turned and reached the point between the two cars just as Kaplan entered the open drive five cars to the left. If Kevin had still been at the front of the car, Kaplan surely would have seen him. Instead, Kaplan kept his head down, running toward the far end of the lot.

“What’s he doing?” Erica said.

Kevin whispered a reply. “I heard Barnett yell something about the truck. That thing is so huge he must have seen it. They’re trying to cut me off.”

* * *

The cellular phone was slick in Kevin’s hand. He wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans.

“Erica, if anything happens to me, call 911, and then get out of there.”

“Nothing’s going to happen. Now just be quiet. Kaplan’s to the row just before the truck now. That’s about three rows past you. Barnett’s still two rows back toward me. He’s moving now. He’s looking between each pair of cars. Kaplan’s doing the same thing.”

“How far down the row are they?”

“I think Kaplan’s too far from you to see you if you stay down. But Barnett will see you. He’s six cars to the east, but he’s not moving as slowly now. He’ll see you in a few seconds unless you go behind the red car.”

The red car was a Chevy sedan behind the green Mazda he was next to. He scurried behind it so that the Chevy and Mazda were between him and Barnett. His heart pounded as he listened to Erica give the play by play.

“Five cars now. Four cars. Three cars. Two cars. One. He’s right behind you. Okay, he’s past.” She waited a few seconds. “You can talk now.”

“This isn’t working,” Kevin said. “A few more times looking under cars and they’re going to see where I am. The driver’s window on this green Mazda is open. It has a fold down back seat. If I can get in, I can crawl into the trunk through the back seat and hide there until they leave. Keep me posted if they get near me.”

“Okay,” said Erica.

With his back to the Chevy, he slid around to the opposite side until he was at the driver’s door of the Mazda. The Mazda’s window was only half open. He tried the door handle, but it was locked. Looking through the window, he could see the passenger door’s lock release was on the inside of the door, next to the handle. It would be the same for the driver’s door.

“Erica,” he said, “I’m going to have to stand up to get to the lock release. Are they looking this way?”

“No. Another car entered the lot on the other side from you. It’s a Jeep. They’re both looking at it. It’s going slowly, on the other side of the divider near the back entrance.”

Good, Kevin thought. It was a perfect distraction. They were both looking away from him. He stood, trying to keep his head behind the car’s door pillar. He snaked his arm through the window opening and felt the velour cloth of the door’s interior. He reached forward. His fingers ran over the nubby plastic of the area surrounding the lock and then rested on the smooth contour of the lock mechanism. He pushed it forward and heard the whine of the locks. A red indicator on the passenger lock appeared.

Kevin pulled his arm out and bent down again.

“It’s unlocked. I’m going to open the door now. Am I clear?”

“They’re both about fifty feet from you, and facing the other way, but they may turn around any minute. You’d better do it now.”

As he lifted the door handle and popped the door open, the shriek of a car alarm rent the air.

* * *

Even from the enclosed office, Erica could hear the alarm easily. Through the phone, it was piercing. She yanked the phone away from her ear instinctively.

Kevin fell backwards in surprise, and Erica could see him drop the phone. Barnett and Kaplan were already running in his direction. In his attempt to get away from the green car, Kevin scrambled around the corner directly into Barnett’s vision.

Erica felt helpless as she saw Kevin stand and look around desperately and then begin running away from Barnett.

“The Jeep!” she screamed at the window. “Get help from the people in the Jeep!”

As if on command, Kevin veered, heading in a direction that would cut off the slowly moving car. Barnett followed, but Kaplan ran toward the brown Taurus sedan they had arrived in.

Not knowing what else to do, Erica hung up the phone and dialed 911.

* * *

Kevin had never run faster in his life, glad he had lost those 30 extra pounds from high school. If he had still been as heavy as he used to, he would have been winded by now, and Barnett and Kaplan would be on top of him. As it was, his long legs were giving him a slight lead.

A sidewalk split the parking lot in half. He leaped over a row of hedges lining the sidewalk and leaped again into the other side of the lot where the Jeep was cruising, looking for a spot. He could see the passengers now, four of them, all adults. They weren’t even looking in his direction, apparently ignoring the car alarm.

When he crashed into the hood of the car, it screeched to a halt. The driver yelled at him.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Kevin ran around to the driver’s door. “Please, sir, you’ve got to help me. These two guys are after me. They say they’re the police, but they’re not.”

The driver, along with the other passengers, stared at him incredulously. Through the window, Kevin could see Barnett approaching the Jeep.

He knew he must have sounded as if he were raving, so he tried to calm his voice. Still, he must have sounded like a lunatic. “Please let me in!”

“Freeze!” Barnett was pointing a gun at him from the front of the Jeep. He circled slowly around, keeping the gun trained on Kevin.

With his left hand, Barnett withdrew a wallet from his jacket and flashed a badge at the occupants. “Virginia State Police. This man’s wanted for car theft.”

“He’s lying!” Kevin said. “Look at his badge. He’s not a policeman.”

The Jeep’s passengers, however, were not about to question a policeman apprehending a crazed criminal. Especially when the cop was holding a gun. They said nothing.

“That car alarm you hear,” Barnett said, “was the result of this suspect attempting to break in to a vehicle. We caught him in the act, and now he’s trying to get away.”

Kaplan stopped the Taurus in front of the Jeep and got out. He walked around, pulling handcuffs from his pocket.

Kevin knew it was no use trying to get help from these people. He didn’t resist as Kaplan pushed him against the Jeep, patted him down, handcuffed him, and led him to the car. Barnett rounded the car to get in. In the distance, Kevin heard sirens.

“You’re not going to wait for the Blacksburg police, Barnett?” Kevin said, sneering the name.

Kaplan shoved Kevin into the back seat. The man who had called himself Barnett six days ago slammed the door and looked back at Kevin from the front seat, his hollow gray eyes smiling.

“Allow me to introduce myself, Mr. Hamilton. My name is David Lobec.”

* * *

Erica bounded down the staircase two steps at a time. To get the police’s attention quickly, she’d told them that somebody had been shot in the commuter parking lot during a fight. When

she was convinced that the police were coming, she hung up and ran for the stairs, stopping only to retrieve her mace from the lab.

She got to the first floor and burst into the hallway, her lungs burning. She ran through the outer door, squinting as she stepped into the sun, and stopped.

To her right, the Jeep was slowly moving toward the main campus.. To her left, the flashing lights of a police car were visible cresting the hill. She quickly scanned the rest of the parking lot, but there was no sign of the brown Taurus.

They were gone.

CHAPTER 31

Kevin was driven to Ted Ishio's house, where they met a man named Vernon Francowiak. He was sickened when he saw how the house had been trashed in their search for the notebook. They waited at the house for thirty minutes, enough time for the cops to have left the commuter lot. Then the four of them returned to the university.

While Franco, as Bern had called him, waited with the car, Bern and Lobec led Kevin to Jacobson Hall's fifth floor. With every step, he prayed that Erica had taken the diamond specimen and left.

"Here it is," Bern said as they approached the lab. He looked at the number on the door.

"This is the lab."

"The key, Mr. Hamilton," Lobec said, holding out his hand.

"I don't have it."

Lobec nodded at Bern, who patted him down more thoroughly than when they had first caught him. Kevin was almost getting used to the process.

After a minute, Bern shrugged. "He's clean."

“Miss Jensen must have it. No matter.” Lobec withdrew a small kit from his pocket and took out two small slivers of metal. He inserted both into the lab’s deadbolt, and within twenty seconds he twisted the handle opening the lab.

Kevin was impressed. Still, he was nervous, and he didn’t want to let them think they had him scared. He tried to lighten up the situation. “That was fast. You must get locked out of your house a lot.”

“I’m glad you can still see the humor in this, Mr. Hamilton. Mr. Bern, wait outside while we look around the laboratory.”

Followed by Lobec, who had his gun drawn, Kevin entered the lab and breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that it was deserted. Erica’s purse was gone, and some papers were strewn on the floor near where it had been. He paid no attention to the experimental equipment, but Lobec walked directly to it.

Lobec first inspected the laser, then peered inside the chamber. “It appears that your purchase from LuminOptics was not wasted. The laser is still warm to the touch.”

Kevin’s stomach sank. Lobec realized what they had done.

“It appears Miss Jensen took the diamond with her.” Lobec turned away from the chamber and looked at Kevin. “You warned her. How?”

A grin spread across Kevin’s face. He shrugged.

“It doesn’t matter,” Lobec said. “I don’t think there’s any point in searching the laboratory. Even in her hurry, Miss Jensen wouldn’t have left the notebook. And we don’t want to dawdle in case she has called the police again. We should, however, check Mr. Ishio’s office to be sure she isn’t still here.”

A search of Ted's office revealed nothing more than that Erica had left in a hurry. She'd still had the presence of mind to lock both doors, though the gesture had been futile.

Inside the office, Lobec looked out at the parking lot below. "I see. She observed our chase from here. Although I'm surprised it took her so long to notify the police, she certainly reacted swiftly in escaping. Curious."

Once they were back in the Taurus, Lobec said, "I think it's safe to assume Miss Jensen is no longer in Blacksburg."

"What do we do now?" asked Bern from his seat beside Kevin. "She's got the notebook."

"Yes," Lobec said, training his steel gray eyes on Kevin, "but we have something equally valuable."

* * *

The Taurus headed straight to the Roanoke airport where Kevin and his three captors got on the most luxurious jet he had ever seen. His hands were cuffed behind him the entire time, but he was otherwise unrestrained. The plane trip lasted less than an hour. Even though he wasn't sure of their final destination because the window next to him was closed, the angle of the sun through the other windows of the plane indicated a north-easterly direction. At a hanger in an airport he couldn't identify, he was put into another car. As they exited the airport, he saw a sign confirming his suspicions. Dulles Airport, Washington.

Thirty minutes from Dulles, after a drive through lush horse farms and rolling farmland, the car turned into a long drive shielded from the afternoon sun by elms and oaks. It wound for what seemed like a mile and then the arbor opened to reveal a stunning white plantation-style mansion. The paint gleamed on the huge columns and stately frontispiece, indicating a recent restoration.

Kevin noted with discomfort that his entourage had made no attempt to disguise their route or even provide him with a blindfold. He knew exactly where they were and how to get back. Which meant they intended to kill him.

Lobec took him out of the car, released his handcuffs, and led him up the front steps into a marble-floored foyer. Large doors on each side flanked a spiral staircase straight out of *Gone with the Wind*. Lobec pointed to the door on the right. Kevin walked into a library with delicate Persian carpeting and handsome leather furniture. Few books lined the cherry shelving, which were instead filled with mementos and awards.

“Ah!” said a man sipping an iced tea in one of the library’s wing-backed chairs. “You’re right on time as usual, David.” The man stood up, stretching to a height four inches taller than Kevin. He walked over to Kevin with his hand outstretched. “Kevin Hamilton, I’m Clayton Tarnwell,” he said with a clipped Texas twang.

Kevin ignored the hand. “So you’re Clay. What do you want?”

With a bemused look, Tarnwell dropped his hand and returned to his chair. “Please sit down while we talk, Kevin. Would you like an iced tea?”

Kevin didn’t move. “I said, what do you want, Tarnwell, if that’s your real name?”

Tarnwell looked at Lobec. “A little like me, wouldn’t you say David?” To Kevin, he said, “That’s good. I’m not much for pleasantries unless it’s to get what I want. And I think you know what I want.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. Last Sunday, your goon here tried to kill me and my girlfriend, and we’ve been on the run ever since.”

“By the way, Clayton Tarnwell *is* my name. Have you ever heard of Tarnwell Mining and Chemicals?” Kevin shrugged. “No? That’s understandable. Our annual revenue is about \$1 billion, small potatoes in the mining and chemicals industry. But in three days, my company’s value will quadruple. Everyone in America will know my company’s name because of something I bought from your professor.”

Kevin remained impassive. Tarnwell arched an eyebrow and continued.

“I know that Erica Jensen paid over \$10,000 for a new laser, which could definitely be used in the process I bought. You see, like you, I’m a chemist.”

“Oh, you’re like me, huh? I don’t seem to recall ever killing someone because I didn’t get what I wanted.”

“If you mean Dr. Ward, he was trying to steal from me. I saw the risks and the possibilities of his process, and I was willing to invest in it, to make it work, to put my company and reputation on the line. As thanks for my willingness to take these risks, Michael Ward stole ten million dollars from me, which by the way, I don’t think I’ll ever see again. Not only that, but the money wasn’t enough for Michael. He had to take the Adamas process, too. It was, sad to say, a tragic situation, his wife and him dying in a fire like that.”

“That was fire was no accident.”

“That’s what the news reports said.”

“Give me a break. What about Herbert Stein? What about my father?”

“Yes, Michael did think I had Herbert Stein killed, but murders are very common in Houston. As for your father, his death was tragically unnecessary, but as I understand, David and Richard

were only defending themselves. You shot at them first. That's why they had to apprehend you the way they did."

Kevin ground his teeth. "You can't explain it all away that easily."

"I just did," Tarnwell said with a wicked smile. "Very easy, wasn't it? It's exactly what I'll tell anyone who asks if your girlfriend goes to the authorities with that notebook. What do I want? I want what I paid for. Nothing more, nothing less."

Lobec spoke up. "And the videotape."

Kevin tried to hide his surprised reaction, but it was too late. Lobec smiled.

Damn, Kevin thought. How did he know about that?

"Ah," Tarnwell said. "So Michael wasn't bluffing. Yes then. The videotape too."

"And I suppose you'll let me go free if she gives them to you."

"Of course."

"Bullshit."

