AARON
PATTERSON
SWEET
DREAMS

ACCLAIM FOR AARON PATTERSON'S

SWEET DREAMS

"New authors come and go every day. Very few come on the scene with the ability to weave a tale that will make you sad to reach the end, longing for more. At a time when the world needs a real hero, Patterson delivers big with the WJA's Mark Appleton—an unlikely hero for the 21st century."

— *The Joe Show*

"Aaron Patterson spins a good tale and does it well."

— *W.P.*

"SWEET DREAMS is packed with action, suspense, romance, betrayal, death, and mystery."

— *Drew Maples, author of "28 Yards from Safety"*

AARON PATTERSON

SWEET DREAMS

Book One In The WJA Series

Copyright ©2008 by Aaron Patterson

All rights reserved as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Borderline
Publishing
2008

Borderline Publishing
305 N. Steelhead Way
Boise, ID 83704
www.borderlinepublishing.com

First Hardcover Edition: November 2008
First Paperback Edition: November 2008
Second Paperback Edition: April 2009

The charters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious. Any similarity to a real person, living or dead is coincidental and not intended by the author.

Patterson, Aaron, 1979-
Sweet Dreams: a novel/ by Aaron Patterson. -2nd ed.
p.cm.

ISBN 978-1-4276-3587-7 (Paperback)
TXu 1-586-116 September 6, 2008
1-92758771

Cover design by Andrew Garcia

Printed in the United States of America

For my wife Karissa,
the love of my life and my best friend.

SWEET DREAMS

-The Revenge of Justice-

Chapter One

TEHRAN, IRAN, IN JULY WASN'T HOT; IT WAS HELL. The heat would melt the soles of your shoes to the pavement if you stood in one place too long. The night air would bring some relief with its cool musty smell of sand and sweat. However, it seemed this evening the cooling desert would not give up any of its pride and send a much-needed breeze into the city. No this night was muggy sticky and just plain miserable.

Tonight was like any other night for Hokamend. As he thought about how his best friend died in a bus bombing just six years earlier, he went about his reading as he did every night; a book called "The Fall of America." He and his friend had spent countless hours together going over and over plans and drawings of the metro system, trying to find the perfect place to set off the explosive.

Muttering a prayer to Allah, as he looked up to the sky and noticed that it was starless and a storm was thinking of moving in to tease them with rain and in the end leave without so much as a drop. He smiled and a spark of victory lit in his eyes.

He envied his friend in some ways; he was in a place beyond this world, a place of which he could only dream. He snapped his head up as he realized what still had to be done. Someone had to finish the work; someone had to finish "them!"

His hate for America and disdain for the people who infested the land made him want to spit just for thinking about them and their smug faces and their fancy cars. He would bring them to their knees. He would wake the sleeping giant and then take its head off.

Hokamend jolted out of his daydream as he heard his bodyguard walking past the door to his room. He relaxed a little. His guards were the best money could buy. They walked in four shifts and in different patterns, every hour to keep any lurking enemies confused. Hokamend was a careful man and never took chances with his own life. True he called even demanded his followers to give up theirs in service to Allah, but he was different, he was worth more.

He was a wanted terrorist in America, and a half-million dollar bounty on your head could make even your friend consider the offer. However, he knew if anyone were even suspected of turning against him, there would be hell to pay. Fingers, toes even a tongue every now and then had a way of driving the truth home that under no circumstances do you ever cross Hokamend.

He slipped to his feet and walked to his window balcony to

light up a cigar. His stocky frame wasn't what you would expect from such a high-profile criminal. His jet-black hair fell in a tangled mess like black spaghetti over his shoulders, almost hiding a small scar above his right eye. "A battle wound," he would say. He was proud of all his scars, and he had many to be proud of, to him they showed his devotion to Allah!

A small flicker jumped into the sky as he flicked the lighter and drew in on his hand rolled Cuban. Looking out over his land his eyes scanned the perimeter and instinctively looked for snipers or anything that might be out of place. He wasn't surprised to find nothing amiss, after all this was the perfect place to build his palace. It stood atop a hill with four guard towers armed with snipers at each corner and the ground below had two fences that made a wide circle around the entire grounds. The fence was topped with razor wire and fifteen mangy trained guard dogs roaming in-between the two fences. Get past one fence and then get real lucky and slip past the dogs then the snipers would finish the job.

Everything within a mile around the white stucco and brick palace had been cleared and bluegrass was kept short making it look more like a park then a secure compound. The lush green lawn was void of trees, shrubs or anything else an enemy could hide behind and get close enough for a shot.

Standing like a stubby statue he looked around at the city lights gleaming in the night air like little bat eyes staring at him wondering if he was a friend or foe. Taking a deep draw, he let out a cloud of thick smoke and wondered when they would figure it out. Or would they ever.

"No," he thought, "they don't have the stomach for it.

They were weak!"

A tiny mosquito landed on his arm and began to suck blood like a small vampire, he swatted at the pest and missed as the bug dodged just in time to save its worthless life. "Stupid bugs." They were out in force tonight, and there was no cool breeze to fend them off.

"Bzzz…" He swung his hand at the mosquito and cursed. This time he made contact with the bloodsucker making a blood smear on his arm.

He grumbled in frustration—the little buggers were ruining his quiet time and in his busy life, he treasured this time of the day. It was his time to think and to clear his head, not to mention enjoy a good cigar.

He felt another one bite into the side of his neck and his anger made his face flush red. *That one stung like a bee sting not a mosquito bite*, he thought. A cold shiver ran its way up his spine.

Rubbing his neck with his thick fingers, he didn't feel anything unusual. The weird thing was, he didn't feel anything, anything at all. His fingers felt numb, like hard rubber. It was as if someone else was touching his neck. He still had feeling everywhere else but his hands were numb.

He neck was beginning to pulse with pain and he turned and managed to make it back into his study without falling down. He could feel his temperature rise and small beads of sweat made there way to the surface of his forehead. Nothing could prepare him for what happened next.

Screaming out in agony, he fell to the floor. Clutching his head with his hands, he dug his nails into his skull, as if digging his nails into his skin would make the pain stop.

Hokamend screamed out for a guard or someone…anyone to come help him, but no one came to his aid. "What's going on?" He mumbled to himself as he writhed on the floor.

His confusion gave way to his instinct to live, and he tried calling out again, to the point where he could feel his throat start to burn. The pain started to get worse and his ears rang with a deafening sound that reminded him of the air horns he used to hear as a boy just before a bomb exploded and more people he knew died. It was always the same thing, mangled bodies, missing limbs and the smell; he would never forget the smell. Like burnt flesh and rust.

The realization hit him that his screams were not doing any good. He was screaming out in agony, but no sound was coming out of his mouth. He did manage a slight gurgling sound—then just air.

He didn't know it, but his voice box had already melted away into nothing. His insides were being heated up by his own immune system as they fought the chemical that blazed through his body. All he felt now was pain. Every nerve in his body burned with a heat that he never thought could generate from a human body. All he could do was curl up in a ball on the floor, and hold his ears. "That sound…Why won't it stop?" He screamed.

He managed to get his hand free and began dragging it down to eye level. He blinked once trying to clear his vision and he couldn't believe what he was seeing. It was his ear! Sitting in his hand was his ear, sizzling like a piece of bacon that was just pulled off a hot frying pan. He tried to focus; he needed to get his brain to start working. But his mind went into panic mode instead, he couldn't even think anymore. All

he saw was orange and red. The pain was so severe that it was almost beyond maddening. He mouthed a curse as he held his bloody ear in his hand.

Then it happened. His body began to heat up passing one hundred and fifty degrees, and reaching two hundred in seconds. Pain swept over his body like a wave of fresh molten lava spitting from a huge volcano. His pores opened up all over his body, trying desperately to relieve the pressure and the heat. The pain was so sharp and excruciating that all he could do was writhe on the floor, clawing at his head and face. His face was as red as a fire hydrant, and his shoes were melting in the heat. Then, nothing…

Hokamend was dead. In less than five minutes from the time of the mysterious bug bite, he had gone from a middle-aged healthy male to not even recognizable.

His body still lay in the fetal position on the floor of his office with his boots, socks and feet gone with only a smoking bloody stub where they used to be. His head and face looked like they had been put into a microwave and cooked on high.

Nothing else seemed out of place in the room. If it wasn't for his head and lack of feet, it might have been thought that he had a heart attack and fell over clutching his chest and left arm like you would see in the movies. The bodyguards joked just outside his door as to whom he would curse at tonight for not getting him his drink on time. Little did they know that, just a few feet away, an assassination had just taken place.

MARK APPLETON QUIETLY MADE his way down from his rooftop perch where he had just carried out another flaw-

less hit. It seemed that no one was aware of his presence, which was the way he liked it. From the looks of it, he did not think that the guards would discover the body until the next morning.

Mark's blond hair hid under a dark baseball cap, which matched the rest of his attire. Black cargo pants and a long-sleeve shirt with patched on the elbows and a tiny pocket on the left arm for a throwing knife. He wore skintight lambskin gloves that were like a second skin. He was silent as he moved across the rooftop and to a zip line, which was how he had come up to this particular building.

The line was made of a small woven cable that was used in airplane wings and developed by NASA. It would hold up to three thousand pounds with the eighth-inch line he was using.

The line was attached to the side of the old apartment building, where Mark had shot with an high-powered air gun that looked like a small crossbow and shot anchor, which spread out once it penetrated the brick to form a solid hold, spanning across to the adjacent building about five hundred yards away.

Hooking up to the line, Mark slung his weapon over his shoulder and started his descent. Without making a sound, he slid through the air with ease and made it to the next building. A door on the rooftop led to a back stairway, which Mark quietly made his way down.

These old buildings had long since been abandoned, except for a homeless drunk here and there, they had old boxes and junk piled up in corners and the smell of urine and mold made even the musty air outside seem like a fresh ocean breeze. Mark made sure not to wake any of them as he went

down the twelve flights of stairs.

Once he was on the main level, he made a right through a broken wooden door and into an empty room. Half of the wallpaper was torn off the walls, and the carpet was long gone leaving just plywood which was curling up on the ends. The buildings were bombed out with a few rooms still intact in each one but this part of town looked like a tornado had ran through the streets. Some buildings were beautiful and untouched; others were about to cave in on themselves. War had a way of leaving its mark on more then just the people.

Mark quickly took apart his weapon and as he did so, his eyes searched the room for anything he might have left or any sign that could tie him to this dilapidated building. He folded the gun in half where the barrel and stock met. All the metal had a black matte finish and the stock was a composite plastic. The scope came off with a click sound and he shoved everything in a backpack and pulled it onto his shoulder. Once everything was secure, he pulled out a small remote, from his pocket. As he stepped outside, he peered around the corner, making sure no one had spotted him, and pushed the button the little red button.

He listened and he could hear a faint sizzling sound as the zip line above him melted and then turned to ash and floated away in small flakes.

“Good,” He muttered under his breath, “no trace.” A look of satisfaction crossed his face as he ran across the street.

Tehran, like most cities in the desert, would come alive after nightfall. People were smoking outside of the local bar and likely talking shop or griping about the heat. Mark could hear laughing coming from inside of one bar as he passed, someone

fell off a chair making a loud thumping sound and glass shattered when his mug hit the floor.

The streets were concrete and asphalt with a few intersections lined with cobblestone. He was in the lower class part of the city right on the edge of where they had spent millions upgrading the city. Red, blue, and yellow cloth hung out above shops with lights and signs blinking hoping to draw traffic to look at what they had to sell. Mark made his way down a back alley, kept his head down and tried not to look at anyone. Tonight all Mark wanted was to get back to his nice soft bed and get some sleep.

He came upon a small one-story shop made of brick and sported some cool graffiti right next to the front door. There was a sign in Persian above the door that read “Sporting Goods.” The building wasn’t much to look at with thick black steel bars over the front door which was wooden and starting to turn gray from the sun. The windows were boarded up and they too had the local kids handiwork spray-painted on the boards that covered the broken windows.

The heavy door creaked as Marked pushed it open and went inside. The lock clicked when he turned the lock and deadbolt into place. Pulling off his ball cap, he tossed it on the coat rack.

The shop was one open room with two rows of metal shelves in the middle, stocked with fishing gear, graphite fishing rods, hooks, fishing line and every kind of bait you can imagine. The other shelf had a complete line of camping supplies: Coleman stoves, dehydrated meals like stew with potatoes and green beans to deserts like peach cobbler. If you were the old school type, you could just get the original MRE’s and

hope your taste buds were on vacation. The racks against the walls went all the way around the room and came to a stop at the front desk where there was a cash register and a glass case with pistols and knives. Behind the counter were guns of every shape and size, from shotguns to M16's. All of them were used, but in good working order.

The shop was not much, but it was clean and it provided a good place for him to hide as he was researching his target. The owner was a native who worked for the same organization that Mark did. As far as any one else was concerned, he was an out-of-town guest.

Mark went to the very back of the little shop, and stopped in front of a shelf that was filled with books on how to fish and hunt, primarily on how to stay alive in the desert. Running his fingers along the back of the books, he felt around for… "Got it." Feeling a small lump the size of a fingertip, he placed his index finger on the button and pushed. A deep groaning sound sliced the silence and the floor to the right of where Mark stood started to open. Splitting in the middle, the floor opened up to a concrete staircase going down about fifteen steps. The hole was six by six and the concrete lid rotated down and hung like wing doors on a cargo plane.

Mark started down and the floor closed behind him with a final thud. Wall lights illuminated the staircase and a few flickered as they came to life. At the bottom of the stairs, Mark came to another door. This door was made of metal and looked like it weighed over a thousand pounds with huge rivets and bolts going all the way around the border of it. A small red light glowed like an evil eye and made a bubble of glass as it protruded from the wall.

Mark looked at the small LCD screen that was mounted to the right of the door. He placed his hand on it and the thing lit up and ran a scan of his handprint. Then he leaned down and spoke into the box making sure to pronounce each syllable perfectly.

"Appleton, Mark."

The red light above the door started humming as a red laser of light shot straight out and fanned out at the end so it lit up red from wall to wall. It started at the top of his head and began to scan down his body. It took readings of his frame and measurements of each bone like an x-ray but way more advanced. The light turned green when it had finished with the scan and then the door unlocked and slid down into the floor.