"Why shouldn't I? Once I have Adamas, who do you think anyone will believe? A wealthy business man who is a pillar in the community, who has donated over a million dollars to charities and political causes around the state? Or a struggling student and his girlfriend who have recently had trouble with the police?"

Kevin walked over to the window and looked out at the lush green lawn. "And once you get the Adamas Blueprint, you'll be satisfied?"

"The Adamas Blueprint? You mean the notebook?"

"That's what Ward called it. He liked thinking up names for patents and new research methods. It got him more recognition in publications."

“It sounds like Michael.”

“All you want is the blueprint?”

“It’s all I’ve wanted from the first day Michael contacted me. In a way, Michael was trying to cheat both of us. If I had known you were one of the coinventors, I wouldn’t have left you out of the deal. In fact, I’m willing to pay you the balance of what I was going to pay Michael. How does \$5 million sound to you?”

* * *

Erica turned off the Chevy’s engine. She was stopped at the gas pump island of a Philips 66 truck stop just outside of Front Royal, Virginia, about an hour and a half west of Washington’s Beltway. She opened the door to the smell of diesel fuel and truck exhaust. The Philips 66’s parking lot was packed. It was 6:00 on Saturday night, and Erica wasn’t surprised at the congestion considering the heavy truck traffic she’d seen on I-81 for the past three hours.

When Kevin had been abducted, Erica immediately ran back to the lab and began gathering her belongings, including the notebook, videotape, and the diamond specimen, all the while terrified that Barnett and Kaplan would burst into the lab at any moment and kidnap her as well. The specimen had been difficult for her to dislodge without Kevin’s help, but after 10 minutes she worked it free. Then she ran to the truck, stopping only to pick up Ted Ishio’s cellular phone, the one Kevin had dropped during the chase.

On her way out of town, she hadn’t gone anywhere near Ted and Janice’s house, afraid that they would be waiting there for her. She headed west, away from the interstate, and then worked her way toward Roanoke over the back roads, getting lost several times on the twisting one-and-a-half-lane highways.

After filling up the enormous tank, Erica went into the convenience store and bought some coffee and a Hershey bar to tide her over until she got supper in Washington. She didn't know when or even if the kidnappers would try to contact her. She had called her apartment several times during the drive, hoping they had left a message for her on the answering machine, but all that was on it were four messages: a call from one of her friends, one from the hospital asking when she'd be in again, and two marketing calls. If she didn't hear from them by Sunday night, she had to conclude that they were torturing information out of Kevin. But she had no idea where to find him or who it was that had abducted him, leaving her with only one option. Given the situation, there was no alternative but to go to Congressman Sutter on her own and get his help in trying to find Kevin.

As she walked back to the truck, Erica heard a faint but distinctive sound, a periodic high-pitched bleat. She looked around to see if it came from someone else's vehicle, but it grew louder as she approached the Chevy. It was the ringing of a cellular phone.

As she got into the truck, the phone bleated again. It couldn't be Murray Hamilton's phone; they'd turned it off after the first time one of his business clients had called. Which meant it was Ted's cellular phone, the one Kevin had used to call her from the Virginia Tech parking lot. Erica tried not to get excited. It could very well be one of Ted's friends calling.

She waited through another ring, hesitant to pick it up. But the ringing was insistent. She flipped open the phone and clicked the TALK button to answer it.

"Hello?" she said.

"Erica Jensen," said an unmistakable Texas drawl, "I'm so glad we were able to contact you this way."

“Who is this?”

“As you might guess, I’m sort of reluctant to give my name out over the phone. I believe we both have something the other wants.”

“What have you done with Kevin?”

“Why, I haven’t done anything. He’s right here. Would you like to speak with him?”

“Put him on.”

“I will, but you didn’t say please.”

After a slight pause, she heard Kevin’s voice, and she almost cried. “Erica? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. I got out before they came back.”

“I know. Don’t worry about me, and don’t deal with them. Stick to our plan...”

She heard a scuffle on the other end of the line. Then the Texan was back on the phone.

“That’s too bad. I thought we convinced Kevin of our good intentions. I even offered him \$5 million for what my former friend Michael Ward called the Adamas Blueprint. You know what he did? He tried to spit in my face.”

“Good.”

“You two are a pair, aren’t you? Well, it doesn’t matter. Erica, do you want Kevin to live?”

Erica’s breath caught in her throat.

“I said do you want Kevin to live?”

“Yes.”

“Then we’ll have to come to an agreement. Murray Hamilton’s truck should get you to Washington, which will be much more convenient for us. I will have the two men you met earlier take Kevin and meet you behind a warehouse on the Potomac. The address is...”

“No. I haven’t done this before, but I’m not stupid. It has to be someplace public.”

A second’s pause. “All right. Where?”

Erica had lived in Washington during a summer job after her sophomore year in college. She worked downtown, but hadn’t had a car at the time. Instead, she avoided the traffic and the crush of the Metro by biking in each day from her apartment in Arlington, Virginia through the Mall. On her route she had crossed one of the busiest bridges in the Washington area, the Arlington Memorial Bridge, directly across from the Lincoln Memorial. It was almost always busy, especially during rush hour, and the moment she thought of the bridge, she got the inkling of a plan.

“The middle of the Arlington Memorial Bridge, north side. The only ones I want to see there are Kevin and the two I’ve already met. If I see an army of guys out there, I’ll leave and send a copy of Adamas to every newspaper in the country.”

Another pause, probably to discuss the risks of the location. “All right, Erica. The Arlington Memorial bridge tomorrow at noon.”

“It has to be Monday morning,” she said, trying to stall for time.

“Monday? Schedule is important to me, Erica.” Her nerves grated every time the Texan said her name.

“If you want the notebook, you’ll have to wait.” She looked at the backpack with the notebook in it. “I can’t get to where it’s hidden until tomorrow night.”

A sigh. “Seven AM Monday morning. Oh, and there’s something else I want you to bring. A particular videotape that you found. You’ll have access to that as well, I assume?”

“Yes,” Erica said, reluctantly. Although it didn’t show much, it *was* a link between Kevin and the Adamas process.

“Good. I can’t afford for you to miss this appointment, Erica. If you’re not there, they will never find Kevin’s body. If you don’t have the notebook and the videotape, they will never find Kevin’s body. If you bring the police, yada yada yada. Get it?”

“I get it.”

“I’m glad we got to talk finally. I’m sure you’re just as smart as you are pretty. Don’t make an error in judgment like Michael Ward did.” Then the phone went dead.

She turned it off and dropped it on the seat in revulsion, realizing the Texan had gotten pictures of her from somewhere. There wasn’t time to stew on that. She started the truck, pulled down on the stalk shifter, and floored the gas. She had to get to Washington and see whether her plan might actually work.

CHAPTER 32

“Hey! Hey out there! Franco!” Kevin continued to pound on the bedroom door. “I have a problem in here.”

Kevin stepped back as the door swung inward. Franco, still dressed in his Italian-style gray suit, stepped through.

“I told you dinner wasn’t for another hour.”

“I know,” Kevin said, “but there’s a problem with the bathroom. I think the toilet’s broken.”

Franco came farther into the mansion’s bedroom and closed and locked the door behind him, putting the deadbolt key in his pocket. The room was sparsely furnished with a bed, a nightstand and lamp, a small writing desk, and a cane-backed chair. All decorations had been removed from the room just before his arrival. Darker areas were visible where pictures used to hang. Kevin had tried opening the window earlier, but it was nailed shut. If he broke it and attempted to jump the twenty feet to the ground, the guard posted outside his door would be alerted and capture him before he could climb through. Besides, he had no doubt it was hooked up to the alarm system. A tiny bathroom with a glass-enclosed shower, a sink, and a toilet was separated from the

bedroom by a louvered door. As with the bedroom, all of its contents had been removed except for a hand towel.

“Did you take a dump in it?” Franco asked, walking toward the bathroom but never taking his eyes off Kevin.

“No, I just took a piss, and then it started to overflow after I flushed it.”

“Sit down in that chair while I take a look. And I don’t want to see you get up.” Kevin did as he was told. Franco went into the bathroom.

Kevin was somewhat surprised at how good he was at lying, considering he almost never did it. The toilet was stopped up, but Kevin knew exactly why. He had torn a piece of the sheet from the bottom of his bed and stuffed the wad into the toilet so that it couldn’t be seen. Only a plumber’s tool would be able to get at it, and he didn’t know of many plumbers that worked on Saturday nights or Sundays. Of course, if they thought it was an emergency, they could get someone, but Kevin thought they wouldn’t for a problem this minor. All he was hoping was that they would let him use another bathroom.

Franco came out of the bathroom after a minute.

“What’s the problem?” Kevin said.

“Do I look like a fucking plumber? How the hell should I know?”

“What am I supposed to do? I can’t use that toilet. It’s filled to the top with water. If I try to flush it, it’s going to flood the whole room.”

“I thought you college guys were smart. You said you just went. If you have to go, don’t flush. Now don’t bother me again.”

The door slammed shut. Kevin could only wait in the barren room, helpless.

* * *

Two hours later, dinner still hadn't come. Kevin was famished; his lunch was still lying in the Virginia Tech commuter lot. He lay in the bed on top of the covers, staring at the ceiling in the dwindling twilight coming through the window. The events of the last week weighed heavily on him. He'd never experienced so much death and destruction. In fact, the only close person he'd lost up to this point had been his mother.

Now he was just like Erica. No parents. No family.

During the drive to Virginia and the subsequent race to get the experiment completed, he'd thought little about his father. When he did, it was only for seconds at a time. Now that his own death was imminent, he had plenty of time to think about his father's. He didn't cry, but he felt an emptiness, a loneliness he didn't expect. Although he hadn't been to church in years, he thought about heaven and wondered if his mother and father were there, together. Despite everything his father had done, he hoped so. He surprised himself by soundlessly mouthing a prayer.

Before he could finish, the door swung open. Kevin sat up.

A tray came through, held by Franco. Following him was David Lobec.

"I understand from Mr. Francowiak that you have had some plumbing problems."

Franco placed the tray on the desk. The only things on it were a paper plate holding a sandwich and potato chips and a paper cup turned upside down.

"Boy, you guys are really going all out," Kevin said, pointing at the meager meal. "You're just trying to butter me up, right? I mean, before you offer me \$10 million instead of \$5 million."

"You are quite an amusing young man, Mr. Hamilton," Lobec said. "I am sorry that we haven't been able to provide more luxurious accommodations, but I am sure you understand our

position. It wouldn't do to have you escape before we have the Adamas notebook in our possession. This is obviously the most secure room in the house. Nevertheless, someone will be outside the room at all times."

"You could have at least given me a working toilet."

"Yes, you're correct. I have decided to let Mr. Francowiak and his replacements take you to another bathroom down the hall. I have instructed him to let you use it only if you behave. If you attempt to escape or cause any mischief, he will tie you to the bed for the rest of your stay. Is that clear?"

"If I'm good, do I get a lollipop?"

Lobec came to within a foot of Kevin. "Do you realize, Mr. Hamilton, that if Miss Jensen does not meet us at the Arlington Bridge on Monday, you will die?"

"You're going to kill me anyway, along with Erica if she's there. In fact, the only way I'll live is if she doesn't show up. Then you need me."

"You can believe what you want, Mr. Hamilton, but I can assure you that no one wants this situation peacefully resolved more than I. Now, I have some business to attend to out of town. I will be back Monday morning to escort you to the rendezvous."

"I'm looking forward to it."

"Enjoy your meal. Mr. Francowiak will escort you to the bathroom when you are finished."

As he flashed a last corrupt smile at Kevin, Lobec followed Franco out the door, leaving Kevin wondering if he had a chance in hell of getting out of this.

* * *

At first apprehensive that the sandwich contained poison, Kevin quickly dismissed the idea as ludicrous. If they wanted to kill him, it would have happened hours ago, probably under torture. Tarnwell had asked him several questions about Adamas, but he obviously believed that the process was useless while the original notebook was still out there. And even with his memory, Kevin wouldn't be able to accurately reproduce the entire experiment anyway.

He wolfed down the sandwich and potato chips and washed them down with several cupfuls of water from the sink. Somewhat invigorated from the food, he prepared himself for a task that in any ordinary setting would have been distasteful. Unfortunately, he didn't have the luxury of maintaining his civility.

With the water running to mask the sound, he urinated into the sink.

After he was finished, he knocked on the door.

"Hey, Franco, I'm through with dinner."

The door opened. "Stand over there," said Franco, pointing to the chair that was now by the window. Kevin did as he was told, and Franco took the tray into the hall.

He came back in and said, "You need to hit the can before you go to sleep?"

"Yeah."

Franco drew a Beretta automatic and waved it toward the hallway. "Come on."

Kevin, with Franco and the gun at his back, walked down the hall he had come through earlier. A Persian runner stretched down the middle of the hallway and polished oak flanked it to either side. Antique tables lined the hall at regular intervals, and fine tapestries hung where mirrors were absent. Intricate wainscoting ran the length of the hall. In all, Kevin supposed the

effect was to be one of lavish opulence, but he found it overdone, as if someone had given an unlimited budget to a fledgling interior decorator.

The mansion was large enough so that the hall formed a complete circuit joined by the large staircase at the back of the house. A balcony overlooked the balustrade but ended about halfway around the circuit, giving way to several rooms. From his first walk to his room at the front of the house, Kevin had seen only one other room with its door open, and that had been a bedroom.

“Here,” Franco said when they had walked about fifty feet down the hallway. Kevin turned and saw him pointing at a door on the interior of the mansion, obviously chosen because it had no windows.

Kevin opened it to find a bathroom to equal the unbridled opulence of the hallway. Marble floors, brass fixtures, beveled mirrors, all shined and polished to perfection. He flicked the light switch and track lighting came on accompanied by a soft fan.