What lay beyond was not a concrete bunker or a dingy underground hideout. It was a house. Well not a real house but as much, a house as you could get this far away from home. The room looked like any everyday home that dotted the landscape of every American city. To the right was a kitchen with a black whirlpool stove and microwave oven. To the left of that was a sitting area with a fireplace and a fifty-inch plasma screen TV with surround-sound and a Blue-Ray player. A couch with big fluffy cushions sat facing the TV, and a rug made of camel hair was tossed on the floor.

Mark punched a code on a key pad that was mounted to the wall across the living room and a hidden door opened. It made a whoosh sound and reminded Mark of something he once saw in a Star Trek movie. The small room was filled with cases and weapons. A cold metal table was against the wall and Mark began to unpack his backpack. After he had cleaned and oiled his gun, he put it back in its place next to a

Glock that hung behind glass in an eight-foot case. Every wall had similar cases and they each contained guns, C4, landmines, and rocket launchers. Most of the weapons and ammo had Mark's own personal touches, from bullets made of paper to guns that shot with air and sound waves.

Mark looked around the room one last time and then left the room. The door whooshed back into place and blended into the wall as if it never existed. Mark stretched and pulled off his shirt and ran his fingers through his blond hair. He was craving a cool shower and a shave. The stakeout and events leading up to the kill had taken about a year of stalking and long boring nights waiting for a clear shot.

The hot water felt good as it cascaded over his body. He was lean and muscular with not a drop of fat on him. He worked out as much as he could but for the most part, he just had good genetics. The cool water washed away the stress of the day like only a shower could. Mark thought about the terrorist he had just killed. He was supposed to be sad or even to feel a little guilty about killing another man, but he could not bring himself to even feel bad. All the things he had done, the bombings, most of them by schools or near playgrounds so as to kill as many kids as possible. He had even trained snipers who would kill twenty people in a major city like New York or Chicago before anyone even realized anything was going on. "It was time for the terrorists of the world to live in *fear* instead of us fearing them."

After he shaved, Mark went into his bedroom to grab a pair of shorts. "Much better," he sighed. "Nothing like a comfortable pair of shorts."

Looking in the freezer, he grabbed a microwave dinner

and threw it in on high. He turned the package over and saw that this dinner offered a tasty slab of chicken with mashed potatoes and a brownie to boot!

"K would be proud," he chuckled, as the food started to cook. "A microwave dinner and a soda?" He knew what she would say.

"Not Healthy!" He could see her face frowning playfully as the smell of fake chicken filled the kitchen. However, he was too tired to cook tonight. "Ding." Grabbing a fork out of the first drawer to the left of the sink, he sat down on the leather couch and started to eat.

"Not bad, for a TV dinner," he said, in-between bites. Not like K's cooking, though, not much like anybody's cooking he supposed.

Now that he was on the subject he couldn't help but think about K and his daughter Samantha. It had been three years since…he shook his head and tried to shake the thought from his head.

"Wow, Three years. Time flies," he thought as he stared off into space.

Finishing his meal, he got up and threw the dishes in the sink, on most nights he would wash and dry all the dishes but he was celebrating, he was done with the mission and that meant only one thing.

Vacation.

Mark wandered into the bedroom and crawled into his king-sized bed. Hitting off the alarm clock—he was going to sleep in and it would be a nice change from the all-nighters he was getting used too. He closed his eyes and pulled the covers up around his chin, no matter how hot it was outside, he had to

be under the covers.

Once he had breathed in deep and let it all out in a big long sigh, he began to relax his legs and arms. His eyes were getting heavy and now he knew no matter what they were going to come. The thoughts of his family and they would consume his mind until he fell asleep. This took from one to two hours most nights but tonight he had a feeling he would fall asleep right away. He wished he could see K and her sparkling hazel eyes and the smile she used to only let him see. Then there was little Samantha with her cute pigtails bobbing as she ran down the steps to meet him. The workday was all worth it just to see her and feel her tiny arms hugging him and the way she smelled. He remembered, she smelled like soap and lavender, he didn't know why but she did no matter how dirty she was or how long it had been in-between baths. Now it seemed like it was just yesterday he was home holding K in his arms, he hated to go to bed alone, so alone.

Three years earlier…

Chapter Two

THE CLOCK ON THE WALL READ ONE O'CLOCK. IT seemed like it wasn't even moving or that it was beginning to go backwards. Mark sat at his desk with his dark blue eyes staring intently at his computer, trying not to look at the clock, which seemed to mock him with its incessant *tick tock*.

"Mark! I need that file on the Hoffman project. I've got a meeting in one hour with Mr. Hoffman himself to go over any changes he might want to make before we move on." Hank leaned in the doorway, looking at Mark. "Oh, and could you run me another set of blueprints, just in case?"

"No problem. The blueprints are printing as we speak. And I'll clean up the file and get it to you in five." Mark clicked the mouse a few times, as he rose from his desk, and then he headed down to the print room.

"Thanks, man," Hank said over his shoulder.

Hank Douglas was a man of speed. Not only was he quick-witted, but it seemed like he even talked on the run. If he was talking to an employee, he was walking or leaning over a desk or the elevator door was closing just as he put in a few more remarks.

Hank was the CEO of Synergy Engineering and Design, one of the top five engineering firms in the country. They designed multi-million dollar homes for celebrities like Hannah Montana to a quaint vacation home in Sun Valley Idaho for Tom Cruse to the tune of twenty-eight million. It was a small price to pay for a good room when you were on vacation. The division not a part of Mark's world handled the commercial side where they were responsible for buildings like Trump Towers Asia and the beautiful yet urban casino *Parchment* in Las Vegas. Everything was run out of the Douglas building in downtown New York on Broadway across the street from the Marine Midland Building. It was twenty-five stories of glass and stone jutting from the earth in what one would say was impossible construction. Twisting metal mixed with stone made the building look like something from a sci-fi movie.

The top of the skyscraper donned a beautiful garden with pine trees standing thirty feet tall casting long shadows over the pond that sat in the west corner. The park was open to the public and most of the employees enjoyed taking walks on their lunch break down the winding path that curved its way around making a loop through the whole park. In the summer months, a family of mallards found their way back each year and got nice and fat from all the free food that just happened to be everywhere.

Mark Appleton was in charge of the Residential Depart-

ment where they designed houses, from basic design to landscaping and interior design. Mark was the chief engineer with five other designers under him. The company employed almost a thousand people and was on its way to being one of the most sought-after firms in the nation.

Mark grew up in the small town of Canon City, Colorado. It was an old mining town that after the gold ran out became a sort of tourist town with a railroad offering scenic tours and impressive gorges, long bridges and whitewater rafting. The population was only fifteen thousand and moving to New York after growing up in a small town was a bit of a shock to Mark's system. Nevertheless, he managed and now loved the city and even looked past its ugly spots and ever-growing cancer.

After high school, Canyon City High home of the fighting tigers, he went off to Harvard school of engineering and applied science to study civil engineering. After graduation, he was picked up as an intern with S.E.D. thanks to professor Greenheart who had taken a liking to Mark and knew Hank's family. Sometimes it is really who you and not what you know. Ten years later he was in upper management and according to Hank *"a mover and a shaker son, one of the best and get that file on my desk like yesterday and…"* the elevator door closes and the rest is lost with the slam of the metal doors.

After a year with S.E.D., Mark met his wife, K. She was an art teacher in a local high school and loved kids more then anything in the world—that is until she met Mark. They met at City Baptist one Sunday, which is where Mark was going every Sunday. He liked to go and get his mind and heart right.

It was something he had grown up doing and something about it had a lasting impact on him. K walked in, the light from the morning sun hit her back, Mark turned, and like a ray from heaven, he saw an angel. Now he never believed in love at first site so he called it like at first site. She was everything he had ever dreamed and more.

K was beautiful, and not just to Mark, but to any red-blooded American. She had long, blond hair that was naturally curly and hazel eyes that changed to a fire green when she was ticked! Mark liked to get her all good and mad every now and again just so he could see the fire in her eyes. Her skin was fair and smooth like fresh milk. She gave him a look and just like her, she went and sat down in the pew right in front of him. Needless to say he didn't hear a thing that was said across the pulpit that morning and afterward in the parking lot he stumbled over himself and asked her out. Sometimes miracles do happen.

After dating for a year, with a few maddening fights that ended with those fiery green eyes they were married beneath the shadow of the Rocky Mountains back in his hometown. It was a beautiful wedding with the fall leaves blazing with color, red and orange covering the ground where they stood gazing into each others eyes and souls. The lake behind his parents house looked like glass and seemed to smile with approval as they kissed for the first time as husband and wife. After a ten-day honeymoon, they bought a little house in upstate New York, it was the all-American house with a small yard and a big old oak tree in the back, and a porch swing painted white in the front. "It's perfect," she said as he pulled off his hands from her eyes. He loved to surprise her and this

one took some doing. He had signed the papers before leaving for Colorado, hoped, and prayed it would be what she wanted. Not exactly, a purchase you can just take back and get a refund. Mark breathed in a silent sigh of relief when he saw her reaction.

Samantha was born a year and a half later. She was everything they hoped for in a daughter, with her mom's smile and her daddy's dark blue eyes. She thought she was sixteen and was more independent than her own good when it came to doing things for herself. "I can do it!" was a common phrase in the Appleton household.

It all seemed like it was just yesterday that he first saw K sitting in that little church pew, and now tonight was their five-year anniversary. Mark turned and looked out the window of his office and noticed the throng of people that filled the sidewalk down below.

"Reservations," Mark said to himself, "Check." He had made them a month ago at an exclusive restaurant called *The Leaf*. It was going to be a great night. Samantha would be at the sitter's overnight, and Mark would be showing K around the honeymoon suite at the Hilton Garden Inn if everything went according to plan.

Mark was glad for a project and with his mind busy, he wouldn't be thinking about what tonight would be like. The clock still mocked him and there was something about Friday's, time seemed to always go by so slow. No matter how hard he tried his mind was not on work today, all he could think about was the evening to follow, and K.

He hurried, grabbing the blueprints as they came off the plotter. His eyebrows furrowed down as he impatiently waited

for the printer to finish the last one. *Finally!* He folded the last one, and after a few minutes of arranging the completed file, started down the hall to a big corner office that was at the far end of the building.

Mark hit the gym at least four days a week after work. His five-foot-eleven frame was strong and solid. He was an easygoing guy who always enjoyed a joke. Most of the time he was the one telling it and if no one thought it was funny, he would keep going till he could get someone to laugh. He ran his hand through his short blond hair and looked into each office as he walked. He was an observant man and had a bad habit of looking over his shoulder for no reason al all. *To many spy novels,* K would say, thinking he was some sort of James Bond or something.

"Hi, Mark. Big night tonight?" the receptionist said as she put a pencil in her hair.

"Yeah. I am going to get out of here after I get this file to Hank. Oh, did you…"

"Yup, I called the flower shop after lunch and made sure that K got them. Don't worry!" she said before he could finish his sentence. "Oh, and the delivery guy said she cried and cried because she wanted *chocolate*, not flowers." Her eyes rolled back in her head as she giggled.

Mark threw a paper clip at her as he walked off chuckling. She ducked out of the way just as the phone rang. "Synergy Engineering. How may I help you?"

After Mark dropped off the file and prints in Hanks office, he took a short cut through the break room to his office. He quickly cleaned up his desk, making sure everything was in place, pencil holder on the left. Picture of Sam and K next to

his PC and everything else had to be in a drawer in its particular holder or folder. *Was he a little OCD?* Maybe, but to Mark everything in his office and in his life for that matter had a place. Why not put it there and at the end of each day, he did just that. "I'm out of here!" Throwing his keys up in the air and catching them, he gave Bert, one of his designers, a smirk on his way to the elevator, and then laughed out loud.

"You be good tonight," Bert said. "Big brother is watching you," he joked as he looked up from a set of plans.

"Have a good weekend, Bert. I know I will." Mark walked into the cherry wood lined elevator and pushed the button to the parking garage.

"Ding." The elevator door closed just as Bert started to respond. Mark laughed, "I just pulled a Hank!"

Mark Pulled from the parking garage onto Broadway and missed a bright yellow cab who thought this was a racetrack rather then a clogged city street. He flipped on the radio and wanted to catch the traffic report even though he knew what it would be, bumper to bumper all the way home, a tangled mess of metal, cell phones and everyone paying attention to everything but their driving.

The radio crackled and a firm commanding voice came on from the much practiced radio announcers voice. "Cindy Winters is reporting live from David's Island Correction Facility where we have a breaking story unfolding. We go live now to reporter Cindy Winters, Cindy, can you tell us a little bit about what is going on out there?"

"Well, Tom, the prison alarms are sounding, and I am looking at about fifteen fire trucks. I've been told that every paramedic within the surrounding areas has been called to the

prison!"

Mark was jammed up on the expressway, trying to decide if he wanted to change lanes or just wait it out like everyone else. He turned up the radio and waved at an angry woman with a little white dog sitting on her lap. She waved back but only with one finger, *so good-natured New Yorkers were.* K liked to call them Yorkers but Mark had his own pet names for them. The news story went on and Mark half listened. *Was there a prison break or maybe a riot?* That sort of thing happened more then anyone wanted to think, but from the sounds of it, it didn't sound like a riot.

David's island used to be an old base for war prisoners then most recently a bible camp for kids. They even had planned to put a nuclear power plant on the island but it never happened for one reason or another. Now it was a maximum-security prison for some of New York's finest and we are not talking the boys in blue. One long two-lane road found its way from New Rochelle to the seventy-eight acre island. All the buildings were only one story and outside of the guard towers, the old red maple trees cover most of the prisons from view, so the people of New Rochelle won't complain that an ugly prison is blocking their view of long island sound.

"Cindy," Tom's voice broke into Mark's thoughts. "Can you tell us what is going on out there?" The thump of a microphone and Cindy's sweet professional voice came back on after a brief pause.

"Tom, I just spoke to a guard who said it seems that there has been a mass food poisoning. He said that the Inmates were in the cafeteria eating their lunch when everyone became ill and immediately passed out. They seem to think that it was

the food or maybe it's an outbreak of some kind! We don't know every detail yet, but we do know that the *center for disease control* is on there way."

"Cindy is this something that is confined to people who ate the tainted lunch, or have others gotten sick as well?"

"From what I've been told, it is only affecting the people who ate the food served here today."