Franco shoved him into the spacious bathroom. “Go ahead.”

The door was still wide open, and Kevin began to shut it. Franco pushed it back, almost slamming into the wall.

“Uh-uh.”

Kevin was afraid that he wouldn’t get the privacy he needed, but he tried to appear angry. “Can’t I take a shit in peace? Where the hell am I going to go?”

Franco thought about it for a second, appraised the room’s dimensions, and then relented, releasing the door. “Okay, but I don’t want to hear that lock click. We got the key downstairs, so don’t bother.”

“Thank you,” said Kevin and closed the door.

Having taken care of his physical hygiene back in the other bathroom, he started to quietly search the cupboards for anything that might be of use to him, hoping that they hadn't cleaned this bathroom out as well as the one in his room. The cabinet under the sink was bare, as were the six drawers to either side. He was careful not to bang the cabinet or drawers for fear of alerting Franco to what he was really doing. It was almost two minutes before he got to the cabinet behind the mirror. Still nothing. Kevin looked around the large bathroom, about to give up on finding anything, when he saw a linen closet which doubled as a stand up mirror.

The closet had no handle, and the edge cutout to open it had been so ingeniously integrated into the mirror's design that he almost hadn't noticed the door. He tiptoed over to it and held his breath as he opened it.

Six evenly-spaced shelves went from top to bottom, and immediately Kevin could see the bare white space. His hope faded, but he decided to look more thoroughly anyway in case something small had been missed. He began on the bottom shelf and made his way up.

The first five shelves were empty, and it appeared that the top one, which lay about two inches above his eye level, was as well. He stood on his toes to reach to the back. Kevin caught a glimpse of color toward the back of the shelf.

He strained as much as he could to see to the back, and he became excited when he saw a number of bottles and cans shoved together. He couldn't be sure from this angle, but he thought one said ammonia and another that could have been a blue and white bottle of Clorox bleach.

Whoever had emptied out the bathroom must have been shorter than Kevin. From a lower angle, the person would never have been able to see the cleaning fluids bunched on the top shelf. It was exactly what Kevin had been hoping for.

He reached his hand to the back and the tips of his fingers brushed against one of the cans. He felt it nudge and gasped involuntarily when he realized it was about to fall. The noise would surely raise suspicions outside. He strained even harder until it felt as if his arm would come out of the socket and was able to steady the can.

He looked at his watch. He'd been in the bathroom five minutes now. Any longer and Franco might barge in on him without knocking. He didn't have time to inventory what was up there. It would have to wait for the next visit.

Kevin silently closed the closet door, then walked heel-to-toe over to the toilet and flushed it. After washing his hands and toweling off, he opened the door. Franco stood on the other side of the hallway with his gun drawn.

"I guess this one worked," he said.

Kevin nodded, stepping into the hall. "I like this bathroom a lot better."

CHAPTER 33

The next morning a new guard took Kevin to the same lavish bathroom he'd been to the night before. This time he tested the bottom shelf and found that it was sufficiently strong to bear his weight. While the fan covered what little noise Kevin made, he inventoried the items in the cabinet.

A gallon jug half full of generic ammonia, a full bottle of the Clorox bleach he'd seen last night, a spray bottle of Windex, a can of lubricating oil which was what he'd probably almost tipped over last night, two small refillable bottles of nonabrasive tile cleaner, a tube of super glue, a brown vial of iodine, a pack of Q-tips, three sponges, and a rag. That was it. Almost all of them were items he expected to find in a bathroom. The glue and oil were unusual, but he'd heard of people keeping weirder stuff in their bathrooms.

Whatever he was going to do, it would have to be with these items. MacGyver he was not, but one thing he did know was how to mix chemicals to produce an effect.

Kevin immediately saw several possibilities. He stuffed the tube of super glue into one sock and the vial of iodine into the other, knowing that they might be seen in his jeans pockets. The Q-tips might come in handy so he took 20 out of the box and put them in his underwear. He needed

the ammonia too, but it would have to wait. He put away the rest of the items, flushed the toilet, and exited the bathroom.

After lunch, Kevin was able to make another trip to the bathroom. He ran the water in the sink and emptied one of the bottles of tile cleaner, which would be small enough to fit in his waistband and go unnoticed. As far from the door as he could get so that the guard wouldn't smell the fumes, Kevin poured some of the ammonia into the bottle until it was full. After capping the ammonia and putting it away, he waved his arms to get what fumes remained sucked up by the fan. Finally, he took one of the sponges and the rag. The sponge he put down his pants, along with the bottle in his waistband. He wrapped the rag around his ankle and pulled his sock tight over it.

As usual, he flushed the toilet and began the walk toward his room. As he did so, he felt his sock inch down under his pant leg. The rag began to fall loose. It flopped against the inside of his pants, but he didn't dare alter his walk to compensate. He felt it nudging lower and lower until, only five feet from the door, he was sure it was peeking out from the bottom of his cuff. If the guard saw it, he would check Kevin to see if he was carrying anything else and that would lead to a search of his room. Whatever hopes he had to escape would be over.

Kevin walked into the room and turned. He sighed with relief to see the bedroom door closing behind him. He finally looked down and saw the corner of the rag brushing against the floor, about half of it exposed. If the guard had looked down for any reason, he would have seen it.

Kevin picked the rag up and took the sponge and bottle of ammonia out of his pants. Then he went to the bathroom and removed the other items from under the sink. He thought about a more

elaborate hiding place but decided that if they made a deliberate search of the room, no hiding place would be good enough.

He looked at the array of items before him. The guard only opened the door to bring in food, and Kevin hoped he would keep to that regimen because the desk was now covered with illicit objects. He had to work quickly to be done in time for dinner.

He spread the rag flat on the desk to protect the desk surface. The hand towel from his bathroom would have done just as well, but it would get much dirtier, which might draw attention. And he couldn't hide it because it might be missed.

On top of the rag, he placed a thin paper plate, which would provide a flat surface but soak through. It was an extra from lunch that he'd removed from under the first plate.

He uncapped the bottle of iodine and poured some of it onto the plate. Then he poured a little water from his paper cup and mixed them together using one of the Q-Tips. To this mixture, he added some ammonia and stirred.

After several minutes, the mixture became a sticky paste, Kevin was pleased to see. While he stirred, he remembered the story about how Erica and Daryl Grotman had met, his injury from mixing a home-made contact explosive. Ammonia triiodide to be exact. With his friends in the chemistry department, Kevin had made it himself years ago at Texas A&M, along with a few other types of explosives. It had just been for fun then. They'd flick quarter-inch drops of the purple concoction onto the sidewalk, then stand back and let it dry. When it did, people would walk by and step on the dried droplets, setting off a pop about half as powerful as a firecracker. The person would jump and Kevin and his friends would laugh hysterically.

But Daryl Grotman found out how dangerous it could be in larger amounts. And from the state of the mixture in front of him, Kevin was confident that he'd remembered how to prepare it correctly.

After he was sure it was ready, he hurriedly emptied out the rest of the iodine bottle into the sink. The mixture would dry quickly in the open air, and he had to get it stored quickly before he put a hole in the desk. Kevin scooped the paste carefully into the empty iodine bottle. He capped it and wiped it clean with the corner of the rag, which was now soaked with iodine. Then he ran water over the paper plate to remove the remaining residue and rinsed the rag out. All of the objects went back under the sink.

The whole process had taken about two hours, which left him with plenty of time to go over his plan. He stood at the window, staring at the woods flanking the front drive. They were thick with foliage from a warm, wet summer. They would be perfect for a nighttime escape.

* * *

Kevin's dinner consisted of another sandwich and chips. Apparently the chef had the weekend off. Kevin didn't really mind. It was the way he usually ate anyway.

Twenty minutes later, Franco was back. As he cleaned up the remnants of the meal, he asked if Kevin needed to go to the bathroom. Kevin declined. There were still about two hours of daylight left. He had to wait for dark.

During the wait, Kevin wondered if his plan would actually work. Despite his efforts, the plan still relied on a great amount of luck, and he would be making it up as he went along once he got to the woods. But he was always bothered by people who passively accepted their fate, letting events happen and taking what they could get. Kevin believed that he had to make his own luck,

even if that meant running into fate head on. Tonight was definitely going to be a test of that philosophy.

Finally it was dark. Kevin quietly leaned the chair against the door and pushed the top of the cane-backed chair up to the knob. He removed the bottle of ammonia triiodide from its hiding place and poured six-inch-diameter circles on the floor six inches from where the chair legs were wedged against the floor.

He closed the bottle and put the remaining triiodide and the super glue in his waistband. Then he moved the chair back to its normal position at the desk and turned off the lights. Standing close to the door, Kevin knocked and told Franco he was ready for the bathroom. The door swung open, and Kevin noted with relief that the door's arc did not overlap the painted circles. Franco didn't see them, or if he did, he didn't remark on them.

Once in the bathroom, Kevin poured another larger circle on the bottom of the under-sink cabinet. He used up the rest of the triiodide and set the bottle aside. From the tall cabinet, he retrieved the bottle of Clorox, the ammonia, and the can of lubricating oil. He put the can of oil next to the triiodide circle under the sink. Then he poured most of the Clorox down the sink and waited. When he thought the triiodide had enough time to dry, he poured some ammonia into the bottle of Clorox, screwed on the lid tightly, and placed the mixture and the bottle of ammonia next to the ammonia triiodide circle. He closed the cabinet door and knocked on the door, knowing he didn't have much time.

When the door opened, Franco said, "Did you take a leak?"

"Of course I did," Kevin said, too defensively.

"Then flush the toilet, for God's sake."

With horror, Kevin realized he had completely forgotten about the facade. As he walked quickly to the toilet and pushed the handle, he told himself he couldn't afford any more mistakes like that.

"Happy?" he said.

"Come on," Franco said, pushing Kevin into the hall.

Kevin tried to walk casually down the hall, but the urge to run was strong. He had only a minute at most. At last, he opened the door to the room, slowly, to avoid a fast change in air pressure that might set off the explosive. Kevin cast his eyes downward, peering to see the dark spots on the floor. If he stepped on one of the circles, he might lose a foot. He turned without moving farther into the room and closed the door behind him. Franco gave him a funny look, probably wondering why he was doing it instead of letting Franco, but Kevin didn't have time to worry about it.

When the door was closed, he heard the rattling of the lock. When it was silent again, Kevin took the super glue from beneath the sink and squirted it into the lock mechanism.

He went over to the chair and lifted it, carrying it to the door, always keeping an eye on the two purple dots on the floor. With the top of the chair wedged under the door knob, he placed it gently on the floor and shoved until it was held tightly in position. He glanced at the watch they'd let him keep. He only had seconds left. He needed to get to the window.

Hand towel and rag in hand, he moved the desk so that the top was even with the window. Luckily, the desk was light enough so that he could lift it without making noise. He sat up on the desk with his feet toward the window. Kevin waited.

He didn't have to wait long. A loud bang echoed through the hallway, followed almost instantly by another, larger explosion. The concoction had worked exactly as planned. The mixture of ammonia and bleach had blown the bottle apart as it formed gas, setting off the ammonia triiodide contact explosive poured onto the shelf next to it, igniting the can of flammable oil and bursting the bottle of ammonia. If he was lucky, a fire was now raging in the bathroom.

His answer came a second later as an ear-splitting alarm sounded throughout the house, no doubt set off by the smoke detector. He heard the guard outside yell "Motherfuck!" and then race down the hall. Now was his chance. He hoped they were too distracted by the fire to worry about him.

Kevin held on to the desk and kicked at the window with both his feet. The glass shattered. Normally it would have set off the alarm, but the fire had already started it. As he had hoped, the fire alarm and the burglar alarm were one and the same.

The cross struts of the window splintered but held and the glass shards were caught by the screen on the other side. More shouting came from down the hall, but it didn't sound like it was aimed at him. He concentrated on the struts, kicking them until they separated from the sturdy window pane. He cleaned the remaining shards sticking out of the window with the hand towel and rag wrapped around his hand.

With the glass shards out of the way, Kevin raised the screen and looked over the edge. No guards were in sight. Twenty feet below the window was a hedge about four feet high. To his left was the top of the portico covering the front porch. He had hoped there would be a car that he could take, but a quick scan of the parking lot to his far right revealed it to be empty.

Another shout down the hall. This time Kevin heard his name. Footsteps pounded toward the room. He began to climb out feet first.

The lock rattled.

“Hurry up!” someone said.

“I’m trying!” yelled Franco.

“Open it!”

“It won’t work!” said Franco. “That fucker did something to the lock.”

Kevin’s legs dangled over the side. He slid his waist across the edge and supported himself with his elbows.

“Forget about the goddam lock!”

The door shuddered as someone kicked it. It held, but several more would cave in the flimsy wood.

He had to jump now. As Kevin pushed off, another kick caused part of the frame to crack. Kevin saw the chair slide three inches toward the purple spots. Then he was freefalling.

If he hit a sturdy branch in the hedge, his ankle could be easily twisted or he could even break his leg. His butt came in contact with the hedge first, but the myriad tiny branches brought him to a gentle stop. The hedge’s sharp needles scraped him in dozens of places, but otherwise he was fine.

Above him, a third kick impacted the door in the room, immediately followed by twin explosions as the chair legs hit the ammonia triiodide.

“Holy shit!” Franco yelled. “He’s got a gun!”

Shots blasted into the room.

“What the hell are you doing?” screamed the other voice. “We can’t kill him!”

Their voices lowered, becoming inaudible to Kevin. He didn’t care. In a few seconds they’d realize that he was no longer in the room. He had to get to the forest before that happened.

He rolled off the top of the hedge and crouched on the ground with his back to the front porch, ready to sprint.

A chill gripped his stomach as he heard a voice behind him say, “Very good, Mr. Hamilton.”

He slowly turned to see David Lobec and Clayton Tarnwell standing on the porch twenty feet from him. They must have been there all along, shielded from the second story window by the portico. Kevin didn’t even consider running. Lobec had a pistol trained on him.

“Even in this light, Mr. Hamilton, I can assure you that I could hit you from this range. I can tell you from experience that getting shot in the leg is not pleasant.” He threw a sideways glance at Tarnwell. “Didn’t I tell you this would be amusing?”

CHAPTER 34

Franco, still huffing from his mad dash down the stairs, led Kevin up the front steps until he was facing Lobec and Tarnwell.

“When did you know?” Kevin asked as he was patted down by Franco.

Lobec smiled, and Kevin knew that he’d been set up.

“From the beginning?”

“He’s clean,” Franco said.

“I know that you are a resourceful man, Mr. Hamilton. You are not the type to sit back and wait for something to happen.”

Kevin looked at Tarnwell. “And the chemicals?”

Tarnwell nodded. “When you stopped up your toilet, David told me about this idea he had. I couldn’t resist. Being a chemist myself, I knew a few mixtures you could brew from what we left up there. You seem to know some yourself.”

“The key,” Lobec said, “was not to make the availability of the chemicals too obvious. We had to make reasonably sure you would find them while not tipping our hand.”

“And you just waited here until I climbed out the window.”

“We had arranged for all paths to lead you to this point, but we did not know exactly how you would get here. That would have spoiled the surprise.”

“We surely didn’t want that,” Tarnwell said.

At least Kevin had the satisfaction of causing serious damage to the expensive mansion. “Did you want me to destroy two rooms in your house?”

“As a matter of fact, I’m having the entire second floor refurbished next month. I just bought this place, and it doesn’t suit me. You could consider tonight the groundbreaking ceremony.”

“Glad I could help,” Kevin sneered.

“Now, Mr. Hamilton,” Lobec said, “as I stated earlier, any attempt on your part to escape would force me to have you restrained. Thankfully, you did not disappoint us.”

* * *

When Hamilton was safely locked in another bedroom, Tarnwell motioned to Lobec to close the library’s door. He poured a snifter of Courvoisier and took a hand-rolled Cuban cigar from the mahogany humidor. Tarnwell noticed that Lobec stayed far on the other side of the room as he lit the cigar.

“Care for one, David?” he asked innocently.

“No, thank you.”

Tarnwell blew a smoke ring in Lobec’s direction, then closed his eyes as he sipped the cognac. After a long pause to savor the taste, he swallowed and opened his eyes. “Fine job tonight, David. I hope your plan for tomorrow is just as good. Tell me about it.”

Still standing at the other side of the library, Lobec’s eyes followed the smoke ring until it dissipated. “It’s very simple really. I will have two men in separate cars posted at each end of the

Arlington Bridge. They can't get there too early or police may stop to ask why they are holding up traffic. We will let Miss Jensen approach, if she is not already there. Once I verify that she has the notebook, we make the exchange and let them leave."

Tarnwell raised an eyebrow. "You let them leave?"

"At least give them that impression. Since Mr. Bern and I must be on foot, it would be risky to terminate them in the middle of the bridge, too much attention would be drawn to us, with no way to escape easily."

"Then where do you get them?"

"My men have instructions to take them out at the end of the bridge. A few short bursts should do the trick. They can then make their escape, with no connection to us."

"Don't you think they might have thought of that?" said Tarnwell.

"Of course, but there really is no defense. My men have automatic rifles. No matter if they leave by foot or by car, they will be vulnerable."

"What about the water?"

"Unlikely. Since we will be in the middle of the bridge, they would have to swim a quarter of a mile to get to the shore. Even if they tried something as foolish as jumping, my men would have no trouble picking them off while they are still in the river."

"And the police?"

"She has no proof. The police won't help her."

Lobec's reasoning seemed valid. "It sounds like you've got things under control, David. Just make sure you get the right notebook. We don't have time for any more delays. Just in case Miss

Jensen doesn't show up, I will be handling our contingency. Call me on my cell phone when you've succeeded."

Lobec turned to leave, but Tarnwell wanted to remind him of something.

"David, I hope you haven't forgotten about your brother and his family. Because I haven't. I really want to see that notebook in my hands tomorrow, and I wouldn't want to see a slipup on your part harm them."

Lobec narrowed his eyes but said nothing. Tarnwell smiled. Lobec understood. With a wave of his hand, Tarnwell dismissed Lobec, who left the room. After the door was closed, Tarnwell pressed an intercom button next to his chair.

"Come in, Richard," he said.

Through the library's other door came Richard Bern. He stood uncomfortably in front of Tarnwell.

"You wanted to see me, Mr. Tarnwell?"

"Yes, Richard, I did. You have a bright future in this company. You've become one of my most trusted employees, and you know that I reward my employees well."

"You sure do, Mr. Tarnwell. I'm lucky to be working for you."

"Thank you, Richard. That's nice of you to say. The reason I asked you in here is because I need someone I trust on my side. You see, David is a very competent individual, but I'm afraid he may be planning something silly after the operation is completed tomorrow morning. I need your help."

"Sure, Mr. Tarnwell, anything."

“Once you have the item you are receiving from Erica Jensen tomorrow, never take your eyes off of it or David. I’m trusting you to make sure it gets back to me safely. It contains something that will make us all very wealthy, you included. This will be the most important job you’ve ever had. Don’t let anything stop you from getting that notebook to me. Do whatever it takes, I mean anything. Are you up for that?”

“You pay the bills.”

“Good,” Tarnwell said. “I’m looking forward to seeing you tomorrow.”

Sensing that Tarnwell was finished with him, Bern left.

Tarnwell turned the cigar over in his fingers, treating himself to one more relaxing moment. In less than 24 hours, moments like these would be few. Even with the Adamas process, it would be hard work becoming the richest man in the world.

* * *

After an almost sleepless night tied to a four-poster bed, Kevin’s muscles ached, and his eyes were gummed from sleeping two straight nights without removing his contacts. At 6:00 in the morning, Richard Bern loosened his bonds. Bern was uncharacteristically dressed in gray sweatpants and a blue, hooded sweatshirt. He led Kevin to a different bathroom, but this time Kevin was afforded no privacy. The door remained open while he urinated.

He was given water but no breakfast. Kevin tried to suppress his growling stomach. He wasn’t sure, but he thought he could hear Bern chuckling behind him as they walked downstairs and into the library.

Lobec stood as Kevin and Bern entered the room. He was already dressed, but like Bern, did not wear a suit. Instead, he wore jogging shorts, a long-sleeved cotton pullover, and an Orioles baseball cap.

“I hope you slept well despite the conditions,” Lobec said.

Kevin had caught a glance at himself in the upstairs mirror and knew he looked like hell.

“Where’s Tarnwell? Doesn’t he want to join in on the fun, too?”

“Mr. Tarnwell had some business at the Capitol this morning. He’s quite involved in fund raising.” He looked at his watch. “Are you ready to meet Miss Jensen?”

“I don’t have much choice, do I?”

“Of course not.”

Lobec nodded at Bern, who cuffed Kevin’s hands in front of him. The three of them went outside to a Ford waiting for them at the mansion entrance. Franco was in the driver’s seat.

“Just the four of us?” said Kevin as they pulled away from the house. “I would have thought you’d bring the whole goon squad.”

“Mr. Francowiak will be dropping us off. There is no reason to upset Miss Jensen unnecessarily with a large contingent.” Even though Kevin couldn’t tell from the smooth voice, he knew Lobec was lying. Lobec probably already had men stationed around the bridge, waiting to tell him when Erica arrived.

Forty minutes later, Franco stopped at the eastern side of the Arlington National Cemetery. It was a ten minute walk to the bridge.

As Bern dragged him from the car, Kevin said, “So what’s the plan?”

“We will escort you to the middle of the bridge,” said Lobec, “where Miss Jensen should be waiting for us. She will leave the notebook and videotape on the sidewalk and you will be free to go.”

Kevin withheld a contemptuous chuckle and held up his cuffed hands. “Can I at least get these off?”

“I don’t think so. You have already shown a penchant for causing trouble. I will release your hands before we make the exchange.”

Bern pulled the hood over his head, and they began walking toward the Arlington Memorial Bridge. The western face of the Lincoln Memorial was still in shadows, and in the distance Kevin could see the Washington Monument and Capitol. They climbed down the incline, crossed a busy interchange, and walked onto the north side of the bridge.

The bridge was essentially a six-lane road with fifteen-foot-wide sidewalks on both sides. Cement railings lined the edge, with lamps embedded in square pillars every twenty feet. The half-mile span arched over the Potomac 75 feet below. A fine mist rose from the river’s placid surface, and the rising sun cast long shadows across the water.

As Kevin expected, several early morning exercisers jogged or biked across the bridge. Traffic was brisk, but not heavy. That would change nearer to 8:00, especially on the other side, where traffic was going from the Virginia suburbs into the District. No cars were allowed to park on the bridge at any time, which was probably why Lobec had agreed to the location. There was nowhere for the police to observe the transaction without being obvious.

That left only two ways for Erica to meet them. She could either pull up in a car and leave it for a few seconds while they made the trade, or she could walk. He didn’t like either scenario.

Lobec and Bern could easily force themselves into a car with him and Erica. And if she walked, they had to trust Lobec to let them get to the end of the bridge and whatever mode of transportation she had waiting. After the past two days, Kevin trusted Lobec about as much as he'd trust a weasel in a hamster-laden Habitrail.

They reached the center of the bridge and stopped next to a cement pillar. They stood facing traffic, scanning both directions. Kevin looked at his watch. It was 6:57.

From a distance, it was difficult to tell one walker from another, and Lobec and Bern had several false starts when they saw lone women coming toward them. When they realized they were mistaken, they relaxed and began scanning again.

The traffic heading toward Virginia suddenly stopped, blocked by a cab that had come to a halt about 100 yards past them. A single woman got out, looked both directions, and began walking toward them.

Kevin had trouble seeing her face through his dirty contacts. The tall, slender form matched Erica's height, but her hair did not cascade over her shoulders as Erica's did. The woman wore a T-shirt and shorts and carried a bag at her side.

Despite his blurred vision, Kevin had no doubt. The distinctive, purposeful stride and long legs gave her away. It was Erica.

* * *

On her cab ride from the L'Enfant Plaza Metro station, Erica had been careful to look out for any signs that she was being followed. In fact, for the last day and a half, she'd carried out an almost paranoid observation of her surroundings. If Kevin's abductors knew what she was about to try, it would certainly fail.

Up ahead, Kevin made no sign that he recognized her. She couldn't see the two men behind him clearly. One wore sunglasses and a baseball cap and the other's head was covered by a hood. She guessed that they were the same two that had kidnapped Kevin from the parking lot at Virginia Tech.

Erica didn't see anyone else, but that only made her more nervous. She knew they had to be around somewhere and thought of all the clichés. A parked car with a man reading a newspaper, a sidewalk vendor, a jogger taking a slow walk to cool down. But as far as she could tell, there was no one else around besides the normal traffic. She didn't like it.

She walked slowly toward them, trying to detect any unusual movement in her periphery. Footsteps pounded behind her. She clutched the bag close to her chest and whirled around to see a sixty-year-old woman focusing on the ground as she jogged past Erica. Erica tried to calm herself and continued toward the middle of the bridge.

When she was fifty feet from Kevin and his escorts, she moved toward the side of the bridge and held the bag over the railing as she walked. It was a concrete railing about a foot wide and at shoulder level, so Erica had to stay close to the edge with her arm outstretched. Inside the bag was a kayaking pack she'd bought yesterday at an outdoor store. She'd wrapped the pack in a canvas bag to hide the fact that it was waterproof.

Thirty feet away from Kevin, she stopped. She could tell from this distance that she was right about the men's identities. Barnett and Kaplan. Barnett was in jogging shorts and a cap, and Kaplan's bulky frame looked at home in the sweatpants and sweatshirt he wore. She could also see that Kevin's hands were cuffed in front of him. They shoved him and began to walk toward her.

“Don’t come any closer, Barnett, or whatever the hell your name is,” Erica said, shaking the bag. “I’ll drop the notebook in the river.”

“If you must know, Miss Jensen, my name is David Lobec. To my left is Richard Bern. How do I know you that you have what I want in that bag.” Lobec held a pistol to Kevin’s right, out of sight of the passing traffic.

“First, I want to know if Kevin’s all right.”

Lobec nodded for Kevin to speak.

“Except for a couple of bruises,” he said, “I’m fine. Are you okay?”

“Considering the circumstances, I’d rather be doing what I was doing the night my parents died.” She looked at the river, hoping to give an impression of sadness to Lobec and Bern. Then she looked back at Kevin.

His eyes flicked twice to the river. He nodded almost imperceptibly. “I think I know what you mean,” he said.

Good, he got the message. Now they had to find the right time. Maybe they could make it a few yards down the bridge before they attempted her plan.

“Miss Jensen. The contents of the bag?”

Still holding the bag out as far as she could, Erica unwrapped the Kayaking pack inside the bag, out of Lobec’s sight. She withdrew the Adamas Blueprint and flipped a few of the pages to show him the writing.

“And the videotape? You have that as well?” said Lobec.

She replaced the notebook and took out the 8mm videotape. He seemed satisfied. She stuffed it back in the kayaking pack and velcroed it shut. Her arm was again outstretched over the water.

“I suppose you expect me to trust that those are the originals and that no copies have been made.”