"Thank you, Cindy," Tom said with a drone." We'll keep you informed of this breaking story as it develops. That was

Cindy Waters, reporting live…"

Mark turned down the radio and gazed out over the sea of metal as it slowly crawled from the city. He had never heard of food poising working so quickly before. He had food poisoning a few times and at least for him it always took an hour or so to kick in.

Mark thought about the news story for about three seconds then his mind turned to his date with his beautiful girl. He would be home soon and he could almost see K and thought about the smile. He knew he would see it tonight and might even get her to flash it at him more then once. He reached to the passenger seat of his modest Honda Accord and felt the velvet box that had a bright red bow tied around it. He had bought it for K two week ago and now traced its delicate corners and wondered if she would like it. The moment he believed he had figured her out and what she might like or hate, the rules would change and he was left to try again. However, he didn't mind, it added to the mystery that was woman.

After getting off the expressway, he drove through Mt Vernon, which was where he called home. It was only thirty or so miles from the office but took over an hour to navigate

the distance. Turning down a side street, he cut across to Carwall Avenue and turned right. Tall old oak trees hung their branches over the road like great monsters of a day gone by. He smiled at a little red headed boy who was shooting hoops into a makeshift basketball hoop he had nailed to a tree. He looked his way with a half smile on his freckled face and went back to shooting.

The third house from the end, he saw Sam's tricycle in the front yard laying on its side with one peddle up in the air as if to surrender. He pulled the silver Honda into the driveway and hit something that made a small crunch sound. Mark got out and saw the cracked body of what used to be little Suzy. Samantha had used the doll for tea parties and after a few months, it was discarded for an upgrade. The white paint on the old house made it look bigger then it was and one window up in the top dormer looked like it was keeping watch over the front yard like a soldier. K had painted the trim blue, it was brown before, but that "*was no color for house trim*," she had said.

Mark could hear little Samantha running to the door to meet him. "Daddy, daddy, Look—*Look!* I drawed a horsey!" she said as she shoved a tattered piece of paper at him. It looked like a red crayon had been used up on sheet of paper. Mark smiled at Samantha and noticed how her blond hair had started to curl up at the ends. He hoped that it would be curly just like K's one day.

"Wow, and what a beautiful horsey it is, Samantha!" Picking her up and hugging her, he threw his arms around her waist and kissed her cheek. Sam's three-year-old arms wrapped around Mark's neck and she hugged him as tight as

she could. “I want to fly!” She exclaimed. Mark laughed, threw her up in the air, and then caught her as she giggled uncontrollably.

“Okay. Let’s go find Mommy.” He knew if he got her going, she would want him to make her *fly* all night.

“Mommy!” she yelled.

K came down the stairs from the bedroom where she was getting ready for their date. She had on a black dress that scooped in the front and came down to just above her knees. She was five foot eleven and had blond hair that looked like summer wheat when it was ripe and ready for harvest. Her long legs made the black dress look even more stunning and Mark’s heart jumped in his chest the second he saw her.

“Oooh, so pretty!” Sam’s eyes lit up when she saw her mom. She wiggled out of Mark’s arms and ran to K’s side. Reaching up, she tried to touch the fabric of the dress.

“Whoa, Nelly. You look fantastic, honey.” Kissing her softly, he could smell her perfume as it whisked through his senses. K smiled with a look of glee, knowing she did look good and was going to use it for everything it was worth tonight.

“How was your day?” She asked with a sparkle in her eye. She turned and started back up the stairs after she gave him a soft kiss on the lips. Mark followed her and sat on the edge of the bed, watching her. He told her about the slow day and how he didn’t get much of anything done. He left out the part about the snarling traffic and the news report. It all seemed like a distant memory now.

“Sam, where’s my other earring, the silver and black one?” Sam was milling around Mark’s feet trying to take his shoes

off and giggling when he would push her over. She would then get back up and try again in hopes that he would push her over again. She looked up at K and tried to seem innocent, her little hand hid behind her back clutching the earring like a pirate who just found the key to a hidden treasure. "Pretty earring," She said, not willing to give up her precious loot.

"Sam, Mommy needs it," She leaned over and tried to reason with Sam, her bright hazel eyes opened wide while trying to look sincere. Sam slowly put out her hand and opened it, revealing the missing earring. "Thank you, Sam," K said. Sam soon forgot about the loss, found a piece of string on the floor, and walked around the room announcing that it was a *necklace.*

When the doorbell rang, Sam jumped up and ran down the stairs yelling, "Gramma, Granpa!" K's parents were great at babysitting, which was nice when they needed someone to look after Sam overnight.

Scooping up the bag of teddy bears and other overnight "necessities," Mark made his way down to say hello to his in-laws and to hug Sam goodnight.

Sam was jumping up and down, giggling. She loved to go over to her grandparents' house. Her blue eyes were wide as she grabbed her sippy cup and Grandpa's hand and pulled him out to the car.

"Samantha, come give me a hug and a kiss!" Mark said. "She doesn't even care, she just wants to go," Mark laughed as Sam ran back, gave him and K a quick hug and a kiss, and then ran back toward the car snagging Grandpa's hand on the way.

Mark watched as their dark blue Chrysler Mini van pulled out of the driveway and onto Carwell Avenue. Bill and Holly

Bardwell live in the Westhampton, and had ever since K could remember. They had money but lived there before you had to be one of the wealthy to own a home there. K grew up in the same house that her father Bill had grown up in. She loved it out there and now the Bardwell's had a very exclusive bed and breakfast they ran in the summers. Bill was in real estate and had done very well for himself over the years. Holly was in love with art and that is where K got all her love for the arts, and her talent. They used to spend hours looking out at the sunsets from the back porch of their home painting what they saw, and sometimes not at all what they saw—but what they felt.

K went up to their bedroom to finish putting on her make-up, and Mark changed into a black pinstriped suit with a white shirt and a dark, blood-red tie. He ran some water through his short blond hair and made it spike up a little and K laughed at him. "Hey, some people don't just fall out of bed looking good, I have to try a little harder than you do." K tied a thin silk ribbon through part of her hair and it held part of it back as the rest fell on her shoulders. She glanced at him and smiled, it was *that* smile! And it was worth it.

KIRK WESTON SAT IN the third row of the briefing room and looked around the room with his dark grey eyes. There were twenty or so people in the room and everyone there wore suits as far as he could tell. The FBI had called his local police office in Detroit and requested that he fly to New York for a case. Kirk was on the bottom of the food chain back home in Detroit and was curious to see what all the fuss was about. He

had a hard time believing that anyone would be requesting his presence let alone the feds.

Kirk Weston was a middle-aged man whose hair was thinning, so he kept it shaved smooth. He had a look of disdain plastered across his face most of the time, and many people would say he was a grump, jerk, or any other word for not a pleasant person you could come up with. However, this *job* could do that to a person.

Now not to be fooled Kirk Weston was not a bad cop, quite the contrary he was a good cop, if not a great one. You don't make detective by hanging in the donut shops and showing up late for work. He just didn't like people, not that people were all that bad, he just couldn't find any he liked more then a splinter that was infected in the bottom of your foot. Then there was the outright disregard for authority, or anyone who was in a position to tell him what to do. Not exactly a fine quality for making friends and all that mumbo jumbo.

Kirk was a little more then annoyed that they had pulled him off his other case, but it seemed, from the looks of the room, that everyone else was in the same boat. Not that his other case was all that important anyway. Just a rapist who had a bad habit of picking targets under the age of sixteen, no biggie, let some other slob go after the guy. "Stupid feds," he muttered just loud enough for the two gentleman in front of him to hear.

He could see badges from New York, Boston, and even Washington. Everyone but Kirk was in uniform. *No matter.* He felt more comfortable in jeans and a white T-shirt, and no one was going to tell him what to wear anyway.

A well-built man with thick black hair that stood on top of

his head like a tiny army of soldiers, made his way up to the front of the room. He adjusted his green tie that had no business next to his salmon shirt unless you were in a sad Christmas play. He looked up through thick glasses and cleared his throat.

"Ladies and Gentleman, my name is Mathews, Special Agent in charge," Special agent Mathews pulled up a PowerPoint as he looked around the room with a somber look on his face. "As most of you know, a few days ago there was an incident at the David's Island Correctional Facility. If you will look on the screen behind me, you can see from the pictures that it appears that the inmates in this photo have passed out," The picture showed thousands of men in orange jumpsuits laying facedown on the floor and some still sitting in their seats with their faces smothered in their food. There were fifty or so paramedics and firemen working on the victims.

Kirk thought to himself, S*o what! So they ate bad shrimp.* The photo looked like it was taken in the main mess hall or cafeteria. Metal tables that looked like picnic tables were in neat rows and in the top part of the picture was a long counter with glass behind it. That was what it looked like where the cooks prepared the food.

"As reported on the news stations, the poisoning affected every inmate in the building. Not one guard was affected in any way. Now for the real story…" He paused to get everyone's attention. The director took off his glasses and switched to the next photo. A slow muttering rippled through the room. "They were not unconscious. Every inmate you see here is dead!"

Whispers and gasps were heard as everyone began to see

what was really going on.

Kirk shifted in his seat with a half smirk on his face. He was somewhat glad and didn't have any feelings of horror or loss like the rest of the *normal* people in the room. The prison housed some of the vilest criminals known to man, and now they were all dead. *Justice is served*, he said to himself. He thought he might be getting too hardened from fifteen years on the force, but he was always one to see it in his own way.

"Quiet down! I will now turn it over to Captain Jacobson. He has been with the FBI for over twenty-five years and has been at the scene of the crime from the moment we found out about the report." A tall lanky-looking man with bottle cap glasses stepped up and the moment he spoke Kirk thought that his voice didn't match his appearance. It was strong and commanding.

"Here's what we know, first, every inmate died within seconds of being around the food, but not all of them ate it, next, not one guard has died or even become ill, even though some of the guards ate the same food. And last but not least, we found no trace of poison or anything abnormal in any of the bodies." The Captain finished and showed them some more slides.

Kirk looked with new interest not because a bunch of slime bags died but because he loved a good mystery. He wanted to know how it was done, to see if he could crack the case and look into the eyes of a mastermind. The yard on the side of the prison was littered with body bags, and the slide was filled from top to bottom. There were people milling about in hazmat suits with the letters CDC stamped in their backs like a bold black warning. They looked like they were

testing something. Kirk guessed it would be the air and food. More pictures were shown of agents going through the rooms looking for any clue that would lead to an answer to the cause of death.

A lean redheaded agent, wearing a pale gray suit sitting in the front row raised her hand.

"Yes, Sally, go ahead," Jacobson said.

"So what you're saying is … there's no poison, no toxic substance in the air, and nothing out of the ordinary?"

The captain looked nervous as he pulled up the next picture. "Well, not everything. This is what was discovered inside of every inmate's pillow. It was sewn inside like it was put there from the factory." The picture showed a cut-open pillow with a small piece of cloth with the initials "W.J.A." "We're looking into every possibility. In addition, if this has been done as some sort of vigilante group, we will stop at nothing to catch them. I need you all to be on top of this case, and unless we get anything that proves the contrary, we will be classifying this case as a mass homicide."

Captain Jacobson looked around the room one last time, then turned everything back over to Special Agent Mathews and turned and took a seat next to the thin redhead in the front row.

Kirk watched as the Mathews began to give out his last orders. He split up the room and gave each of them assignments. Each person was handed a cream-colored file folder stuffed with photos and case records, and each file contained everything you did and didn't want to know about the inmates housed at David's Island. They were to follow up with the deceased families and see what—if anything, they could find

out. It was a shot in the dark and Kirk thought that they were barking up the wrong tree. They should be looking into this W.J.A. note, the pillow factory, and the food delivery service; someone had to have seen or remembered something that could help.

After they were dismissed, he left hurriedly, heading for the exit. He pushed open the door to the parking garage where he had parked his rental car.

"Chirp, chirp." The lights lit up on a dark blue Ford Crown Victoria, it was a hard habit to break. He had driven a Crown Vic for as long as he could remember and he liked knowing what he had under the hood. Getting in, he tossed the files in the back where they scattered all over the seat and a few loose photos fluttered to the floor. He turned the key and peeled out of the garage leaving a black rubber tire mark on the pavement. He started driving back in the direction of his hotel. He had to think, to really think, *did he want to do this? Did he have a choice?* His career was almost over anyway; one more screw-up, and his boss would have him patrolling a mall parking lot for the rest of his life. He hunched over as he drove, his back was aching again and the stress and the flight didn't help any.

"Ah, screw it!" He said with a grunt.

With that, he flipped the car around and headed for the expressway in the direction of David's Island. He paid no heed to the honking horns and the angry waves that came from the other cars he had just cut off, he wanted to see the crime scene for himself.

Chapter Three

LIGHTS GLEAMED IN THE MOONLIGHT, HIGH ABOVE the city. The view of the New York skyline was breathtaking. Mark stared into K's eyes and couldn't remember when she looked more beautiful. He reached into his pocket and pulled out her gift. He placed it on the table and slid it toward K with a smile.

"Oh, Mark, honey, you shouldn't have! You know, all I need is you!" K's eyes sparkled as she untied the red bow, the lid of the long black box made a faint popping sound as she opened it. K gasped and put her hand to her lips. "Honey, it's beautiful!" She almost whispered. She held up a diamond necklace and it caught a touch of light from the moon and twinkled. The silver chain held a sparkling diamond circle and Mark got up and moved behind her, and hooked the silver chain around her neck.

“This has been the most wonderful five years of my life. Never in all my wildest dreams did I think it could be like this.” Kissing her on the shoulder softly, he pulled her to her feet and they embraced. “Dance with me?” Mark said as the music started.

The music was soft in the background as they held each other and danced. The balcony of *The Leaf* sat high above the city where it overlooked Brooklyn Bridge. All around the balcony on the fifteenth floor where the Leaf was, stood tall torches that were lit and tall orange flames flickered making K’s soft skin glow in the firelight. Mark thought about how warm and content he felt, holding K in his arms, and how he knew that he was the luckiest man in the world.

After the song ended which was Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, Mark took K’s hand and they walked over to the edge of the balcony looking out at the New York skyline. The city looked alive with white and yellow lights filling the sky making the stars look pale in comparison.

“Thank you, honey. This night has been just what I needed.” Leaning her head on his shoulder, she shivered a little.

“Are you cold?” Mark asked.