“Just like I have to trust you to let us go once you have them. Now let Kevin go or I’ll drop the bag in the water and no one will ever see the Adamas Blueprint again, especially Tarnwell.”

“I don’t care,” Lobec said.

She was taken aback by the statement. Kevin furrowed his brow. By the look on his face, even Bern seemed puzzled.

“I’m serious,” Erica said. “I’m going to drop it.”

“I certainly hope you’re serious,” Lobec said. “Go ahead. Drop it.” Then he turned and shot Richard Bern.

CHAPTER 35

Kevin had been ready to act ever since he realized what Erica was planning. When Lobec said, “Drop it,” Kevin knew that was the time. He twisted and swung his arms at Lobec.

He brought his arms up and into the side of Lobec’s head, which was just above Kevin’s arm level. At the same time, he heard Lobec’s gun fire, but he didn’t let that slow him down. The full force of Kevin’s blow snapped Lobec’s neck sideways and he staggered away.

Kevin ran to the side of the bridge while Lobec was stunned. Erica was already standing on the concrete railing. He shouted, “Go!”

Erica jumped.

Kevin didn’t bother climbing onto the railing. He dove over it, praying that the river was deep enough for him to make the running dive.

As he fell, Kevin could just see Erica entering the water in a perfect pike position. Kevin had no control and spun end over end. He tried to stabilize his trajectory in the two seconds of freefall he had, aiming his feet at the water. Then the soles of his feet slammed into the murky Potomac.

He sank for what seemed like forever despite his attempts to stop. Finally, his direction reversed. The impact had almost knocked the wind out of him, and his lungs were already crying for fresh air. He kicked furiously.

Just when he thought he was never going to breathe again, he caught a glimmer of light and kicked harder. He broke the surface and gasped, the crisp morning air filling his lungs.

Kevin looked around for signs of Erica. He didn't see her. He took a deep breath, about to dive back under and begin a search when he heard, "Kevin, over here."

He spun around. The impact of water must have jarred his contacts loose because all he saw was an indistinct blur of a head bobbing in the water. She had already swum twenty yards to the next bridge pylon. She waved for him to swim in her direction and disappeared behind it. He tried to swim freestyle, but the shackles on his hands made that impossible. The best he could manage was a lame breaststroke.

Kevin paddled as quickly as he could to get past the next pylon and under the bridge. As he came around the pylon, he looked for Erica's face, but instead he saw a large object come into view. It bobbed on the surface of the water next to the concrete wall of the pylon. On top of the bobbing object, a figure moved. As he got closer, he saw letters painted on its side. He squinted. *Lady Luck*. It was a boat.

"There's a ladder on the left," Erica called from the deck. "Hurry. They could be here any minute."

Kevin sputtered through the water. "I'm swimming as fast as I can. The handcuffs aren't helping."

He gripped the top rung of the ladder with both hands and lifted his feet to the bottom rung. Erica grabbed his hands and pulled, heaving him up so that he lay on the deck with his feet dangling over the back. From this position Kevin was able to sit up. Although he couldn't make out any details, the boat looked to be about a 16-footer.

"What can I do?" he said, trying to catch his breath.

"Here. Untie this mooring while I start her up."

"Show me where it is.," he said, rubbing his eyelids. "I think I lost my contacts in the jump."

Erica escorted him to the tie-down. He got to work while she cranked the engine. Unfortunately, Erica must not have been in the Boy Scouts like he had. Instead of a slip knot, she had used a granny, and the constant tug of the river had tightened the bond.

"Do you have a knife?" he said.

The engine roared to life. "No!" she yelled over the sound of the motor. "I didn't think to...Wait a minute. Yes!" She went over to a bag under the cowling. "Your Swiss army knife. I picked it up with the other stuff in the lab."

She handed it to him, and he quickly sliced through the nylon cord. Free from the restraint, *Lady Luck* began to float away from the pylon.

"Clear!" Kevin yelled.

Erica gunned the engine, and the boat shot forward, its bow rising high above the water's surface. Within seconds, they were cruising South on the Potomac at 25 knots.

"Where are we going?" Kevin said.

"Bayshore marina. That's where I rented this. The truck's parked there. I bought you some dry clothes. They're in the bag. So's your gun."

“Good thinking. How far?”

“The marina’s about fifteen minutes from here. We should have plenty of time to get to the Capitol.”

The Capitol. Their meeting with Congressman Sutter. Kevin looked at his watch. It was 7:15. She was right. They still had time. The meeting wasn’t until 8:00.

“Jumping off the bridge,” he said, shaking his head. “I’m impressed.”

“I’m just glad you understood the reference to my diving meet. I didn’t want Lobec to even get a hint that we’d try that.”

“When did you get the idea?” Something itched in his left eye. He rubbed his eyelid to dislodge it.

“Two days ago, when I got the phone call. I didn’t have much time to think. When I lived here six years ago, I biked to work every day. I came from the Virginia side, over the Arlington Bridge, and around the Mall. I always saw boats on the river. I didn’t know if it was deep enough to jump until yesterday when I checked the navigation charts at the marina. They said it’s up to ninety feet deep in the middle. It was a chance.”

“I’ll take jumping into a river over getting shot any day.” There was definitely something caught in Kevin’s left eye. He tried harder to work it out.

To the left, a white rounded shape rose above some trees. He’d never been to DC before, but Kevin recognized the Jefferson Memorial’s domed top from photographs. An engine roared above them. Kevin looked up to see a jet. He wasn’t sure, but it looked like it had just taken off. It banked to the left and headed up the Potomac.

“National Airport,” Erica said, pointing to her right.

“All I can see are blinking lights.”

“About a half-mile ahead is the end of the runway. Looks like the bleachers are still there.”

“Bleachers?”

“Yeah. The jogging path goes right by the airport. Someone set up bleachers just on the other side of the fence surrounding the airport. A lot of people take breaks and watch the planes taking off. Three more are ready to go.” Erica paused. “Why did Lobec do it?”

Kevin looked at her. “You mean shoot Bern?” She nodded. “He probably wanted Adamas for himself. Once he got all of us out of the way, he could disappear and sell it to the highest bidder. Of course, after he applied for the patent. It would be no good without the patent protection.”

“Who was the guy in charge? The Texan?”

“Yeah, Clayton Tarnwell. He owns a mining and chemical company. Tarnwell would probably go after him, but this guy Lobec is smart. He would have gotten away.”

Kevin massaged his eyelid, working the object down from the top of the eyeball. When he realized what it was, he turned and ducked to get out of the wind. Slowly, carefully, he worked it down until it was over his cornea. He blinked several times to clear his vision.

“Got it!”

“Got what?” Erica said in a confused voice.

“My contact. The left one didn’t come out after all. It just got pushed up under the top eyelid.” Kevin looked around at the boat. For the first time, he could see the inside of the fiberglass hull in detail. The bow was open and lined on either side with bench seats. An aisle

split the main console, which had a bucket seat behind it on either side. More bench seats lined the aft section. A 100 hp Mercury outboard thrashed a spray of water into the air.

When his eyes reached the top of the ladder fastened to the back of the boat, he stopped. Erica had been focusing on piloting the boat since they left the bridge, and Kevin's eyesight had been too poor to notice before. But now that he had his corrected vision back, it was stomach-wrenchingly obvious.

One hand curled over the back of the boat, knuckles fiercely gripping the hull. Then a grimacing face rose above the hand. David Lobec's eyes locked with Kevin's. Kevin could only stare in disbelief as Lobec smiled and continued to pull himself up.

CHAPTER 36

After he had been hit in the head by Hamilton back on the Arlington Memorial Bridge, Lobec had been dazed for only a second, but it had been enough for the two of them to jump over the side of the bridge without Lobec firing a shot. It was uncharacteristic of Lobec to get distracted, but he had taken undeniable pleasure in shooting the insufferable Bern. The temporary lapse had been enough for the resourceful Hamilton.

Lobec had recovered quickly from the blow and run over to see Hamilton splash to the surface, his girlfriend already taking cover under the bridge at the next pylon west. Unfortunately, some of the passing cars stopped upon seeing what happened, and their passengers got out to investigate, leaving no chance for Lobec to take them out from above. Jensen and Hamilton disappeared under the bridge.

For the benefit of the bystanders, Lobec pointed at Bern and yelled, “My God! That man shot him and jumped off the bridge!” Then he began running.

If there had been men stationed at the ends of the bridge, they could have intercepted Jensen and Hamilton. But he had lied to Tarnwell. Extra men wouldn’t have fit into Lobec’s plans. Just before he had left for the rendezvous, he had told them to stay at the mansion.

Lobec ran toward Virginia, pausing at the next pylon to see if he could find them. That's when he heard the boat's motor fire up and realized they would get away unless he did something. He knew that there were only a few small docks north of the bridge, so he took a chance that they were headed south.

Lobec tucked the SIG Sauer he'd used to shoot Bern into the waistband of his shorts and sprinted through the slow-moving traffic, crossing the six lanes in seconds. Without stopping, he leaped off the opposite side of the bridge. When he surfaced, the boat was roaring out from under the bridge three feet in front of him. He lunged forward and barely grabbed the aft ladder as the boat skimmed by. He gritted his teeth as the force of the jolt dislocated his left shoulder, nearly ripping his arm from its socket. He couldn't be sure, but it appeared that neither Hamilton nor his girlfriend had seen him.

It had taken all of his concentration to keep his legs from being tossed by the waves into the exposed propeller. After a minute, though, he was able to raise himself enough to get a foothold on the ladder. Then the climb had gotten easy. He had not been surprised to see Hamilton watching as his head rose above the boat's edge. He even smiled at seeing Hamilton's shocked face, although the surprise had come earlier than he had hoped it would.

Hamilton's inaction lasted only a fraction of a second. Cursing, he began fumbling with a bag lying next to him. The girl turned around and screamed when she saw Lobec.

"Shake him loose!" Hamilton yelled.

Lobec was not all the way into the boat and had to hold on tightly to keep from being thrown into the water as Jensen tossed the boat side to side.

Hamilton found what he was looking for, withdrawing a Glock pistol from the bag. He chambered a round. Then he yelled in the girl's direction.

"Okay. Stop the boat." Hamilton held the Glock with both hands. They were still chained together by the handcuffs.

Jensen pushed the throttle to STOP and turned to face Lobec.

"Keep your hands where I can see them," Hamilton said.

Lobec was still only halfway into the boat and could not draw the SIG Sauer in his waistband because his right hand was holding him onto the ladder and his left was useless. He couldn't raise his arm enough to grab the pistol let alone fire it accurately.

With the Glock trained on him by the marksman Lobec knew Hamilton to be, Lobec slowly eased his legs over the side of the boat without trying to draw.

"That's far enough," Hamilton said. "Now with the thumb and forefinger of your right hand grab only the butt of the pistol in your shorts and drop it on the deck."

At a range of three meters, Hamilton would not miss if Lobec tried to draw the awkward pistol and silencer combination. He did as he was told and dropped it to the deck.

"Good. Now slide it over here with your right foot."

"Or what," Lobec said. "Or you will shoot me?"

"You killed my father. Give me one good reason why I shouldn't blow your head off." Kevin had to raise his voice to be heard over the sound of jet engines powering up at the end of National's runway.

"Kevin, don't," Erica said.

“He will not, Miss Jensen. And I have a very good reason for you not to kill me. You’ll never know what this is all about. Besides, I am an unarmed man. I know for a fact that you have never shot anyone in your life. And you won’t shoot me.” He moved his left leg forward. Even with his dislocated shoulder, Lobec merely had to get close enough to disarm Hamilton. At most, two arm’s lengths away would do it.

With the quickness of a cat, Hamilton shifted the gun and shot Lobec in the left calf. Lobec stumbled, for the first time surprised by Hamilton, but he caught himself before falling, balancing on the other leg. He didn’t look down. The pain was no worse than other gunshot injuries he’d endured, probably little more than a flesh wound.

“Are you convinced now?” Kevin pointed the pistol at Lobec’s head.

“Quite.” With his right foot, Lobec tapped the SIG Sauer, which slid along the floor to Hamilton’s feet.

“All right then,” Hamilton said as he slowly dipped to the deck to pick up the SIG, never once taking his eyes off Lobec. He put the pistol in his waistband. “I decided I wanted to hear what you have to say. Now sit down on that cushion.” Hamilton pointed at the back of the boat with his head. “And remember to keep your hands in the air.”

An interesting predicament, Lobec thought as he sat with a squish on the cushioned ledge. To be at the mercy of his captors, most likely to be turned in to the authorities, was a situation he had never before faced. But despite his injuries, his hand-to-hand skills were still formidable. To use them, he had to get them off guard. And presently, he had only one way to do that. Tell them the truth.

* * *

“Are you crazy?” Erica said.

“It’s only a minor wound,” Kevin said, seeing that Lobec’s expression hadn’t wavered. “He’ll be all right.”

Which was true, but for the moment Lobec was a mess. Blood was streaming down his leg and pooling onto the floor of the boat.. His left arm dangled awkwardly at his side. It looked dislocated.

“I can’t believe you shot him.”

“He wouldn’t have stopped if I hadn’t. After two days with this guy, I’m sure of it.”

Lobec spoke. “You are probably wondering why I shot Mr. Bern.”

“We know why,” said Kevin. “Because you’re a greedy son of a bitch like Tarnwell. You wanted Adamas, and you weren’t willing to share.”

“Then why did he tell me to throw the bag into the river?” Erica said.

“What?”

“When I told him to let you go or I’d throw the bag in the river, he said that he didn’t care. He practically told me to throw it into the Potomac.”

“He was bluffing you.”

“On the contrary, Mr. Hamilton. She is right. My intent was to have her drop the bag in the river.”

“Oh really?” Kevin said sarcastically. “And why did you shoot Bern? So you could let us go?”

“Mr. Bern’s death was tragically unavoidable in the protection of my country’s national security.”

“Oh that’s just great,” Kevin said. “You work for the government? It’s just like you guys to wave the flag around whenever you do something wrong and pretend you’re doing it for God and country.”

“What does the Adamas process have to do with American national security?” Erica said. “If anything, it should be good for it, considering all the possibilities Kevin’s been telling me about the process.”

Without changing expression, Lobec said something that splashed over Kevin like a bucket of ice water.

“Who said I was American?” In that one short phrase, Lobec’s cadence and accent changed noticeably. Kevin couldn’t place it, but it was definitely not an American accent.

“Please allow me to introduce myself yet again. My real name is Nils Van Dyke.”

“What is that?” Erica said. “A Dutch accent?”

“Very good, Erica. Not exactly, but you’re close. I’m from the Republic of South Africa.” The words came quickly now, not the measured rhythm Lobec had used with the American accent. “My one flaw has always been my inability to master accents. I could do an American accent, but it required me to speak in a stilted manner. Unfortunate, since it drew attention to me. Not something I relish in my line of work.”

“Which is?” Kevin said.

“I thought that would be obvious by now. I’m a spy.”

Erica looked at Kevin, but he wouldn’t take his eyes off Van Dyke. The pistol was still pointed straight at his head. A pool of blood was slowly expanding at Van Dyke’s feet.

“You’re a spy working for Clayton Tarnwell?” Kevin’s voice was dubious.

“As you both probably know, South Africa is rich in mineral resources. In fact, it’s one of our main sources of wealth. It obviously makes sense to observe the world’s most powerful country to see what is happening in the mining field, both politically and industrially. My position in Tarnwell’s company allows me to do just that. Of course, he thinks I’m a mercenary for hire, bowing to his every wish because he manipulated my release from a Mexican prison and now holds the lives of my brother and his family as hostage.”

“Let me guess,” Kevin said. “There is no brother.”

“Oh, I have a brother, but not one in California, which is where Tarnwell thinks he lives. If Tarnwell does retaliate for my actions, it will be against a family that, except for a few fabricated records in my phone bill, doesn’t exist. If Michael Ward wasn’t lying, that videotape would have given *me* something to use against *Tarnwell*.”

“What do you mean?”

“You haven’t watched it?”

“We watched it,” Erica said. “The only thing we saw was the first experiment, the one that got this all started.”

“Then Ward *was* lying.” Van Dyke seemed surprised. “It doesn’t matter. Tarnwell’s easy enough to manipulate without it. However, my most important mission is almost over. I may not even need Tarnwell any more. Not if I can stop Adamas.”

“So you never were helping Tarnwell?”

“Oh, my missions helped him tangentially, but that wasn’t my intent. In fact, this mission will almost surely ruin him. Tarnwell has all of his money riding on a merger with Forrestal Chemical.

If he doesn't have Adamas by tomorrow, his company won't be worth enough to pay the interest on his loans."

"If you really are a spy," Kevin said, "then why are you telling us all this? I thought you guys took poison pills before talking."

"I'm telling you because I want to appeal to you. My country is in a very fragile state right now. It will take years to recover from apartheid, years that could stretch into decades if our country is suddenly plunged into economic ruin. And this Adamas process will do just that. It could devastate our economy, maybe even provoke a civil war. Whatever you think of me, I am a patriot first. I can't let my country be ruined, and I'm sure you don't want it to be."

Kevin chuckled. "You expect us to believe that load of crap?"

"It's the truth."

"The truth! Van Dyke is the third name you've given me. Lord knows how many other ones you have. You killed my father, Bern, Ward, Stein. Now you want us to believe that all you want is peace and harmony for your country? Pardon me for thinking this is a bunch of bullshit. Erica start the boat. We're taking this guy to the police. Let them figure out whether he's telling the truth."

"I must point out that I'm merely trying to protect you. Tarnwell has thirty men still looking for you. They'll find you, just as I...found..." Van Dyke's voice trailed off, and his face began turning white.

"We need to stop the bleeding," she said. "He's going into shock." She started toward him.

Kevin put his left hand out to stop her. "Wait until we get to the marina. It'll only be a few minutes."

“He may not have that much time.” She struggled against his arm, and Kevin turned his head to face her.

“Erica, I’m telling you, this guy is dangerous. If he...”

Suddenly, Kevin’s left arm exploded in pain. The impact of Van Dyke’s foot knocked the gun from his hand. The Glock ricocheted off the port side of the boat. Before he could react, Van Dyke slammed him backward against the console.

In the next instant, Kevin could feel a hand pawing at his midsection. He realized what was happening and wrapped both hands around Van Dyke’s wrist just as he felt the SIG Sauer being drawn from his waistband. The safety was on, but if they wrestled much longer, Van Dyke might be able to flick it off. Kevin didn’t like the idea of a gun going off in his pants.

Erica, who had almost fallen overboard when Kevin glanced off her, regained her balance and came up behind Van Dyke. Using a modified Aikido move, she hammered both arms into his neck. Van Dyke released his grip and the SIG clattered to the deck. In a single twisting motion, he swung in a 180 degree arc and threw his fist at Erica. She ducked to avoid a direct blow, but Van Dyke managed to catch the top of her head. It was enough to send her reeling toward the bow.

Kevin stooped to pick up the fallen SIG. As his fingers brushed the grip, Van Dyke threw his knee into Kevin’s chest, knocking the wind out of him. Then Kevin felt himself being tossed to the back of the boat.

While he struggled to breathe, Kevin saw the Glock lying underneath a life vest in front of him. He scrambled over to it. In a prone position, Kevin raised the pistol and turned to point it at Van Dyke.

At the same time, Van Dyke was rising next to the console, holding the SIG Sauer. But it wasn't pointed at Kevin. It was pointed at Erica. She was now standing at the bow of the boat.

"Hold it!" Kevin yelled.

Van Dyke remained facing Erica. "I saw you retrieve the Glock, Kevin. Drop it, or I will kill Erica."

"What if I kill you first?"

"You're in handcuffs and in an awkward position. I am not. My chances are much better."

"If you kill her, you'll die and I'll still have the Adamas Blueprint. Now put down the damn gun!"

Erica looked at Kevin. Oddly, she didn't seem as terrified as Kevin was. Instead, she was concentrating on him. Her eyes almost imperceptibly moved towards the water and then back to him. Her legs were bent, ready for action. Kevin understood what she was thinking. But Van Dyke was standing no more than eight feet from her. She'd never be able to dive into the river before he shot her. Kevin shook his head.

"Kevin, we both know how this is going to end..."

The roar of a jet taking off drowned out his words. Erica extended her legs and leaped into the air. Van Dyke fired the SIG. Erica flew backward over the starboard side of the bow. Van Dyke fired twice more within the second it took her to hit the water.

"No!" Kevin shouted. He pulled the Glock's trigger. A gush of blood and flesh exploded from Van Dyke's left shoulder, spinning him around to face Kevin. There was no expression on his face. No sadness, no remorse, no anger, no pleasure. Just the determined look of a professional carrying out his duties.

He swung the SIG in Kevin's direction. Kevin had no choice. Without hesitation, he shifted the Glock slightly and fired. A spray of red flew back from the top of Van Dyke's head. For a moment, he just stood there, as if nothing had happened. The only change was that he now had an expression.

He was puzzled.

The expression quickly faded. His eyes closed sleepily. Like a puppet dropped by his master, he collapsed in a heap.

Kevin pushed himself to his feet and ran to the bow, expecting to see Erica's body floating face down in the water. What greeted him was almost worse. All he could see in the placid surface of the Potomac was his horrified reflection.

CHAPTER 37

Afraid that Erica had gotten stuck under the boat, Kevin dropped the Glock and prepared to dive in.

A bubble broke the surface on the starboard side. Then another and another. Erica's head burst out of the water. She gasped for air and looked up to see Kevin.

"You're alive!" Kevin said, amazed.

"So are you!"

"Are you injured?" he asked, holding out his still-cuffed hands.

"No, I'm all right." Erica pulled herself up and over the railing. When she was aboard, he pulled her to him and hugged her fiercely.

"I was afraid you were gone." Kevin's hands began to shake and his teeth chattered.

"Are *you* okay?" Erica said.

"Yeah. It's just beginning to sink in. I had to..." He hesitated.

"Van Dyke?"

Kevin nodded toward the back of the boat. "Dead." The shivering got worse.

"Are you sure?"

He didn't answer. She went behind the console and sucked in her breath when she saw the body.

"He's dead all right."

"I thought you were, too," he said. "He shot you. You fell backward..."

"No, I *dove* backward. I thought he might assume I'd dive forward. Apparently, he did. I heard one of the bullets zing past my ear."

"Oh, that makes me feel a lot better."

"Let's not dwell on it. It happened. Now let's get you out of those handcuffs."

They retrieved the keys from Van Dyke's back pocket, then moved the body away from the console and laid it against the port side. Kevin draped the boat's rain tarp over the body while Erica washed the bloody deck with a bottle of water. It took five refills from the Potomac to wash it all off.

When they got back to the marina, Erica told the rental agency they would need the boat for another day. After she paid in advance with cash, the clerk promised that it wouldn't be disturbed.

There had been no discussion about reporting the shooting to the police before their meeting with Congressman Sutter. This was their only chance to get high-level help. Going to the police would just make them stationary targets.

The truck was in the marina's lot, but they would never find a parking space around the Capitol at this hour. The nearest Metro station was a five minute walk. With only 25 minutes left before the meeting, they jogged.

* * *

The white limestone steps of the Rayburn building, one of the three House of Representatives office buildings, gleamed in the morning sun, forcing Kevin to squint until he and Erica were under the shadow of the portico. He glanced at his watch. 7:56. Right on time. The walk from the Capitol South Metro stop had been short. Kevin breathed a literal sigh of relief. The worst was over. Now it was just a matter of getting someone to believe them.

The guard at the door of the Rayburn building had shown them where to find the building's directory. Sutter's office was on the second floor of the north wing. They walked briskly but calmly upstairs and found the congressman's office.

The outer area of the office was somewhat small, to be expected of a congressman who was in only his second term. The larger offices would go to the more senior members. Four chairs lined a wall under pictures showing various scenes from the congressman's district. A wide-angle shot of downtown Houston, a medical researcher pretending to study a test tube for the camera, an aerial view of South Texas University. The last made Kevin feel a little more confident about doing this. He turned to the desk facing the chairs.

Behind it sat a slightly frumpy woman in her fifties. She gave a smile that showed perfect teeth.

"May I help you?" she said in a pleasant voice.

"Yes. My name's Kevin Hamilton. I have an appointment with Congressman Sutter."

"Kevin Hamilton?" The secretary looked at him as if he'd told her his name was Madonna.

"Yes, Kevin Hamilton. This is a friend of mine, Erica Jensen. Our appointment was for 8:00. It's very urgent that we speak with the congressman." Kevin tried to see the appointment book.

There was none. It must have been on the computer. "It should be down for 8:00 this morning. I called last Wednesday."

"Yes, Mr. Hamilton. I was the one who spoke to you. Until a few minutes ago, I wasn't expecting you until 9:30. Now I'm surprised you're even here."

What was this woman talking about? Kevin looked at Erica. She seemed just as puzzled as he was.

"I'm sorry," said Erica to the secretary. "I don't understand."

"When I called Friday to tell Mr. Hamilton that the meeting had been delayed until 9:30 this morning, I assumed he had received it."

"Wait a minute," said Kevin. "You called my apartment?"

"That's right. Representative Sutter had a breakfast with Senator Mitchell that was supposed to run late. As it turned out, the breakfast was over early."

"You mean he's here?" Thank God. It wasn't too late. If Kevin's apartment phone was still tapped, Tarnwell would know they were planning on coming here. Once he found out they'd escaped, he'd send someone down here to intercept them. They had to hurry. He started for the Congressman's office.

"Mr. Hamilton, the representative is in a meeting. Mr. Tarnwell said you wouldn't be coming, so I canceled..."

"Tarnwell?" He was right. Tarnwell's thugs might be here any minute. Despite the secretary's loud protests, he burst through the door to Congressman Sutter's office.

The room was about 15 by 15 feet, with a spectacular view of the Capitol through the broad windows at the opposite side of the room. Bookshelves lined one wall, while a couch sat in front

of the other. A television was perched on an oak dresser to Kevin's left. A man occupied one of the two chairs in front of the congressman's mahogany desk. Congressman Frederick Sutter, a slender black man in his forties with a receding hairline and dressed in a gray suit, stood up from his chair at the intrusion.

"What's going on here?" he said.

The other man stood as well now, rising to his full six foot six height. He turned, and Kevin stopped short when he saw who it was. The look on Clayton Tarnwell's face was almost as shocked as Kevin's, but he quickly recovered.

"Kevin," Tarnwell said, "I see you and Erica were able to make it after all."

"I recognize you now," Sutter said to Kevin. "You sat next to me at a South Texas brunch, correct?"

"A dinner," said Kevin. "You told me about your son's football scholarship to A&M." He turned to Erica. "This is Erica Jensen. She's a med student at South Texas."

"Nice to meet you." He nodded at Erica and then looked at Tarnwell. "These are the two you were telling me about, Clay? I find that hard to believe. I remember Mr. Hamilton. He seemed like an articulate young man."

"Yes, Fred, he does. Kevin fooled me as well. I've never met this girl before, but her boyfriend here is the slickest con artist I've ever seen."

Kevin made a move toward Tarnwell. "I should..." Before he got two steps, Erica grabbed him, holding him back.

"Now that I've exposed your little game, you're losing your cool. How pathetic."