“Just a little…” It was warm out but a slight breeze was coming from the bay with a hint of salt in the air.

“Ok, I’ll get the check; I’ll be right back. I have another surprise for you anyway!” Mark hurried off to find the waiter, and K shook her head and smiled, she liked how excited he got when he was trying to surprise her.

After taking care of the tab, Mark grabbed K’s hand and they went down the elevator to the lobby. The car pulled up

with a short man stepping from behind the wheel, he had on a red vest and a white shirt with a cursive *L* on the left corner showing that he worked for the restaurant. Mark gave him a twenty and opened the door for K.

"Where are we going?" She tugged on his arm and smiled flirtatiously.

"You'll see when we get there," Mark teased. "Don't worry. You'll like it." K pretended to resist and pouted a little playfully.

The streets were busy as usual, but then again, it was Friday night in New York. The hotel that Mark had booked was the Hilton Garden Inn, which was where they had spent their first night together before heading out to California for their honeymoon. Mark wanted to bring her back to the same room and this year he had the luck to get the reservation in on time and couldn't wait to see K's reaction.

As they drove up in front of the fourteen-story stucco and glass building and the valet, a thin faced kid who looked like he was right out of grade school took the keys and delivered the car to the parking garage. K giggled with glee and she clutched Marks hand and pulled him up the stairs and into the front lobby. "Mark, you *sneak.* How did you get us a room? They're always booked."

"Not just a room. I got *our* room!" Grinning, Mark flinched as K tried to hit him in the arm. Mark could see where Sam got all of her energy from. *Like mother, like daughter.*

The lobby had smooth cream-colored marble floors with bright red leather couches and fluffy chairs in the same soft red color. A fireplace raged in the sitting room and an older man

who looked like he was used to the finer things in life sipped a cup of coffee and watched the fire from the closer of the two couches. He was lost in the yellow firelight thinking of what his life amounted to or maybe remembering a love he had once had that was just as hot as the fire in which he stared. Mark looked away from the man and went up to the tall light colored front counter to check in.

The room was everything they had remembered, it was as if time was reversed and it was their very first time together as husband and wife. The fire was burning in the living room fireplace and it sent soft orange and white light throughout the room. Candles flickered on the nightstand next to the dark coffee brown bed, K turned her eyes to Mark, and they took on the light from the fire and seemed to come alive, like a firefly on the first night of spring. Her soft hands took Marks and she led him to the bedroom through a set of French doors. Her long, blond hair was that of an angel and Mark could see each strand as it curled down around her shoulders. Mark tried to say something but K put one finger to his lips, reached behind her, and closed the door.

Mark knew that the way he felt tonight, how his heart pounded in his throat, that this was something special, something that you don't find by accident. No, this was love, true love that you couldn't fake or manufacture. Every day he grew more and more in love with K, and he could not wait to grow old with her.

"I love you, K…"

REPORTERS RAN EVERYWHERE LIKE ants after some-

one had just kicked in the anthill. The prison had an odd presence about it. It was like death had moved in and even after he had done his work with his boney fingers, the stench of his soul lingered.

Kirk was used to seeing guards high up in towers and roaming the grounds and inmates in orange jump suits working out or playing courtyard ball. However, this looked like a movie set, and the cameras were not rolling.

Most of the bodies were already at the CSI crime lab so the mortician could examine them further. Kirk got out of his car, flashed his badge at the officer who was trying to keep the mob of reporters back with not much success. He was a fat out of shape cop with dark sunglasses on and a radio in his hand. The pot-bellied cop let him pass with just a look. He had been swarmed with FBI and detectives all day and to him what was one more goon tromping around the crime scene?

"What a mess—*vultures.* They all want a piece," Kirk muttered as he looked back over his shoulder. Finding the poor sap who was supposed to be in charge was easy. He was the one barking out orders, holding a blueprint of the prison in one hand and a cup of black coffee in the other.

"Hey, cap! You the man around here?" Kirk didn't bother taking off his mirror finish sun glasses, and he knew it was a sign of disrespect but he was never good at the whole butt kissing thing.

"Yeah. Who wants to know?" His thick mustache curled as he spoke and he talked out only one side of his mouth.

"The name's Kirk, Kirk Weston, DPD. I'm here with the FBI trying to get a look around, if I could," he said while holding up his badge so the captain could get a closer look. He

could tell the middle-aged police captain didn't like someone else stomping around in his crime scene, and he didn't blame him. *Heck, he didn't even want to be here.*

The captain glared at Kirk from under his hat wide brimmed cowboy hat. "Fine, just don't touch anything. Besides, there isn't much to see. But knock yourself out anyway."

Muttering a thanks, Kirk turned and headed to the front door. He ducked under the police line and headed in the direction where he thought the cafeteria might be.

The correctional facility or as Kirk called it—*prison, stinking liberals liked to gussy up the place to make it seem like a four star resort,* had the usual amenities. To the west, we have for your viewing pleasure a beautiful concrete wall with razor wire at the top just for looks I assure you! Kirk made a sick grin and looked up at the building that stood in front of him. All the buildings were one story and made of concrete and brick. Not many windows or bushes and to Kirk's surprise no garden of petunias to add some color to the drab surroundings.

The front doors were open and a paramedic wheeled by him pushing a gurney with a black body bag strapped to it like a dark Christmas gift from hell. Kirk wandered down the hall, then to the left through two sets of double doors. He smelled stale milk, mashed potatoes, and followed his nose to the cafeteria.

Food was everywhere, and trays were still sitting on the tables, some overturned on the floor spilling gravy and corn in a splash on the cold concrete floor. It was like someone had frozen time and then everyone just disappeared. Metal tables in neat rows just like the pictures Kirk had seen in the confer-

ence just hours earlier, but with one distinct difference, no bodies were there with stunned looks on their faces and fear in their eyes. A few CSI agents were collecting samples and labeling them in plastic bags over a few rows from where Kirk watched.

"I thought you guys would be done by now." One of the agents looked up at Kirk when he spoke and broke the deafening silence. He was a man of less then average stature and had thick blond hair that kept falling in his face every time he looked down.

"We *were* done. But after we didn't find anything abnormal in the samples we gathered the first time, we decided to come back to get samples from all the food bins in the kitchen, as well as something from every tray."

"It doesn't make any sense," the other agent, a brunette in her mid-twenties with a slim waist and wearing a white button up top and black slacks which looked funny to Kirk with the latex gloves. "If it was in the food, it would have killed the guards who according to them had eaten the same thing as the rest of the inmates."

"What about something airborne?" Kirk asked. A gas or something,"

"No. That would have done the same thing. It would have killed anyone within range." The short one, looking to be in his thirties, scratched his head and pushed away a loose strand of blond hair from his face.

"Do any of you have a card?" Kirk said. The pretty brunette reached in her pocket, and pulled out a white card and handed it to him. "Thanks. I might call you in a few days to see if you have anything new, I am working with the FBI on

this one, never thought I would work with the Feds..." Kirk trailed off and muttered something in almost a whisper.

"No problem. This one's a mystery," she said.

Kirk looked around a little more, and then went back to the kitchen where the meals were prepared. Sifting through a file cabinet that sat in a back corner, he found a paper that looked like a purchase order.

One hundred pounds of flour, twenty-five cases of Mac and Cheese… All the items on the P.O. looked like they came from the same place, *Simco Foods.*

Good, he thought, shoving one of them in his pocket. *We've got a lead.* He looked through the rest of the files and didn't find anything about who they bought their bedding from. He wrote down a note to himself on a beat up old notebook that he kept in his back pocket, to remind himself later to look into it. Closing the file drawer, he headed back to the hall and wandered around and looked into a few of the cellblocks but nothing seemed out of order, nothing except the missing prisoners. Once he was back in his Crown Vic and driving again, he glanced up at the sky and saw one out of place cloud that looked down on him like a big brother waiting to give him a swift punch to the arm. Kirk turned on the radio and found the 80s rock station.

His left arm held the steering wheel firmly, and just the bottom of a tattoo showed under the sleeve of his white T-shirt. His forearm revealed a scar from a bullet that grazed him last year. He could still feel the rain as it fell like a flood making it almost impossible to see more then ten yards in front of you. He had run down a suspected drug trafficker and as soon as Kirk showed his badge, the idiot ran. Kirk pounded

pavement after him and cornered him in a dingy alley, behind a laundry mat on Sixth Street back in Detroit.

It ended in a wet bloody shooting with Kirk hit but not bad and the idiot dead with two well-placed bullet holes in his heart. Kirk rubbed the scar and adjusted his dark sunglasses; he patted his .45 Glock that sat nicely in his side holster and remembered what his instructor had said over and over again— *never leave home without it.*

The sun would be setting in a few hours; he wanted to scope out the food warehouse before it closed. He knew he had to work fast before his boss got wind of it.

"Whatever! I'll just tell him one of the little dead convict's momma told me her little boy had a friend that works there." He smirked and then turned off the expressway and headed toward the northeast.

Chapter Four

SUN RAYS STREAMED INTO THE SUITE LIKE SOFT whispers from the morning sun to its true love the lowering moon. The sheer white curtains allowed a few beams of warm light to fall on Marks face as they tried to gently wake him from a deep sleep. Mark rolled over, trying to trick his mind into believing that it was still early and he had more time to sleep then he did.

Warm October air drifted through the window, filling the room with the scent of maple trees and roasted coffee beans as it mixed with the diner a block up the street.

Groaning, Mark looked over at K as she slept, he touched her soft skin and traced the outline of her face. She was everything to him, he thought of how he was happy, and for a brief moment, he wished that he could freeze time. He wanted to be

like this forever, to lay next to his true love, his soul mate and drink in her beauty. "Good morning, honey." He watched as K opened her eyes and smiled. "It's ten o'clock. We should get going. I think check-out is at eleven." K mumbled something, and then snuggled deeper into the pile of pillows and blankets.

Mark forced his legs to move, stumbled to the bathroom, got the shower going, and stepped in. The hot water hit his back and he sighed as he began to wake up from the morning fog his brain had left him in, he could feel the steam fill his nostrils.

"Baby?" he yelled from the bathroom.

"I'm up, Hmmmm," she moaned, "that is one comfortable bed."

"What?" Mark yelled as the water drowned out the sound of K's voice.

"Nothing, hon. I'm going to definitely need a coffee today," she mumbled as she pulled herself up out of bed.

Leaving the shower going, Mark slipped out of the bathroom and pulled a towel around his waist. He snuck up behind K, who was going through her suitcase looking for the new powder pink shirt she had bought yesterday, she knew Mark loved her in pink so she thought it was worth the price tag. Mark grabbed K from behind, making her jump and scream.

"Mark! Stop! You scared me!" Pushing him on the bed, she turned and ran into the bathroom, locking the door behind her so she could take a shower in peace.

Mark laughed as he grabbed a pair of jeans and pulled them on. He was a comfort person; that is to say, he liked to have on a broken-in pair of jeans with a T-shirt. He didn't

mind a suit, but only if he had to.

After they checked out of the hotel, they drove to K's parents' house. K grew up in what most people thought of the Hamptons. She and her older sister Lily had a white horse they affectionately named *booboo*. At one time, they had ten acres but her Dad had since sold off most of the land to be developed, but still had one acre left on which they ran a beautiful bed and breakfast. The horse was getting older but was still alive and was pampered by the visitors of what her parents called *the getaway*.

"After we get Sam, I need to go to the store to get a few things for dinner tonight." K looked up from the grocery list she was making out.

"I think the Super Mart by our house has an office depot across the street, and I need to get a few things there anyway." Mark looked out the window of the Honda at the city as it bustled with energy. "I'll just drop you off, then run over there, and pick you and Sam up after I'm done."

K nodded in agreement. She was always up for saving time. She knew Mark would wander around forever, looking at the newest computerized device or gadget.

After just over half an hour they pulled into the driveway leading up to the light blue three-story house, Mark could see Sam waving at them from the front bay window with a huge smile on her face.

The House had a circular drive with a pond in the middle of the circle. The pond housed bass and a few ducks who thought it was a great place to soak up some sun.

Mark parked the Honda and met K's parents at the front door. "Mom, dad. Thank you so much for watching Sam

overnight."

K's father Bill had a kind face and smiled with full white teeth. "It was our pleasure, she is lots of fun, besides *booboo* needed a little girl to ride her, she misses the little ones." He held out Sam's backpack and shook Marks hand.

K hugged her Mom and her dad and thanked them again for babysitting. "Anytime you two, we love having her around," Holly had graying hair pulled up in a bun and was slim and fit for a woman of her age; she still walked a mile every day rain or shine. "Nothing makes you feel young like a child."

Sam hugged her grandparents, ran to the car, and jumped into the back seat. She climbed into her booster seat and waited to be buckled in. After more goodbye's and thanks, Mark opened the car door for K and then walked to his side and got in.

As they drove away Sam waved good-bye to her grandparents through the side window and giggled as she began to tell them all about her adventures. "Granpa tickled me, and Gramma gave me candy and…and…" was all Mark heard from the back seat. The chatter continued all the way to the store in a torrent of laughs and giggles.

Before Mark realized it, the Super Mart came into view and Mark pulled into the parking lot. Going over the speed bumps at a crawl, he put the car into park in front of the store entrance. K opened her door, grabbed her purse, and walked around to get Sam out of her car seat. Sam giggled as K unbuckled her. "Can I ride the horsey?" Sam asked, referring to the horse ride that sat next to the front of the door.

Smiling and rolling her eyes, K leaned in and kissed Mark

through his window. "I'll be about twenty minutes or so. Love ya." She looked radiant without even trying, and Mark couldn't help but smile.

"Okay. See you in twenty." Rolling up the window, he turned the wheel, making a left down the middle aisle, pointing the car toward the office depot on the far end of the parking lot. Glancing in his rear view mirror, he could see K holding Sam's hand as they went through the sliding doors and into the store. Mark put his foot on the brake as the hair on the back of his neck *stood* up on end.

"Wha…?" The sound of a high-pitched whine filled his ears as a single man bolted from the store at a full run. He could see the fear and absolute terror on his face and Mark was frozen in time, just staring at the lone figure in the mirror.

It was as if time was irrelevant and seemed to slow to a dead stop. He felt as if he was frozen, trying to move, but every limb felt like it weighed a thousand pounds. His hands were cramped to the steering wheel. His heart stopped. *Was this what death was like? The absolute helplessness and the sense that your body was being ripped from time and space.*

Then the sound overtook him as it shot through his body like a bolt of lightning. He could feel the rush of air go by him as it threw him forward in his seat. *This was the one time he wished he had listened to K and worn his seatbelt.* His body slammed into the steering wheel, and the car filled with a blinding light and a heat that began to melt the headliner and the plastic molding on the interior of the car. The rear window burst under the pressure of the blast, and glass went flying into the front seat, shattering into a thousand pieces as his head hit the front windshield making a dull *thud.*

Mark *couldn't* feel the glass digging into his back, but he could taste the iron warm blood in his mouth. He couldn't feel anything and his mind was temporally frozen in fear or just shock he didn't know.

He heard the sound again and this time he could put it into words in his mind. "KABOOM!" Mark escaped his nightmare and regained the use of his limbs and hopefully his wits. He reacted with lightning fast reflexes and ducked down with his face smashed into the leather seat as the rest of the windows exploded into a million daggers of death.

The car lifted off the ground like a rocket that just hit the *blastoff* part of the countdown. The silver Honda flipped end over end followed by a fireball that pushed over fifty other cars in what looked like a huge wave on the sea but not made of salt water but rather metal and molten fire. Mark covered his head with his arms, and jammed his legs into the floorboard wedging himself against the seat and the door, trying not to get thrown from the car.

The force was like a merry-go-round pulling everything away from the center of the vehicle as it tumbled through the air. Mark pushed with everything in him, trying desperately to keep from being thrown from the vehicle. The car landed on its roof, slamming Mark from his hiding place, and slid to a halt, crashing into a light pole about one hundred yards away from where he had started.

Blood ran from Marks arms and back but he didn't notice, all he could hear was a high ringing in his ears. A small fire was beginning to burn into the leather and fabric of the caved in cab where Mark was lying when he seemed to notice that this was not the best place to be at the moment.

Slowly, Mark crawled out of the broken window, dragged his legs through, and rolled onto his back. The sky was blue with a few scattered clouds floating lazily across the open expanse as if nothing out of the ordinary was going on in the world.

Mark gulped in a deep breath not knowing that he was holding his breath. His confused brain was sparking and sputtering as if trying to re-boot. His lungs burned as he took another deep breath and blood oozed from his side. He did an inventory check of damaged parts and could tell that he had a few broken ribs and from the pain in his back he guessed that he was a dartboard for glass shards. His head was spinning, and he tried to focus his eyes.

He scrambled to his feet and turned to face the supermarket where his family had been. *"Where was the store?"* His mind raced. He tried to take a step toward where he thought the store should be when his legs gave away, and he fell on his elbow onto the crushed glass and concrete splitting his forearm open and sending a flash of hot pain up his arm.

Flames and thick black smoke filled the air. It was raining bits of metal and fire all around him, and all of the cars within a one-hundred-yard radius had been thrown away from the front of the store like a tidal wave. Cars were on fire, and one let out an explosion as the gas tank caught fire and the fumes ignited. One man lay draped over a mangled shopping cart, with his leg, missing from the knee down, he was dead, and a pool of ruby red blood began to make its way toward the drain a few feet away.

The air left his lungs and he choked back the need to vomit. The building was all but gone, through the fire and debris, Mark could see that the walls were sheered off at about

four feet high. Pipes and metal, along with brick, were piled up in the outer rim. From the looks of it, the blast had been in the center of the store.

Rushing to his feet, he found the strength to stand then he ran. *This can't be happening!* He thought as he bolted toward the building. Only a matter of minutes had passed by from the blast until now, but it seemed like it had been hours.

"K!" he screamed, reaching the spot where the front doors used to be. He started to dig into the mass of bricks and rubble. "Sam!" He cried. He refused to believe that they were… "NO!" *They were alive, they had to be! This was a mistake—* "not like this," he sobbed, "not like this."

His hands were soaked with blood as he dug in the dirt and concrete. He found a strap, it looked like Sam's backpack, and a fresh flood of hope filled his heart as he pulled. The strap was only three inches long and was burnt at the end but it was Sam's. He threw his head back and screamed yelling out to God to save his little girl but only feeling the cold stone sky in return.

Tears ran down his face, and he tried to wipe them away, but that just made it worse. He could feel the world spinning, and then, his head hit the dirt making a new cut on his forehead, which began to bleed at once.

The sound of the fire trucks and police cars could be heard in the distance. Mark's head ached; he could not get his ears to stop ringing. He could see the blue sky through the smoke, with the same lumbering clouds floating off in the distance; they seemed to smile, *why were they smiling?*

Then everything went black.

KIRK SAT IN THE parking lot of Simco Foods, which was a big metal warehouse with a little office stuck to the front like a tumor. The bulk of the building was covered with rust and the small office and the parking lot were as neglected as the rest of the building.

Taking out his gun, he dropped the clip, made sure that it was full, and then slid it back into place. Pulling the slide back, he put a bullet into the chamber. Kirk was never a boy scout, but he was always prepared. Being a detective had taught him that you never know what people will do when their backs are against the wall.

After locking the car, he went through the front office door. The receptionist was an older woman with gray speckled hair and more wrinkles then a bulldog. She looked to be in her sixties and when Kirk entered the dingy office, she looked up at him through her horn-rimmed glasses.

"Can I help you, young man?" Her voice quivered just like he remembered his grandmothers did when he was a boy. He loved going over to his granny's house, she always had a dish of M&M's on the coffee table.

Kirk pointed to the Detroit Police Department badge on his hip belt and flashed her a half grin. The FBI had issued them all identification but he didn't want to use it if he didn't have to. No one ever looked at the city stamp on the badge anyway. "I'm detective Weston and I am investigating a homicide and would like to ask you a few questions."

"Well I don't know if I can help you with that, we don't get much excitement around here." She fumbled with the tiny chain that hooked to her glasses and went around her neck.

"Your company delivers to David's Island don't they?"

Kirk looked around at the faded pictures on the wall of a mountain lake and one of the ocean. They looked to be over thirty years old and the rest of the office was dated just the same. Kirk tried to sound like he was half-interested in the answer so as not to alarm the poor old woman.

"Yes, we deliver to the prison every Friday. Now, let me see…" She shuffled through some papers that unlike the office were filed and stacked in neat rows on her desk. The phone was clean and a small photo of a little boy probably her grandson sat just right next to a pencil holder. "Here it is. Yes, Gus was the driver this last Friday." She handed him a paper with a photocopy of his driver's license.

Kirk took the paper and looked at it with his eyebrows down. "Is he here? I need to ask him some questions."

"Hold on. Let me check…" pulling out what looked like a time sheet, she glanced at it and nodded. "Yes, he should be out back cleaning his truck. You can go talk to him if you like." She pointed to a door behind her. Kirk thanked her and headed toward the door.

Kirk looked over his shoulder and asked. "Besides food what else do you deliver to David's Island?"

"Just that, we are a food servicing plant, we provide anything edible, but that's it."

Kirk nodded and pushed through the swinging door ignoring the mandatory safety glasses warning and walked into the huge open warehouse.

The small office was a different world compared to where Kirk stood now. The structure had metal beams stretching across to metal columns and even the siding was metal. It had to be forty feet tall and well over two football fields long but

Kirk could not see all of it. Loading docks ran along the east wall, and to the west were huge walk-in freezers. Forklifts drove in and out through hanging thick plastic that groaned and popped each time a driver went through. They were honking and driving like lunatics stocking shelves and unloading trucks. Shelves loaded with frozen food went from floor to ceiling. Most of the forklift drivers had on winter gear to keep from freezing in the iceboxes that were from twelve below zero, to twenty below.

Kirk saw a stocky Hispanic man who was probably in his mid-thirties with thick black hair and a thin mustache. He was sweeping a long eighteen-wheeler at the fourth loading dock from the end. Kirk double-checked the picture he was holding. It was Gus, all right.

Gus Martinez looked up from his broom. He could tell that Kirk was a cop from the badge on his belt and the way he walked. *All cops walked the same way, with that swaggerer as if they owned the world or something.* He shifted his feet nervously as Kirk approached.

"Are you Gus Martinez?" Kirk asked

Gus nodded in the affirmative but didn't say anything.

"I'm Detective Weston; I have some questions for you if you don't mind." Kirk was pulling out all of his nice guy charm and even said the sappy bull, *"if you don't mind"* —he was on a roll now.

"Sure, Am I in some kind of trouble?" Gus blinked at Kirk like a scared rabbit.

"No, no trouble I just had a few questions about your deliveries to David's Island?" He could see Gus shifting his feet and looking down at the floor, not a good sign so far.

"Um…what you need to know?" His English was broken, but still understandable. His dark hair was unkempt and had a streak of gray that ran through it. Kirk didn't see this gray before but up close he could see the spots and the large streaks making their way through the dark jungle. He shoved his hands into his pockets and fiddled with his keys nervously.

"Well, as I'm sure you know from the news, there was an incident out there on Friday, the same day you delivered food to the place."

"Some people got sick…I saw on news…" He looked toward the big rollup door and then back at Kirk, his eyes darting back and forth.

"No. They all died, Gus. The news was just trying to keep everyone from panicking, just in case it was an outbreak of some kind." Kirk's eyes narrowed, reading Gus's body language.

This guy is gonna run! Kirk thought, though he hoped he would be wrong.

Gus looked like he had seen a ghost. "Died? But they said…" He took one more look at Kirk, and then bolted for the door.

"Aw, crap!" Kirk pulled out his gun, diving after him, missing his shirt collar by just a hair. Gus jumped down from the ledge where a trucker was backing up to unload. "Stop!" Kirk yelled. Jumping down to the pavement, he sprinted after Gus. "Stupid…stupid, never run, man. This will only make things worse for you!"

Kirk had a bit of a temper, and it was beginning to rise. He could feel his heart kick in as a surge of adrenaline started to pump through his body. He could see his new little friend

take off around the corner, heading for the parking lot. He was right behind him, about fifty feet or so. He hit the corner and put his shoulder into the cinder block wall to stop himself. With his gun drawn, Kirk whipped around the corner.

Nothing…

He could hear a car start up. A pair of headlights came on and glared into Kirk's eyes like a panther ready to strike. A green paint chipped Caddy squealed out of the parking lot just missing a light pole as he rounded the corner and threw gravel when he hit the street.

Kirk grabbed his keys as he ran. Hitting the auto locks, he jumped into his own car, fired it up, and then took off out of the parking lot. The taillights of the runaway caddie were in the distance, weaving in and out of traffic like a drunk psychopath.

Grabbing his cell phone, Kirk dialed 911.

"Yes, what is your emerg…?" He cut the operator off. "This is Detective Weston. I'm in pursuit of a green Cadillac heading west on…" The street sign whipped past him as the driver of an oncoming car slammed on his brakes swerving out of the way. "…Fourth Street, I am in pursuit and we just passed Beacon Ave. Send some backup—Suspect is Hispanic, hundred and eighty pounds, wearing a dark jacket and gray pants." Kirk dropped the phone on the seat and grabbed the wheel with both hands. His arms bulged as he cranked with all his might, making a hard left and sending the phone over into the passenger side floorboard.

He caught up to the old beat-up caddy and remembered how glad he was that he was in a Crown Vic. Cars were flying by the windows like blurs of light. He could hear metal scrap-

ing and the glass breaking behind him. Then it hit him. They were on the wrong side of the street!

"You *messed* with the wrong cop!" Gritting his teeth and swerving into the right lane, he pushed the gas pedal to the floor and the car surged forward. He could see the road up ahead was going to make a sharp right-hand curve and he knew this was his chance to gain the advantage.

The two cars screamed down the industrial road, roaring like two lions in a fight to the death. Gus was ahead by just a nose, and Kirk had the front of his car directly next to the rear bumper of the Cadillac. As they started into the curve, Kirk jammed his foot to the floor, hoping to drop a gear and complete the maneuver. It was risky but Kirk had done it a few times in years past, so he was running on nerves at this point. The goal was to hit the rear of the suspect's car knocking his backend loose and causing him to spin out. Kirk waited for the gear to drop and then—*it did*, sending him smashing into the corner of his target like a bull who ran past the red cape and right into the matador. Then Kirk spun the steering wheel hard to the left propelling Gus into a spin.

The big green Caddy spun around as Kirk tried to keep his own car in control, dodging oncoming cars and trying not to lose Gus again. The world spun in slow motion like a special effect in a high budget movie and Kirk remembered thinking how he felt like some sort of super cop, in complete control of the spin and the impending outcome. However, that was just wishful thinking and he knew it, the two cars were now locked together in a dance that was not heading in the right direction. Gus stared wide eyed at Kirk for a brief second as a white mini van slid through the intersection and t-boned Gus breaking

them loose from each other and then the old caddy turned and proceeded to flip over in a shower of sparks and grinding metal.

Kirk stood on the brakes, cranked the wheel to the right, and came to a skidding stop. The white mini van was stopped halfway on the curb to Kirks left, and there was white smoke boiling from the crunched hood. A tall dark woman stumbled from the van with a small cut on her cheek. Kirk noticed she was not dressed like a mini van driving soccer mom with a short black skirt and a white shirt but more like a sales woman about to visit a very rich client. The two car seats in the back said other wise and for a minute Kirk was drawn away from the scene that was unfolding in front of him.

The green caddy had come to a stop on its top and the back wheels still spun looking like a dog that was dreaming of running and even though it was asleep, pumped its legs onward still as if it was going somewhere. The road past the intersection and on all sides was what looked like a bad day at a NASCAR race or maybe a good day depending on what kind of fan you were. The mini van was one of many such accidents but Kirk was only interested in one at the moment.

Kirk opened the door and stepped out taking his place behind the protection of the large Crown Vic's door. He had drawn his .45 but didn't remember when he had, was it when he was running or driving? It was not important now but he was sure after all this was over he would have a crap load of paperwork to do and a detail like that might be good to remember. Kirk could hear the whine and squealing of breaks as a semi truck full of frozen chicken locked up and jackknifed. He threw a glance over his shoulder, saw the semi turn over,

and scraped the road clean like a huge snowplow. It stopped just shy of the end of what would be yet another mess made by yours truly.