Erica spoke to Sutter. "I don't know what this man has told you, Mr. Sutter, but Kevin has discovered a revolutionary new process that could change almost every industry over night."

"He's got her in on this thing with him too," Tarnwell said. "Very clever, Kevin. Two voices are always better than one. But as I was just telling Congressman Sutter, your plan's a failure. I thought the police had caught you by now, and when you'd bragged about your meeting with Mr. Sutter, I thought I'd better come down and clear up any misunderstandings you might have caused. About how you and Dr. Ward tried to swindle me into investing huge amounts of money into a experimental process with no merit."

"He's lying, Mr. Sutter!" Kevin said. "I can prove it." Kevin reached into his pocket for the specimen he'd completed two days ago.

"Ah yes," Tarnwell said. "Now he's going to present you with a piece of glass and claim it's a diamond. Well, Kevin, let's see it."

Kevin walked over to the Congressman's desk and handed him a diamond the size and shape of an egg. It was perfectly clear, a flawless specimen, except for one thing: the safe deposit box key fused in its middle.

Kevin thought he'd need some way of confirming that he hadn't stolen it from somewhere, that it was actually made and not dug up out of the ground. The key was the most appropriate thing he could think of.

While the Congressman inspected the specimen, Kevin took the notebook out of the backpack and tossed it onto the desk.

"It's all in there, sir. How we discovered it, how it works, everything. You are holding an artificially manufactured 200 carat diamond in your hand."

“This is ridiculous, Fred. Now he’s trying to make a fool of you like he did to me. It’s obviously some kind of forgery.”

“He’s right, Kevin,” Sutter said. “I don’t understand what’s going on here, but this does look a piece of glass. Mr. Tarnwell is a man who is well-respected in the Houston community, and he’s donated a lot of time and money to my campaigns. It’s his word against yours.”

“I know, sir,” Kevin said, “but if you’ll just be patient, I’m sure we can prove to you in another minute that that is a real diamond.” Kevin repeatedly looked at the door to the outer office. Where was he?

“I’m sorry, Kevin. This seems like a matter for the police.” Sutter picked up the phone and told security to come to his office.

“No, you’re our last hope. Tarnwell will have us killed before the night is over.”

“Will you listen to this?” Tarnwell said. “The lies just go on and on. I promise you, Fred, that I am going to ask the DA to prosecute them to the fullest extent of the law.”

“Sir, you have to help us,” Erica said. “Kevin’s telling the truth.”

Sutter only nodded. The look on his face told Kevin that he didn’t believe them. “Let’s just wait for the Capitol police and explain it to them.”

“Mr. Sutter,” Erica said, “you have to arrange protection for us.”

“I don’t have to do anything.”

“It’s so I won’t have them killed,” Tarnwell said. “Come on, Erica. Don’t make this any worse for yourself.”

Kevin’s attention was drawn to a commotion in the outer office. A man with a scraggly beard and gray hair tied in a pony tail was arguing with the secretary.

“No, I’m telling you,” the man said. “Your office called and asked me to be here at eight this morning. I admit I’m a little late, but I’m here.” He wore a short-sleeved dress shirt, solid blue tie, and blue polyester slacks that were a little too tight and a little too short. A battered leather briefcase was in his left hand.

“We have no appointment for you, Mr. Downs.”

At the sound of Downs’ name, Kevin raced to the outer office.

“It’s Dr. Downs,” the scruffy man said. “Fine, I have better things to do than subject myself to silly pranks.” Kevin caught his arm as he turned to leave.

“Dr. Downs, I’m the one who asked you to come.”

“What? No, no, a woman called me.”

“That was a friend of mine. I asked her to call you because I didn’t think you’d come unless the Congressman asked you.”

“You’re right about that.”

“I’ll explain everything in a minute. Could you please come into the Congressman’s office? I can tell you this is not a prank. In fact, I’m relieved you actually came.”

Downs looked dubiously at Kevin, then grudgingly he said, “All right. But just for a few minutes. If you wanted some diamonds appraised, you should have gone to a jeweler.”

“I think this will interest you professionally, Dr. Downs. Did you bring the equipment that my friend requested?”

“Of course.”

They walked back into the Congressman’s office.

“Now who is this?” Congressman Sutter said, throwing his hands up.

“Congressman,” Kevin said. “I’d like to introduce, Dr. Quincy Downs, a geologist from the Smithsonian.”

“The Smithsonian? Oh, well why didn’t you say so?” The Congressman buzzed his secretary.

“Yes, Mr. Sutter?” she answered.

“Marian, call the Smithsonian and ask if they have a Quincy Downs listed. If he’s there, I want to speak with him.”

“Yes, sir.”

“What’s going on here?” Downs said. “I was the one called over here, and now you don’t even believe me?”

“We’ve had a very strange morning here. I want to know if you’re really who you say you are before we go any further.”

Tarnwell seemed to believe it. His face was slowly losing its color.

Marian buzzed back a minute later. “A secretary over at the Natural History Museum said Dr. Downs is a geologist over there. He’s not in at the moment. She said his schedule had him down for an appointment in your office this morning.”

For the first time since arriving at the Congressman’s office, Kevin smiled.

“Will someone please tell me what I’m doing here?” Dr. Downs said.

“Now that we’ve established you’re a geologist...” Sutter held up the diamond specimen and pointed at Kevin. “This man claims that this clear material is a diamond.”

Downs took the specimen from the Congressman. He looked at it for less than five seconds and declared, “This can’t possibly be diamond.”

“What? Why not?” Kevin said in horror.

“Look at it. It has a key in the middle, which means it would have be artificial. I’ve seen a few artificial diamonds, but this one’s ten times as big as the largest I’ve ever heard of.”

Kevin protested. “But you haven’t even tested it.”

“Why bother?”

“I agree, Fred,” Tarnwell said. “There’s no reason to let this go on any longer.”

Kevin looked at the Congressman. “Sir, what harm could it do to test it? It’ll take just a few minutes. If it’s a fake, I’ll let the police take me away peacefully and you’ll never hear from me again.”

Congressman Sutter hesitated, but after a few seconds relented. To Downs he said, “Can you test to see if this is actually a diamond?”

“Sure. But it’s a waste of time.”

“Then go ahead.”

Downs withdrew a jeweler’s loupe and visually inspected the specimen. After about a minute, he removed the loupe from his eye.

“I can’t see any flaws, but the doesn’t mean anything. I’ve been fooled by cubic zirconia before. Fakes are getting better and better. It’s especially difficult to tell without facets.”

“See!” Tarnwell said. “It’s a fake.”

“I didn’t say I was done,” Downs said. He removed a small scale from the bag and then took out a piece of electronic equipment. He placed the specimen on the scale.

A Capitol policeman appeared in the outer office. Sutter motioned for him to wait.

“232 carats. Minus, of course, whatever the key weighs.” The electronic equipment was a 4 inch by 6 inch box with a display. Two wire leads came out of the box’s top and ended in metal-tipped probes.

“What’s that?” said Sutter.

“This measures the electrical resistance of any material. Diamond has a unique resistive signature.” Downs pressed a button to turn the unit on and placed the two probes against the specimen’s surface.

He gasped, then touched the probes twice more against different parts of the surface. “Oh my.”

“What is it?” Kevin said.

“I calibrated this instrument an hour ago.” Downs looked at Kevin. “Where did you get this?”

“I made it.”

“Is it real?” Sutter said.

“You made this?” Downs said, holding the specimen as gently as a robin’s egg.

“Dr. Downs,” Sutter said impatiently.

“It’s incredible,” Downs said. “This is as pure a diamond as I’ve ever seen.”

“But it’s huge,” Sutter said. “It must be worth a fortune.”

“With this clarity and color...If it were cut and polished into gemstones, it would be worth over \$10,000 per carat.”

“That’s over \$2 million,” Erica said.

“Without the key in it, it would be worth far more. A stone that size hasn’t come on the market in twenty years. It would create a sensation.”

“I guess you were wrong, Clay,” Sutter said. “It looks like he really can make diamonds.”

For a minute, Tarnwell said nothing. “I was hoping I wouldn’t have to do this, Fred. I wanted to keep the process a secret until we had the patent in hand, and I wanted to get this mess resolved without Kevin going to prison. But now it seems like I have no choice. My scientists developed this process over six months ago. Kevin stole it.”

“This is insane!” Kevin yelled. “He is lying.”

“I was trying to settle this some other way, but I see that it just isn’t possible now. Dr. Michael Ward, a professor at South Texas, was working as a consultant for me. In particular, he was providing me with some important information on how to refine the diamond-making process. Although Michael was careful, I guess Kevin got wind of it somehow and wanted it for himself. He’d been having some financial troubles. I know how people can get desperate when they have no money, but I think we can all see how this has gone too far.”

The eyes of everyone in the room were on Kevin, and none of them seemed to be doubting the story Tarnwell was spinning.

“Unfortunately, he’s drawn Erica into this as well. Now she’s going to be responsible for this along with him.”

The situation was quickly turning sour. Kevin had to do something else. But what?

Erica whispered to him. “What about the tape?”

He whispered back. “That won’t prove anything. The Congressman won’t know one experiment from another.” Then he remembered Van Dyke specifically asking about the tape.

He'd said Ward had told him something about it, something he might have used against Tarnwell. Maybe there was a chance.

"Do you have a camcorder here?" Kevin said to the Congressman.

"I've had about all I can take. The police..."

"Please, sir. There may be something in a tape I have that will convince you that I really did invent this." He was taking a huge risk, but there didn't seem to be anything else to do.

Although the color had returned to Tarnwell's face, the mention of a videotape turned it ash gray.

"All right," Sutter said, "but this is it. What kind of camcorder do you need?"

"8mm."

"Marian! Does anyone around here have an 8mm camcorder?"

"I'll check, sir," said Marian.

"Fred," said Tarnwell, "I really think we shouldn't waste any more of your time."

"It's not every day I see a 200-carat artificial diamond. I think we can take a few more minutes out of my time."

"Thank you," said Kevin. He turned to Tarnwell. "Lobec didn't tell you what was on the tape, did he? Just like he didn't tell you he was a spy working for the South African government."

"You're babbling to get yourself out of this mess you've created. David Lobec is my head of company security. He is not South African."

“That’s what he led you to believe after he got out of that Mexican prison. I bet he was in there on purpose, just to make your releasing him more realistic. His real name wasn’t even Lobec. It was Van Dyke. Oh, and his brother in California? Doesn’t exist.”

Tarnwell’s face was a mask of pure shock. “How did you know...”

“After he shot Bern, he told us.”

Tarnwell recovered quickly from Kevin’s revelations. “He did tell me that Dr. Ward was attempting to blackmail me, but that he had fabricated some kind of evidence to do so. That must be what your tape is.”

Marian walked in with a camcorder in hand. “Congressman Weaver had one in his office. He uses it to videotape himself shaking hands with constituents so he can show them like home movies back in Nebraska.” She took it over to the TV.

“Thanks,” Kevin said and began attaching the camcorder to the TV. “I’ll tell you what’s on the video. It’s the lab experiment where Ward and I first accidentally discovered the Adamas process. But Van Dyke seemed to think there was something more on it.”

Kevin put in the tape. As it ran, he narrated the experiment in great detail. As he watched, he looked for anything he and Erica might have missed the first time they’d seen it.

As before when they had watched it in the store, the tape went to static after the Kevin on the screen switched off the camcorder. Kevin couldn’t understand. He stared at it, hoping for a revelation about what he’d just seen. But nothing seemed especially significant.

Tarnwell didn’t think so either.

“Is this all you have to show us?” he said. “Because I can tell you that I don’t know what the fuss is about. For all I know, that could have been anything.”

“If we look closely at the equipment in the tape,” said Kevin, “I think it’s clear that we had the setup described in the notebook.”

“Even if it was the Adamas process,” Tarnwell continued, “how do we know when you made the tape? You could just as easily have stolen the process from me, run the experiment with Ward later, and changed the time stamp on the camcorder. That kind of thing is faked all the time.”

“There’s got to be something.” Kevin went over to the camcorder to rewind it to the beginning and play it back again.

“Really, Fred,” said Tarnwell, “I think one viewing is enough to see that there wasn’t anything there.”

Just as Kevin reached for the camcorder, a new picture flickered into focus on the screen. He stopped and stepped aside to let the others see. It was the lab again, freshly cleaned and the damaged equipment replaced, but this time it was from a different point of view. The tripod was visible across the room. The camera was on the other side of the lab, probably on one of the lab shelves. The picture moved around as adjustments in the camera view were made. Then a voice said “Dammit!” Kevin recognized it immediately and realized why it was cursing. The lab’s camcorder had a broken recording light. It was difficult to tell whether the camcorder was recording unless you looked through the viewfinder. With it on the shelf, the viewfinder was probably difficult to get to.

Finally, the camcorder stopped moving. Michael Ward walked past the camera into the field of view, tinkered with a piece of equipment, and left the room.

“Do we need to see this again?” Tarnwell said.

Kevin looked at Sutter. “This is something different. I haven’t seen this before.”

“Keep going,” Sutter said.

Nothing was happening on screen, so Kevin hit the fast forward button. After about a minute, the lab door opened. Kevin released the button and watched the screen intently.

Michael Ward walked in and opened the lab’s door wider.

“Come on in,” he said.

Another voice could be heard outside the door.

“David, wait for us out here.” Even muffled, the Texas drawl was unmistakable.

Ward’s guest followed him into the lab. Although Ward was six feet tall, he looked puny next to the massive frame of Clayton Tarnwell.

CHAPTER 38

“We’ve got about half an hour until my graduate student gets here from his class,” Ward said as he closed the door. The wide-angle lens of the camcorder captured almost the entire lab.

“That’s all right,” the Tarnwell on screen said. “I don’t have much time anyway.” He looked into the test chamber. “Good. Nothing here but the test stand. All right, you can go ahead.”

As Ward began the start-up of the experiment, Tarnwell wandered around the room, casually observing the equipment. When he looked directly at the camcorder, Kevin held his breath, afraid that Tarnwell had seen that it was recording. But after a second Tarnwell continued. Without the camcorder’s recording light, he had not been suspicious.

With a nod, Ward indicated he was ready.

“Let’s see it,” Tarnwell said.

A hum emanated from the TV for a minute or so, then it was quiet. Ward walked over to the test chamber and opened the door. After a few second’s inspection, he turned to Tarnwell.

“Take a look for yourself,” he said.

Tarnwell peered into the chamber. He began to reach in, but Ward grabbed his hand.

“Be careful. It’s hot. Here.” Ward handed him a pair of tongs. A minute later, Tarnwell held a metal pin in his hand. A target on top glistened.

Tarnwell looked in awe at the diamond coated sample in his hand, then walked over to a lab table and set it down. From a briefcase, he removed a device similar to the one Dr. Downs had used minutes before. Tarnwell placed its sensors on the sample.

“Jesus, Michael,” Tarnwell said when he was done. “I wouldn’t have believed it if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes.”

“Incredible, isn’t it?” said Ward. “I’ve been working on perfecting it for three months. I could produce 50 carats a day if I ran it around the clock.”

“Which makes me wonder why I’m here,” Tarnwell said. “Why not just make them yourself?”

“Two reasons. The first is that I have other people in here all the time. Usually, the only time I get work done in here is late at night when no one else is around. That’s why it’s taken me three months to get as far as I have.”

“And the second?”

Ward took the sample from Tarnwell and put it back in the chamber. “It’s difficult, but I can cut sections off the target. I looked into selling some of them, but unpolished stones raised eyebrows. They wanted to know where I got them. After a couple of times and a lot of questions, I stopped. I figured better to sell the whole thing at once rather than keep making them myself. The only catch was to find someone who I trusted that had enough money to make it worthwhile.” Ward smiled. “Of course, the first person I thought of was my old college buddy.”

“I appreciate that.” Tarnwell repacked the testing equipment. “Of course, you realize that this is highly illegal.”

“Of course.” Ward smiled, and Tarnwell returned it.

“Good. Now that I’ve seen...what did you call this process?”

“Adamas.”

“Now that I have seen and verified Adamas, how about we talk business.”

They walked toward the lab door together.

“I think you can see the value of something like this,” said Ward. “You’ll easily net over a billion dollars in the first year of production.” He stopped at the door.

“So what are you thinking of?” said Tarnwell.

“Let’s start talking about a nice round number. Fifty million.”

Tarnwell didn’t blink. “Why don’t we talk about it over dinner?” He opened the door, and the two of them left. After a few seconds of fast forwarding, it was obvious that the tape would run out recording the empty room. Kevin pressed the STOP button. He looked at Sutter and then Tarnwell.

“What do you have to say for yourself, Clay?” said Congressman Sutter.

Tarnwell didn’t move. He stared at Kevin, his eyes closed to slits, his lips curled in a sneer.

“Van Dyke told us about the merger,” Kevin said. “You bet it all, didn’t you? Without Adamas, your company is nonexistent. And I think it’s safe to say that you’re going to jail for murdering Ward.” He waited a beat, then said, “I’m glad.”

Tarnwell sat seething. Then without warning, he launched himself from the chair. “You little shit!” Kevin was surprised by the move, especially for a man of Tarnwell’s size. Before Kevin

could react, Tarnwell knocked him to the floor, straddled him, and gripped Kevin's throat, his meaty thumbs digging into Kevin's larynx. He had an insane look in his eyes, as if he didn't give a damn anymore. He probably didn't, which terrified Kevin. He was a man with nothing to lose.

Tarnwell whispered to him. "You're gonna die this time. And guess what. I'm going to plead insanity. You'll be dead and I'll be out of the asylum by next year."

Kevin gasped for breath as he tried to pry Tarnwell's hands off. Then he reached for Tarnwell's eyes, but his arms were five inches shorter than Tarnwell's.

He saw the Capitol policeman who had been waiting in the outer office grapple Tarnwell from behind.

"Let him go!" the cop yelled. He had his baton out and was ready to hit Tarnwell with it. Tarnwell released the grip on one hand and elbowed the cop in the eye. An audible crack issued from the breaking bone, and the cop reeled backward, screaming in pain and dropping the baton to Kevin's left. Kevin reached for it, but it was just out of reach.

With renewed fury, Tarnwell choked Kevin using both hands. Someone yelled, "Get security!" Kevin's vision began to tunnel from lack of oxygen to his brain. He felt his eyes bulging. In another few seconds he'd pass out.

Suddenly, Tarnwell released him. As his vision returned, Kevin saw why. Erica had kicked Tarnwell in the lower back, which he was now holding. She was about to do it again when Tarnwell grabbed her leg and twisted it, throwing her to the ground.

Seeing his chance, Kevin leaned over and grabbed the baton. Tarnwell, who was still straddling him, saw what he was doing. He stood and turned. Clawing at the cop's holstered Smith & Wesson, Tarnwell released the safety catch and drew the gun. With all the strength left

in him, Kevin pushed himself off the floor. As Tarnwell swung the pistol around, Kevin raised the baton, and brought it down on the back of Tarnwell's head.

Tarnwell slumped to the floor, the gun tumbling to Kevin's feet. Erica crawled over to Tarnwell and checked for a pulse.

"He's all right," she said. She looked at the Capitol policeman, who was just recovering from the blow. "How about you?"

With his hand to his eye, he nodded. At that point, two more policemen rushed into the room.

The injured policeman pointed at Tarnwell. "Take this guy away. And make sure you cuff him."

As the two cops struggled to lift Tarnwell, Kevin sat back on his elbows. He looked at Congressman Sutter, who was still wide-eyed at what had just happened. His voice a raspy croak, Kevin said, "Now do you believe us?"

EPILOGUE

A light breeze played through the lush foliage of the South Texas University campus, enhancing the unusually cool September evening. The sun was just setting over the chemistry building, and Kevin turned to look at it as he walked toward the agreed-to meeting place. He stopped and removed his sunglasses to see the dazzling pink and orange sky, the result of a volcano that had erupted in the Philippines three months earlier. After a moment, he continued walking, reminding himself to get out every night at this time from now on.

He reached the bench in the middle of the quad but decided to stand. He'd been sitting at the computer all day and his glutes ached. Maybe he'd go to the gym after dinner to work the kinks out.

To his left, Campbell Library was undergoing renovations. It was almost exactly a year ago that Erica had found the safe deposit box key that Michael Ward had hidden in its basement. Kevin wondered where he'd be right now if Erica hadn't found it. Probably dead. Probably both of them. It was amazing how close it had been. He still had trouble believing it.

"Hey stranger!" a voice said from behind.

Kevin turned to see a weary-looking Erica. She'd been on-call for 36 hours. Kevin hadn't seen her for almost a week, and despite the circles under her eyes, she was still beautiful.

After a long hug and kiss, they sat on the bench.

"That feels good," said Erica. "I've been standing for the last 12 hours."

"How are you handling it?" She'd been a emergency medicine resident for two months. Since she'd graduated in the top five of her med school class, she'd gotten to pick her residency. She chose the trauma room at Hermann Hospital, one of the best in the country. It also let her stay in Houston with Kevin.

"I've never worked this hard in my life. Right before I came over, I was stitching up a guy who walked through a plate glass window. Nothing serious, but he had about forty places where he needed stitches. Then there was the burn victim..."

Kevin put up his hand. "Okay, thanks for the update. But if I'm going to eat dinner, I'll need to talk about something else. Check these out." He handed her his sunglasses.

She inspected them. "Are these the first ones?"

He didn't answer her. Instead, he took his keys out. He picked the longest one, the one to his new Mustang convertible, and ran the point of it along the lens. The surface was unmarred.

"Try it," he said, handing her the keys.

She rubbed the key on the lens. Any other sunglasses would have been severely scratched by now, but these still looked brand new.

"You could drive a tank over them," he said, "and the lenses wouldn't have a mark."

"How thick is the coating?" Erica asked.

"That's the great thing. There is no coating."

“You mean the whole lens is diamond?”

“Yes. And that’s just the tip of the iceberg. The university got two more licensing contracts today. One from a stove manufacturer who wants to make clear stove tops out of diamond, the other from a chain saw company to make diamond-coated teeth for their saws. Now if we can just get the lawsuits with DeBeers resolved, we can run with it in the gem market.”

When the university learned of the magnitude of the discovery and the role Kevin played in retrieving it, they decided to give him a percentage of the licensing grosses. It was only a fraction of a percent, but it still would be worth millions over the next few years. So far, all he’d done with the money was buy his new car to replace the destroyed Mustang and rent a bigger apartment for the two of them. He was so busy finishing his degree and overseeing further research with the Adamas process that he didn’t have time to spend the rest of it.

“Did you hear the latest on the trial?” Kevin said.

“No. I tried to catch a little of it on CNN when I had a break last night, but I was so tired, I fell asleep before the story came on.”

“It should be over soon. Tarnwell brought in some character witnesses, but I don’t think they did much good. Not after Bern’s testimony.”

Tarnwell’s trial for conspiracy to commit murder, among other charges, was the hottest news topic in Houston. Kevin and Erica testified a month ago, after months of delaying tactics by Tarnwell’s lawyers. Kevin hadn’t understood that, since Tarnwell was jailed without bail because he was a possible menace and a flight risk. Leave it to the lawyers. Luckily, Tarnwell was spending what was left of his money on his defense. None was available for his private security force, meaning Kevin and Erica had little to fear.

Although at the time of his shooting, Bern's wound seemed mortal, Tarnwell's meaty employee proved to have a strong constitution and survived. Kevin had apparently altered Van Dyke's aim when he had struck him, and the bullet just missed Bern's heart.

When Bern recovered, he believed Tarnwell had set him up. The bullet recovered from Herbert Stein's body matched Bern's gun perfectly, so given the overwhelming number of crimes he was charged with, Bern decided to turn state's evidence against Tarnwell. Together with Kevin and Erica's testimony and the videotape, the prosecution's case was practically open and shut.

"Do you think the death penalty will be given?" said Erica.

"I don't see why it wouldn't." He saw her disturbed expression. "I know what you think, but if anyone deserves it, he does. Besides, it'll be years before it happens."

He looked at the library. "You want to go see the renovations we paid for?"

"We didn't exactly pay for them."

"You want to put Tarnwell's name on the donation?"

"No, Anonymous was the right name to use."

As they got up and strolled toward the library, Kevin could see the sign at the front with the list of donors. At the top was the word "Anonymous," and next to it written "\$2,500,000." Similar signs were on buildings being renovated or built at the STU med school, Texas A&M, and Erica's undergraduate college, the University of Kansas.

When Kevin found out how much Ward had taken from Tarnwell, he realized that the money had to be stashed somewhere. Then he'd remembered the page ripped out of the Adamas Blueprint and the impression of a number and some letters on the next page. It was an account

number and the name of a bank in the Cayman Islands. He'd tried to transfer the funds electronically, but the account specifically stated that the transaction had to be made in person. That wasn't a problem. Daryl Grotman was happy to make a phony passport for him.

Kevin and Erica had toyed with the idea of keeping the \$10 million, but only for a few minutes. Financially, they were set for life. Besides, it would be fairly difficult to explain to the IRS how they suddenly got \$10 million. Since Tarnwell thought the money was lost, there was no sense returning it to him. He'd just spend it on more lawyers. The idea of anonymous donations was the best they could come up with. They had both wanted to donate the money in their parents' names, but that would only have raised more questions.

Kevin and Erica took a short walk through the construction. The renovations seemed to be coming along nicely. Most of the linoleum was being replaced with carpeting to deaden the sound of footsteps, and new, comfortable cubicles took the place of the torn and battered ones. The rest of the money was spent on restoring or replacing worn-out books.

As they left the building, Erica said, "It's amazing that all this was made possible because of a process that makes shiny little stones." She looked down at the one-carat diamond on her finger. Kevin had tried to tell her that diamonds weren't going to be worth much as gems much longer, but she had insisted on a traditional engagement ring. A simple gold wedding band was next to it.

"I like to think that we had something to do with it, too." He took her hand and smiled. "Now, Mrs. Hamilton, where would you like to eat dinner. The sky's the limit: Wendy's, Taco Bell, you name it."

"I was thinking about a nice quiet dinner at Cenn'tani's and then back to the apartment for a bit of R and R."

“Rest and relaxation?”

She winked at him. “Rum and romance. You didn’t have more interesting plans, did you?”

The idea of going to the gym after dinner fluttered out of his mind like a moth escaping a suddenly opened trunk.

“Didn’t you know?” Kevin said, leading her by the hand toward his car. “Nothing interesting ever happens to me.”

THE END

AFTERWORD

When I completed this novel in 1995, the technology at the heart of this story did not yet exist. Diamonds had been made in a laboratory, but the process was difficult, expensive, and didn't produce gem quality stones in large quantities. Then in September 2003, Wired magazine unveiled a cover story about the invention of revolutionary new chemical processes for making diamonds, processes very similar to Adamas.

Now chemically-perfect diamonds can be produced artificially at reasonable prices and great quantities. It is such a huge threat to DeBeers that they have spent millions of dollars convincing consumers that mined diamonds are better than laboratory diamonds, even though the two are identical in structure. A diamond is a diamond, no matter whether its natural or artificial.

However, I still don't have diamond-coated sunglasses yet.

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