"Gus? Are you trying to get yourself killed?" Kirk said to himself. He could see movement through all the wreckage and Gus slowly crawled out from the smashed-up car, and hid behind the rear fender. Then without warning, Gus popped up with a handgun and opened fire, a bullet sliced through the door; hitting Kirk in the leg and sending a riveting heat through his body. Dropping to one knee from the impact of the bullet as it drilled into his flesh, Kirk fired back two shots that glanced off the rear fender where Gus's head was a few seconds before.

Kirk grimaced and looked down, seeing that the bullet had not hit an artery, and appeared to have gone clean through, he clenched his jaw and cursed. This was the time most cops would have waited for backup and nursed their wounds. However, Kirk Weston had what he liked to call a short fuse, and he was hopping mad.

"Okay, this is how you want to do this? Fine, just remember you called down the rain so don't gripe if you get wet!" Kirk peered at the Caddy to see if Gus was up waiting for him to make an appearance and saw the little creep through the broken side window cowering like a whipped dog. Kirk shot at him so he would have more time and mustering all his strength, he jumped to his feet.

Kirk Weston ran ignoring the burning pain that ate at his leg and like a gunslinger, he held out his .45 out in front of him making a straight line for the overturned car.

Gus jumped to his feet, looked into the wild eyes of Kirk

Weston, and had a tinge of regret run through his mind. Only a crazy man would run across open ground gun drawn screaming like that. It unnerved Gus and he did what only a beaten man would do—he hesitated!

Kirk saw this flash of fear cross Gus's face and shot once hitting Gus in the right shoulder. Gus twitched and twisted around and fell backward landing on a bed of glass. Gus turned on his side as quick as he could to put a bullet into the pigs other leg, and when he looked through the glassless side windows of his mothers prize Cadillac, all he saw was the flash of a muzzle flare from the cop's gun.

Kirk saw Gus hit the ground and knew what he was planning on doing. *He thinks he is going to put another slug in my other leg for good measure!* This all came to Kirk in the time it takes to blink for as soon as he realized it he dove to the ground like a baseball player sliding into first and between the glass that lay strewn on the pavement and radiator fluid made the street like an ice skating rink. Kirk skidded on his belly and saw Gus turnover and with a smirk on his face, he fired two shots in rapid succession.

Both shots hit Gus square in the forehead blowing out the back of his skull like a ripe watermelon. Gus slumped over in a lifeless heap.

Kirk lay in the middle of the street for a second, he was not aware of any other noise besides the thumping in his ears. He grunted as he pulled himself to his feet, brushing the dirt from his arms and glass shards. He made his way around to the back of the car. Gus was dead. His head lay in a pool of blood that grew as it drained from his body.

"Ah!" Kirk yelled in frustration and pounded his fist

down on the car, his eyebrows lowered in anger, more at himself then anything else. *You had to kill the guy didn't you? He pushed your buttons and you just had to make him pay!* He needed information, and now his only lead was dead! He could now hear the sound of emergency vehicles off in the distance.

Trouble, he thought. "No fighting it now. Oh, well." He liked to tick people off, and it was even more fun when they thought they were smarter than him. However, he knew the truth. He was going to break this case. Now he had to!

Chapter Five

MARK TRIED TO OPEN HIS EYES. THEY FELT LIKE they weighed ten pounds each. He cracked one eye open and was met with a blinding light that gave him an instant headache. The light in the hospital room beamed right into his eyes and adjusting was a slow process.

After a few minutes, Mark managed to work both eyes open and found that he was lying in a medium-sized room with a TV mounted on the wall at the foot of his bed. He could hear a shrill beeping coming from the heart monitor that sat on a metal counter next to his bed. The sound of nurses hurrying up and down the halls made a rustling as they walked from appointment to appointment. Mark wanted to sit up, but the harsh pain that shot through his side said otherwise. He hurt just about everywhere he had a nerve ending and they all cried out for attention. The glass had perforated his back and neck,

and he could feel the wounds break their scabs open every time he moved.

"*Why?* Why was this happening?" A single tear ran down his cheek. His perfect life was ripped from him in a single moment, but his mind didn't want to believe it. "K and Sam are gone. Dead, and for what? This can't be. They had to have made it. Maybe by God's grace they made it. Is it possible?"

"Nurse! Nurse! Please help. I need help!" Frantically, he called out from his room and searched for the call button but could not find it through his blinding tears. A nearby nurse heard Mark calling and came into his room.

"Is everything all right, Mr. Appleton?" The plump nurse looked at his chart for a second and then began to check his vitals.

"Please," He cracked, his mouth was so dry, and it felt like he had been sucking on cotton. "Do you know where my wife and daughter are? They were in the explosion. Have you seen them? My wife's name is K Appleton, and Samantha is my daughter. Please…" His eyes filled with fresh tears, and he held tightly to the nurse's hand.

"Mr. Appleton, I am so sorry…" She hesitated. "They didn't make it. Everyone in the supermarket died, and we only found four survivors including you. I am so sorry,"

Mark's heart sank, and as the truth hit him, he began to weep harder. He needed to think. So many questions ran through his mind. "Was it a bomb? Was it a terrorist attack? Was it an *accident*?"

He had to pull himself together. The nurse asked him if he wanted anything. "Would you like some water?" He declined

and said he just needed to be alone for a while. Even though he felt like he could drink a gallon of water, he could not now, not with Sam and K dead. The round nurse told him she was going to go get the doctor and hurried out of the room.

Mark's mind raced as he thought about what happened to his wife and little girl. Feelings of guilt started to rise in his heart. He should have gone in with them. If he had only made them stay with him. But how could he have known what would happen? How could anyone know?

The evening wore on as Mark lay in his empty room, staring at the ceiling. The doctor, a gentlemen in every respect came in and talked with him but Mark didn't hear him. Bill and Holly came by and Holly had red puffy eyes from crying, and Bill looked like he was going to pass out. Mark turned over and did not say a word to either of them. It was selfish he knew and he knew that they had lost their daughter and beloved granddaughter but he could not feel anything beyond his own deep dark grief.

Mark refused any food and in the end, they gave up and put something in his IV. The line between grief and anger was very thin and Mark fought it with everything in him but with each passing minute, he was losing the battle. He would find out what happened. He would find out if this was an accident. "Because if it wasn't …" his mind trailed off. "If it was a terrorist, then they would pay. One way or another, they would pay!" Finally, after the sun began to set, Mark drifted off to restless sleep.

"YOU, MR. WESTON, ARE off the case!" Captain Ja-

cobson's face was as red as a Washington apple as he pointed his long, bony finger into Kirk's face. "All I need is a rogue cop running around *MY* city. All you had to do is interview the families in your files. Is that so hard? Now we've got a dead witness and a few miles of rubble that I've got to explain to the media! Who do you think is going to pay for all the damage?"

Kirk shrugged his shoulders and said. "I was just doing my job—following a lead."

"Shut up! Not another word! Now I want you on the next plane back to Detroit," He hissed. "I've already informed your superiors and they'll be expecting you." The Captain paced the room, trying to cool down. He glared at Kirk who sat in a chair looking smug. Sitting down in a big, black chair behind his desk, the Captain motioned for Kirk to leave.

"Here. You might want to look into this," Kirk tossed the purchase order on his desk as he stood to leave the room. He muttered a curse and walked from the captain's office. He slammed the door and, limped his way to the exit. He had a feeling that the FBI knew more than they were letting on. This stupid thing about interviewing the inmates' families was a joke. This was a well-planned job, and he had a feeling that the FBI might even know who it was. Maybe they could not do anything about it. But, then again, who gave a crap about a bunch of cons dying? They had it coming anyway, and it would save the taxpayers some money!

Kirk got into a cab as he left the FBI building, his rental car was at the shop and the rental car agency was not to keen on replacing it with his recent driving record. He rubbed his chin, thinking about what his next move was going to be. He

was not one that liked to be pushed around, no matter who was doing the pushing. No. This was far from over. He had to know why this had a stinking smell about it.

"Hill View Hotel," he said. As he slumped back into his seat, the cab made a right onto the interstate. He touched his leg, feeling the bandage where his wound was. Wincing, he decided he would check into a different hotel and get his hands on another car. If that bottled-caped captain thought he was going to send him packing, he had another thing coming.

His cell phone rang, and he looked at the number. It was his boss and he was sure he would have a few choice words for him so he silenced it, "Sorry. This one, I'm doing on my own."

The cab came to a stop in front of the Hill View Hotel and Kirk dug in his wallet for some cash. "Keep the change." He tossed the driver a fifty, and then headed into the building. Hill View was a simple hotel that sat next to a few other hotels in the same district. It was not a pay by the hour hotel but only about two steps higher up on the food chain. The lobby stank of cigar smoke and stale coffee. Kirk didn't bother to even look at the scabby rail of a man behind the short thing they called a front desk.

The room was about twelve by twelve and had a double bed and a nightstand next to it. A fifteen-inch TV sat on a desk just beyond the foot of the bed. This room had a small shower and the bathroom was so small that it didn't even have a sink. In fact, the room didn't have a sink at all.

Kirk packed up his clothes, which were thrown all over the floor and made sure to grab one of the white robes as a gift to himself. "Thanks. I needed one of these." Stuffing the robe

into his Underarmor bag and zipping it shut, he thought how strange it was that a dump like this even had robes.

A few blocks down from the hotel, Kirk had noticed a Avis rental car place and decided to walk. He slung his blue and black bag over his shoulder and put his sunglasses on. He had on a white t-shirt and light blue jeans with a hole in the left knee. He gritted his teeth each time he added weight to his sore leg, and the only thing that made it not hurt so much was that the punk that shot him was at the morgue.

Avis had a bumbling blond behind a white counter when Kirk wandered in. She was a snot, and as soon as Kirk opened his mouth to explain his situation she confirmed this assumption. Kirk had to flash his badge to get the tall woman moving, and smashing up the last car didn't help any, but the FBI would take care of it. At least, that is what he told the dumb blond behind the counter.

Once he was behind the wheel, again Kirk felt much better. He requested the new Dodge Charger and they happened to have one left. In addition, to make him feel even more *not so cranky*, it was black!

Kirk couldn't get that phrase out of his mind. "They said. Who is '*they*'?" *Gus had said 'they.'* He needed more info. He needed a hacker. "I need Mooch!"

Kirk had picked up Mooch a few years back for hacking into the eBay website. He put every auction as a '*buy it now*' for a dollar, and the site ended up in a lawsuit for the billions that were lost in that one day. Kirk didn't turn him in and no one even knew it was him, so Kirk let him off. It was somewhat funny and Kirk knew it was always good to have one of these guys owing you a favor.

"It's time to pay up, kid." Kirk dialed his cell as he drove down the street, weaving in and out of traffic only to get stuck behind three yellow cabs.

"Pick up," Kirk grumbled. The other end of the line crackled and a young voice came on the line. "Hey, Mooch, I need that favor you owe me. I'll be online in ten minutes. Stay close to your phone." Kirk hung up the phone before Mooch could say anything more then hello.

Slipping his phone into his pocket, he turned down Fourth Street and looked for a coffee shop, he needed some caffeine, and if he got cut off one more time he was going to scream.

There!

He spotted a small coffee shop called the *Mean Bean*. He pulled down the alley next to the brick building and parked in the back. The building was three stories tall and used to be apartments back in the fifties but had been renovated into a coffee shop, a law firm, and a few other businesses. Grabbing his laptop from the front seat, he locked the doors and went in the back door as if he owned the place.

The Mean Bean was decorated with different oversized coffee cups and the walls were painted mocha brown and black. Burlap sacks hung from the walls, along with pictures of coffee beans and newspaper clippings of the Mean Bean's first ribbon cutting ceremony, which made at least one local paper.

Kirk ordered a plain black coffee from the pretty brown-eyed brunette. She was very good looking, and on a different day, he would have flirted with her. "Thanks" was all he said today. He headed toward a table toward the back and sat down. He looked around as his laptop booted up; he noticed

that the place had only a few people in it. One guy with a woven cap on was reading a book, and a couple of ladies were laughing and talking in hushed tones.

Dialing Mooch, he waited for an answer. The voice of a twenty-year-old kid sounded on the other end, and Kirk jumped in not waiting for Mooch to answer.

"Mooch, bring up the Transportation Department!"

THE NEXT DAY, MARK was released from the hospital with conditions. The Doctor told him that he had to take it easy for about a month, so his ribs could heal properly. He had three broken ribs, lacerations over most of his back and his hands were swollen and bruised. However, considering what he went through the doctor said he was lucky to be alive. He didn't feel that lucky, people who are lucky don't watch their family die and lose everything in one day.

Mark took a cab home even though Bill and Holly offered to drive him, but he didn't want to walk through the front door with them with him. He did not know what he would do or how he would feel going home to an empty house. The house still had K's sent in the air like a angelic presence and Mark closed his eyes and said more to try to strengthen himself for what he must do. *"You have to get through this Mark, there is no one here to hold your hand and do this with you or for you."* He walked upstairs, looking at all the family photos that hung on the wall. *"How could this happen*?" Just yesterday he was hugging little Sam. He could still feel her squirm with energy as she showed him her new toy puppy dog that she had named *woofie.*

K looked back at him from the bathroom with a smile. He could see her putting on makeup, and the way she looked, the way she smelled it was all gone!

He *couldn't* do it. This house, this home they had made together was not a home anymore. It was just another house on a street where other families lived, played, and loved each other. A wave of emotion racked his body, he fell to the floor of their bedroom, and he wept bitterly. What was he going to do without them? He could not live in this house with all the memories and pain of losing them. He wanted to remember them but not live surrounded with the life that he lost. He had to leave.

Mark wiped his eyes and stood to his feet. He had to pull himself together and no matter how much he cried or how much he missed them, nothing he did would bring them back.

The phone rang startling Mark, it was Hank. He was close to the family, and as he talked to Mark on the phone, he tried to somehow let Mark know that he was there for him. "Mark, take some time off. We've got it covered here, and if there is anything I can do for you let me know."

Mark's voice was low and quiet, which was not like him at all. He agreed that he needed some time to himself.

"Thanks, Hank. The funeral is set for Tuesday morning," Just the thought of it tortured him, but he knew it was something he had to do. "I think after that, I'm just going to get out of town for a bit…" His voice drifted off as he thought. "Anyway, I'll keep you updated."

"Okay, buddy. Call me if you need anything. I mean it." Hank's voice was sincere. He said good-bye, and then Mark hung up the phone. He looked around their bedroom and let

out a sigh. He knew that he could not stay here and he couldn't think of anywhere else to go. Maybe I should get something closer to work, the only reason he lived outside the city was for Sam and now that… He shook his head and went over to the nightstand beside their bed.

Mark took a picture frame from off the nightstand and looked at it for a long time; it showed Mark and K standing in front of the house right after Sam was born. K was smiling with that beautiful smile as she held little Sam in her arms. He took the photo out of the frame and held it close. He took a few boxes from the garage and began to pack a few things he could not live without. All the family photo albums and Samantha's teddy bear. Mark held it together through the process but had to walk out on the back porch a few times to do so.

After packing all of his clothes in two suitcases, Mark looked around the house one last time and loaded the boxes and suitcases into a silver BMW convertible. Hank had sent it over and the note on the windshield said:

"Don't worry; you can pay me back later, I'll get it out of you one way or another!"

Hank

Bill and Holly had agreed to take care of the house until Mark decided what to do with it. He could not think about it now and he thought that it might do him some good to get an apartment for a while. Finding an apartment turned out to be easier then Mark had anticipated. SED owned several in the buildings they had designed. After a few calls, Mark located one that he could move into immediately.

The apartment was on the fifth floor of Central Park West.

The place was nice and was fully furnished, along with a parking space in the garage and a twenty-four hour doorman. Two bedrooms and a living room opened up to a huge balcony overlooking Central Park. Marks firm had updated the interior and exterior of the building. The walls were brick and concrete inside, giving it a cool comfortable feel. Mark was thankful that his company was being so gracious; an apartment in this part of the city would normally be out of his reach.

Crashing down on the overstuffed sofa, he slung his hand over his eyes. His mind raced, trying to take in the events of the last few days. "*What day is it? Sunday?"* he thought. "Yeah, it's Sunday." He grabbed the remote and clicked on the news. Then dragging himself up, he felt his ribs cry out. "Slow," he thought. "Slow it down. Ah!" He spotted a gift basket with candy bars and fruit filling it to the brim.

"Yesterday was a busy day here in New York," The anchorwoman looked grim as she reported the news. "There was a car chase over in the Northeastern industrial park, which resulted in a shootout that left one man dead and a Detroit detective wounded." Mark was half listening to the news as he bit into a ripe peach, "*Was there anything on the bombing*?" he thought.

"The shootout left collateral damage in the hundreds of thousands and at this time we still have no comment from NYPD, other than that the situation is being looked into. "In other news, we still have no confirming reports on the explosion at the Super Mart yesterday. Sources say that an underground gas line that ruptured may have caused it. The blast killed more than two hundred people and destroyed the entire building. We now go live to Andrea Kilpatrick who is at the

scene where investigators are still trying to pinpoint exactly what happened.

"Andrea?"

"Yes, Susan. I am standing in front of where Super Mart once was, and as you can see, there is not much left here. We have spoken to the local police, and they are not ruling anything out, but so far they have not received anything to lead them to believe that this was anything more than a tragic accident."

"Andrea, is this something that might have been caused by faulty wiring or a line that needed to be repaired? Could the store have prevented this?"

"At this time, we just don't know. They are not releasing a statement as of yet, but we will be following this developing story and let you know as soon as we hear something from the local authorities."

"Thank you, Andrea.

There has been a relief fund set up for the families involved to help them out. You can go to www…"

Mark shut off the TV and walked over to the kitchen counter, grabbed his cell phone and dialed the police station. He needed some answers, and, in his gut, he knew that this was not an accident. The image of that disturbed man running from the building right before it exploded burned in his mind.

"Yes. Hello. I'm Mark Appleton, and I was there at the Super Mart when it exploded. I was wondering, who is in charge of that investigation?" The dispatcher on the other end connected him to a Detective Clive Owens. The line rang twice, and then he heard a deep low voice. "What can I do you for?" Mark heard Clive Owens' slow Southern drawl. Clive

had just moved up to New York a few months earlier from an area a little west of Austin, Texas. His accent was hard to hide, so he had just given up and decided to live with it.

"Hello, Clive. I am Mark Appleton. My wife and daughter were killed at the Super Mart yesterday." Just saying it out loud made Mark want to weep but he choked it back and went on. "I was supposed to call you to give you a statement, and I was wondering when you were available? I was told that you are overseeing the investigation." Mark sounded as firm as he could, but his voice cracked anyway.

"Yes sir. I've been looking into it. And I've been meanin to call you but I didn't want to push to hard with what you've been through and all…"

Mark cut in, "Well, is there some time Monday I can get with you? I just got out of the hospital today," He just wanted to get it over with and maybe find out if they had anything new besides the crap the news was reporting.

"Well, now, I think I got some time tomorrow. You come down here at ten o'clock, and I'll get you in. Just ask for Clive at the front and they'll show you the way back to my desk." His deep Texan voice showed concern, and Mark hoped he was the real deal and he wasn't just putting him on.

Mark thanked him and hung up the phone. "*Clive sounded like a good enough guy*," he thought. He just hoped that he was not just another detective who didn't give a crap about anything other than when the donut shop opened up.

AS THE LAPTOP DOWNLOADED the patch that Mooch was sending over, Kirk thought about how little he knew about

the internet and all of its wonders. "It always seems to cause more problems than help," he thought as he waited impatiently.

The laptop hummed quietly.

"Mooch, what are you doing?" His voice strained in frustration.

"Well, excuse me. I am only trying to hack into a government site and still keep us out of jail. If they see us, we're screwed!" Mooch warned as he typed. He muttered under his breath and said, "This is hard enough over the phone and getting you a link and… Well, you should be happy that I'm the best."

"Fine, Mooch. Just get me to last Friday and here is the address of Simco Foods, Five Sixty Four West Fuller Ave. Do you have cameras around that area?"

Mooch's voice cracked, "Yeah. I can see almost anywhere in the world. I am hacking into the street cameras and into the *Crimson Satellite* that isn't running…so they say,"

"Not running?" Kirk leaned on the small wooden table that had coffee beans under the glass top, and took a sip of his coffee.

"No, it isn't running. It's been broken for years, and is just too expensive to fix. It was used to—well, never mind, I can still use it for looking around. Me and my buddy Chucko—do you know Chucko? Anyway we got it to take snapshots, just not live action."

"You get off on this stuff, don't you?" Kirk asked shaking his head; Kirk saw something come up on his screen. It was an aerial view of the Simco warehouse. "What day was this taken?" Kirk asked.

"It's the day you wanted, Friday, hold on. Here is the video from the loading dock cameras."

"Run it from about eight a.m. in fast forward."

The video showed semi trucks pulling up, loading, and then driving off. He looked for Gus but didn't see him. He watched the clock at the bottom of the screen spin by and then…

"Wait! Back up a sec. I think that's it, stop it there." Kirk cursed as he looked at what was plain to see, Gus was loading his truck with boxes.

Mooch asked, "What are we trying to find here?"

"I'm not sure, Can you follow that truck? Can you go in real time?" Putting his coffee down, Kirk scooted his chair closer to the table.

"There you go. We had better make this quick, we'll be spotted if we stay on too long. I'm running a Radian Jammer, but that will only work for about five minutes."

"Just do it, we won't get caught." And if they did then Kirk had no problem throwing Mooch to the wolves.

The truck left the warehouse and headed out toward the interstate. "Where did he go?" Kirk franticly hit his laptop and almost spilled his coffee all over it.

"Man, you're jumpy, hold on. He went out of range of the camera; I'll have to switch back to *Crimson*. Now you will see it. But it will be in stills, so don't blow a gasket!"

The screen showed snapshots of the loaded-down truck. *Weird.* Gus was heading the wrong way. This road didn't lead to the David's Island, and he knew he had delivered out there that morning.

He watched as the truck pulled onto a dirt road and pulled

behind an old abandoned sawmill. Kirk could see that the parking lot was over grown with weeds and one side of the building looked like it had collapsed. "Can we get a shot behind that mill? I can't see him," He tried to sound nicer, even though his body heat was rising. He never liked computers, and now he was at the mercy of one.

"Just a second, I can get a partial, but the mill is blocking line of site." Kirk could hear Mooch typing, and munching on what sounded like potato chips. This only added to Kirk's stress level. The truck had driven behind the building and out of site in exception to the rear bumper. The truck stayed in the same spot with each time stamped photo and then Kirk saw a shadow that looked like Gus and he was outside of the vehicle. "There. Go back one, yes, that one. Can you zoom in on the shadow that the truck is making?"

The picture zoomed in closer; it was clear now. There were *two trucks!* One was parked behind the mill just out of site from the satellite, and you could see its shadow outlined on the ground. Somehow, Kirk didn't think this was an accident.

"What is this?" It looked like a second person, and it was! "Mooch…"

"On it. I see her!"

"Her!" Kirk strained his eyes. The picture zoomed in on the second shadow. You could see her hair blowing in the wind. *Her!* "Okay, Mooch. Show me a few more shots, let's see if we can get a look at this chick." Sitting back in his chair, Kirk took another sip of his coffee; he looked at the screen in satisfaction. He knew his hunch was right. Gus was up to something and now he had proof.

Picture after picture showed nothing!

The woman stayed in the shadows as if she knew where to stand to stay out of site. As the stills went by one by one, he saw what looked like Gus unloading the boxes from his truck and loading new ones from the mystery woman's truck.

"Mooch, where is this spot? Give me an address." He needed to check out this drop-off site firsthand.

"Crud! Pull the plug, man! They got us!" Mooch screamed like a girl in Kirks ear and made Kirk drop his coffee. A red warning sign flashed on his screen. He grabbed the laptop and flipped it over, pulling the battery out of it. Kirk didn't know if it would do any good but it was the only thing he could think of at the time.

"Okay, Mooch. I'm out. Did they see us?"

"Holy cow, that was close. Good thing I have a breaker switch here at my desk, just for such an occasion." Mooch's voice sounded like he had just won a Super Bowl game, and his breathing came in short bursts and Kirk wondered if the poor kid ever got out in the real world for some good old exercise.

"I need you to make a copy of that photo of the mystery woman and of those trucks. E-mail it to me as soon as you can, and find out anything you can on where that other truck went. Oh, by the way, if you do this for me, I won't tell the FBI that it was you they almost caught a minute ago!"

"Awww, thanks, man. You're a saint."

"Just do it, Mooch. I'll even get you a T-shirt from the FBI." Kirk laughed as Mooch started cursing. Kirk knew that Mooch hated nothing more than the Feds. He packed up his laptop and went out the back door. Getting into his car, he

looked at the address that Mooch had given him. It would have to wait until morning; Kirk needed to get some sleep. With the day wearing on, he was getting hungry and irritable.

This woman bothered him. "*Who is she?* What is going on with this whole case?" His leg pulsed where the gunshot wound was, it felt much better than yesterday, but was still pretty sore.

Looking at his cell phone, he saw he had two missed calls, both from his boss. This case might cost him his job, but it was too late now. He knew how it worked, come home with the win, and save his job. Come home with nothing and hello early retirement!

Chapter Six

THE THREE-STORY BRICK BUILDING HAD A FULL basement and housed one of the many police stations throughout the city of New York. This one had a wide open parking lot with police cruisers littered in a few of the spaces, as well as what looked like a SWAT team truck, but painted white with a blue stripe down the side stating that it was NYPD. The sun was out with a slight breeze, and Mark could feel it flow across his face like a warm blanket. He breathed in deep, trying to prepare himself. The last thing he wanted to do was relive the day his family was taken from him, but there was not much luck in that this morning.

The Red brick and stone that covered the face of the building boasted an American flag that tossed in the morning breeze, promising a beautiful day. The double doors led to a front desk area where people hurried, in and out of doors.

Mark dodged an officer taking a reluctant prisoner down to a holding cell in the basement. He then approached the front desk to get clearance and directions to Detective Owens' office.

"Hello. I am here to meet with Detective Owens. He's expecting me." A small, pretty blond receptionist looked up at him with bright sunny blue eyes. She shuffled some papers around on her desk and then smiled, lighting up her face.

"Yes. He's in the big conference room down the hall and to the left. It will be—Oh, never mind, I'll show you. I give terrible directions." She giggled and jumped out of her chair. Walking around her desk, she almost skipped down the hall. She was bubbly, and this made Mark wonder where she was from. New Yorkers are not known for being friendly and the NYPD are not ever accommodating or even helpful. Mark thought that she might be new or maybe had one to many gun shot wounds to the head making her a little loopy. She chatted as they walked past a big, open room that was filled with rows of desks. The place was busy, but then, it was a big city.

"Here you go, Mr.?"

"Appleton, Mark Appleton." Sticking out his hand to meet hers, she shook it with vigor and went off back to her desk, and Mark imagined that she would try to dance with a white bunny on the way just to make its day just a little brighter.

The door to the room had a small window with foggy glass in it. Mark was surprised when he opened it. The place was packed to the point that he had to squeeze in the back, barely finding a chair. The mood was somber. People talked in hushed tones, whispering and looking around. Mark looked around, guessing there were about three hundred in the room.

Clive Owens came in a side door on the right, near the front. He was slender and reminded Mark of Shaggy from the cartoon show Scooby Doo. He had wavy blond hair and a polo shirt that looked like it was blue at one time but had faded so much it looked almost white. He had a stack of papers in his hand and he came to a small table up front with a laptop and a projection screen behind him.

"Good morning, everyone," The crowd mouthed out a response just as a formality. "I'd been contacted by a few families of this tragic event, so I decided to call y'all for a meeting. Its better y'all hear it at one time and not from the news, I've never been good at this stuff, but here it is to you straight."

The screen came to life as he grabbed a remote that ran his laptop. "Now, I want to start by saying that I'm very sorry for your losses. There is nothing to prepare yourself for this kind of thing, and I'll tell you everything that I know up to this point. Afterwards, if any of you folks have questions, I'll try to answer them the best I can."

The slide showed a view of what was left of the store from the air. The crater looked like a bomb had been dropped and from the slides if you didn't know different you would have thought you were looking at a war zone picture instead of what used to be a popular shopping center. A gasp rippled through the room as everyone saw the devastation, and for some, it was the first time they had seen any pictures outside of what the local news stations were running.

"Now, what you folks are looking at is what used to be the Super Mart. We've had a group of experts working on this here, night and day since it happened on Saturday morning. We still don't know how many people were killed but so far

we have recovered two hundred and thirteen bodies." The sound of soft sobs came from a few women sitting in the front row and Mark blinked back one himself. He had to keep it together and be strong for K and Sam.

Clive's slow drawl continued, "Here is what we know so far: this incident has been ruled out as a terrorist attack. We haven't found any traces of a bomb, or anything that would suggest foul play. The nearest we can tell is that an underground gas line ruptured, and then exploded." Whispers ran throughout the room. Mark couldn't believe what he was hearing. *This was a freak accident, but the picture looked like a bomb, and not that he was an expert but come on!* There had to be more to it then that. The tall detective went on.

"The gas line was part of a main feed that ran from a nearby apartment complex, and then tied in with the Super Mart before connecting with the city gas line, in the street. The line was just old, and the City was in the process of replacing it, but they just didn't get that far down the line yet. Are there any questions so far?"

An older man raised his hand from the front row. "How do you know that it wasn't a terrorist that did this? It sure looks like a bomb from that picture." His bushy white eyebrows lowered as he pointed at the screen behind Clive.

"Well, sir, we would have found traces of C-4, and parts of the bomb, and there would be traces of it everywhere. Everything in this darn accident that we've found is consistent with a gas-based substance." Clive picked through a thick stack of papers and pulled out a single sheet, he held it up, and started to read.

"Traces of natural gas and fossil fuel were found, and

based on the saturation level in the boiler room, we have reason to believe that the gas leak started there, and the boiler ignited. The explosion then caused a chain reaction, setting off the entire underground gas line. If it weren't for the automatic shut off valves the explosion could have extended further down the line."

A few more questions were brought up, and then answered until the room grew quiet. The feeling of utter despair and grief filled the room. Everyone was thinking how pointless and unfair this was. They would have been happier if it was an act of terror, and then at least they could direct their anger and emotions at the killers. They could have some closure when they were brought to justice!

"*But this*," thought Mark. "Who could they blame? The city was trying to fix the problem. They just didn't make it in time." Mark stood up and followed the crowd as they started to file out of the room. He wanted to talk with detective Owens but everything had slipped his mind. He was in a trance thinking back to the day it all happened. It seemed like so long ago, almost as if it was in another lifetime.

"Mr. Appleton?" Detective Owens motioned for Mark to come over to the front of the room. He made his way up to where the detective was standing. The room was a medium sized conference room and they had pulled the big oak table out and set up folding metal chairs in order to fit everyone.

"Mark, I'm glad to finally meet you. I apologize for not telling you about this meeting. After we talked on the phone, I decided to get everyone who had a family member killed in the explosion together and fill everyone in on the investigation." Shutting down his laptop, he walked toward his office.

Mark followed. "I wanted to get a statement from you and go over what you saw that day. You were one of four people who survived the explosion." Setting all his stuff down on his paper filled desk, he pointed to a chair, and Mark took a seat. When he sat down his ribs came alive with a pain so intense Mark could not breathe. He took a shallow breath and sat back even though that hurt as well.

"Well, there isn't much to tell," Mark grunted through the cutting pain. "I had just dropped off…um—well, my wife and daughter…" His head dropped, as the vision of K and Sam walking into the store filled his mind.

"Take your time," Clive said. He leaned his elbows on his desk and looked intently at Mark with what seemed to Mark as real concern. This made Mark look twice, for this was yet another weird *non-cop* thing to do. First, the happy person calling herself a New York cop at the front desk and now the Texan who actually seemed to care!

Mark regained his composure, and then continued. "I had to go across the street to Office Depot, and just as I turned down the aisle, away from the Super Mart, the building exploded and flipped my car upside down! After I got my bearings, I ran toward the building, trying to find them. That's about it." His eyes looked sunken due to lack of sleep, and detective Owens wrote everything down as he spoke. "There was one thing unusual though, right before the explosion, I saw a young man running from the building just seconds before it happened. He looked scared as if he knew it was going to happen."

"Hmmm…" Clive looked curious. "Can you remember what he looked like?"

"He had on a red ball cap, a blue jacket, and blue jeans. I think he had dark hair; it was sticking out from his ball cap on the sides. He looked to be in his early twenties, just a kid."

Clive looked interested as he wrote on his notepad, and scratched his head making his blond hair flop as if it was made of yarn. "Well, I'll have my folks look into it. His body would have been outside, and then we might be able to ID him."

"So you really think it was just an accident? I mean it is sure hard to accept that your whole life was taken from you because of an old gas line." Mark didn't blink back his tears this time and something about letting them fall made him feel better.

Detective Owens leaned back in his chair making it squeal out in protest. "I will do everything in my power to find out for sure, but I'm afraid it looks that way," He paused and looked down at his long fingers and played with his fingernails. "I'm so very sorry Mark, if there is anything I can do…"

Mark shook his head and stood up. It was too much to process right now and he didn't think he wanted too.

The detective stood and stuck out his hand and Mark shook it. "Thanks a bunch for coming in and I'll be keeping in touch with you about that guy you saw. If we find him, I may need you to come in to ID him." Mark nodded. "And if you remember anything else, I mean anything that you think might help, give me a call." Reaching into his pocket, Clive pulled out a business card. It had his cell number on it, as well as the office number.

"Thank you. I will," Mark said. "You let me know if any-

thing turns up."

"I'll guarantee it."

Mark made his way out past the front desk, where the receptionist smiled and waved at him as he passed. This had turned out a lot different than Mark had thought it would. Now he had to try to figure out what he was going to do. He didn't feel like living anymore, not without K. A part of him wished he would have died in that explosion with K and Sam… poor little Samantha. The sun hit him in the face as he left the police station, and Mark looked at the people walking, living, yelling, and cursing! It was all life, even if it was terrible at times and K couldn't even get mad or cry anymore. She was dead and his innocent little girl who had never done anything to deserve this.

Mark walked past the parking lot where his car sat and dodged a SUV on his way across the street. The white escalade honked and the driver waved franticly but Mark didn't pay attention to him, he didn't care.

He found a small park with a slide and a swing set where kids played and parents watched and looked at their watches. Sam would love this park; it had a big swing with a green rubber seat. A rut was under each swing where kids had dug it deep from stopping and dragging their feet as they flew by. He could see Sam laughing and calling out to him to push her higher and higher! Mark sat down on a faded wooden bench and cried. He cried and didn't care who saw him or what they thought. "Sam, my sweet, beautiful Sam."

A SLEEK BLACK LEXUS parked up from where Mark had

crossed the street. The woman inside watched him as he settled into a park bench, and once he was engrossed in his own thoughts, she exited the Lexus and entered the crowd of people walking down the sidewalk. As she approached Mark's convertible, which was parked facing the street, she looked in her purse and pulled out a set of keys. She approached the driver's side of the silver BMW, and unlocked Mark's car with the push of a button. She tossed a sealed envelope, with the insignia *W.J.A.* stamped onto it and shut the door as she looked around. She paused and fumbled with her keys, pretending that she had forgotten something.

It was a nice day, and the strange woman wore a long black skirt that danced in the breeze. She turned and walked back to her waiting car, and stopped to take in the weeping man one more time. It was like a painting where the artist wanted to show the pain in contrast with joy as the kids just beyond played and laughed without a care in the world.

Once inside, she waited in the shadows, with her dark deadly eyes fixed upon Mark. "Now, let's see what you're made of, Mark."

A KNOCK SOUNDED ON Kirk's door. He stirred, trying to forget what happened, all he wanted to do is sleep in for a change. The morning was slipping away as he slept, but he did not seem to notice. No one knew where he was, and he did not have anywhere to be, so what crazy suicidal person would have the audacity to knock on his door at this hour? The hotel room was small, with just a queen bed in the center and a bathroom with a tub and a toilet. It wasn't much, but he didn't

care, it was a place he could be alone.

The sun was splitting through the curtains, glaring into his eyes like a nagging wife, forcing him to wake up. Groaning, he pushed himself to an upright position, and his feet hit the floor with a thud. "Bah!" Kirk wasn't a morning person. In fact, he wasn't a people person, either.

Finally getting to his feet, he dragged each foot to the door. It was the newspaper and a list for the different breakfast options here at the hotel. This hotel was a few steps up from the last one. It even had a little fridge filled with bottled water and liquor. If you touched it you bought it, but hey, it beat a sharp stick in the eye.

"Eggs, toast, or a breakfast sandwich served until eight a.m." He looked back at the alarm clock on the nightstand it read eight thirty. "*Whatever*." He didn't want their dry, lukewarm breakfast anyway.

Kirk decided to take a shower in order to wake himself up, he clicked on the TV on the way to the bathroom, turning it up loud, so he could hear the news through the sound of the water. Undressing, he took the bandage off his leg, and looked at the gunshot wound. It looked like it was scabbing over well and would heal up and be nothing but another scar to add to his collection.

The water felt good, and it even made him smile for just a minute. He could hear the anchorwoman jabbering on about some high-pressure system that was coming in, or some crap like that.

"And in other news, the NYPD have been investigating cooperatively with the FBI, into the food poisoning incident out at the David's Island last week. They have no new leads in

the case or how the food was contaminated, but they assure the citizens of New York that our food is safe."

"Safe. Ha! I bet they've still got their agents chasing around family members, asking about what kind of childhood they had." Grumbling as he finished shampooing his baldhead, he dripped water on the floor when he reached for a razor to shave. While finishing his shower, he thought about the case so far.

He had a bunch of dead inmates, but no dead guards, notes with the letters W.J.A. on them, and a mystery woman involved in a food drop. "*This woman had to be linked to this W.J.A. thing*," Kirk thought. "W.J.A. It might be a code or a name of a group of terrorists."

"Hmmm, I wonder what Deb would think about this one. Deb?" Why was he thinking about his ex-wife? Granted she was nice to think about, but in the bitter end, it would always end in a raging fight. Even in his mind.

He shook his head, as if to shake her out of his thoughts. Maybe it was because she was great at helping him crack cases. She could always figure out who the bad guy was, and was a great sounding board.

Kirk was married to the fiery redhead longer then he should have been but then again, Kirk should never have gotten married in the first place. She always spoke her mind, a little too much, and between Kirk and her, it was not a good combo. The fighting just got too much for her, and they split up two years ago, no kids. "*A clean break*," he told himself, but he still loved her. He just couldn't ever bring himself to change the way he was, maybe he didn't want to change. *It was better this way*, but then again, he told himself many lies.

Kirk met Deb in front of a stand of tomatoes in his rare visit to the local supermarket. She was only five foot tall and not even one hundred pounds, and for a second he thought she was just a kid but then she turned and smiled at him, and it was all over. Kirk asked her to marry him four months later.

Kirk's cell phone rang vibrating on the nightstand liker a rattlesnake ready to strike. The sound jolted him back to the here and now. He didn't recognize the number, but he decided to take the call anyway.

"Detective Weston," Kirk answered.

"Hello, this is the crime lab. Well, this is the lady from the prison. I gave you my card," Kirk tried to remember her name.

"Ah, yeah, hi, uh…"

"Cassy Meyers," She said.

"Right! Cassy! How are you doing?"

"The FBI gave me your phone number yesterday morning. I've been so busy with everything going on and I remembered that you wanted to know if we found anything new." Kirk grinned with good luck beaming from his eyes. She must have called the FBI for his number before he ticked off the big dogs.

"So what did you find?"

"After testing all the food samples and coming up empty I decided to look into the guards blood work and I found something very interesting." Her voice started to rise in excitement.

"The guards?"

"Yes. I thought since we didn't find anything in the inmates' bodies or in their food, that maybe we would find something in the guard's blood that the inmates lacked—and we did! Are you ready for this?"

"Yeah, hit me!"

"Okay. The guards all had traces of Dypethline in their systems, a drug used specifically to protect their immune system."

"Hmmm," said Kirk. "So the question is—why would they need a protected immune system? And protected from what?"

"Wait! It gets more interesting. This drug is still…well, it's experimental, and still in a test form and, as far as we know, it has never been tested on humans. We don't even know who else would have access to it besides the government." Kirk tried to process the information he was hearing.

"So how did they get it into their system?"

"I'm not sure. However, this opens up more options. If they were protected, then, like you said, they were being protected from something, something that would have the exact opposite effect of Dypethline." The phone was silent as Cassy waited for the information to sink in.

The picture started to clear up. "What you're saying, Cassy—is that this drug, Dypethline, has a partner drug that is like its polar opposite. If a good drug helps the immune system, the partner drug kills the immune system. And from the looks of it, it seems they also can cancel each other out."

Kirk paused for a moment, "So, basically, whoever did this poisoned all the food, but it didn't affect the guards or whoever had Dypethline in their blood!"

She laughed like a child who just learned to ride a bike for the first time. "Very good, Detective, you catch on quick. All I have to do is find out what its partner drug is, and then we have our killer."

“This drug, where is it, and who has access to it?”

“I’m not sure where it is now or if they are still testing it, but I read an article about it a year or so back in a medical journal.”

The thought ran through Kirks mind but he dismissed it. If it was what he thought, it might be then the government and maybe even the FBI had something to do with the killings. Was that why they had the misfits running the investigation?

“Could you do me a favor, Cassy? Keep this conversation under your hat for the time being? I need to check into a few more leads, and the FBI isn’t too happy with me at the moment.”

“Sure. Until I find out definitely what we’re dealing with, I’ll tell them the truth—that we still don’t know what we’ve we’re dealing with yet.”

Kirk folded his cell and put it into his pocket. This was getting more twisted by the second. He had a bad feeling his friends at the FBI were playing with something they shouldn’t be playing with. Either way, he was going to find out, but first he needed to eat!

Chapter Seven

MARK DIDN'T NOTICE THE BLACK SPORTS CAR parked up the street, waiting like a panther for the right moment to strike. Mark walked back from across the street, and made his way through traffic and this time he managed not to tick anyone off because he decided to use the cross walk. Mark hit the unlock button and stopped dead in his tracks, there was a note sitting on the leather seat staring up at him as if to say, "Hello."

The paper looked expensive; he could tell from the feel of it…linen or something like it. A logo of sorts was stamped on the front, with raised letters popping from the paper that cried out like a warning, "WJA…Hmmm, interesting." He unfolded it and read the note.

"NO ACCIDENT!"

Mark looked around to see if he could spot the person who

put the note in his car. People were walking up and down the street; anyone could have done it. *What is that supposed to mean? No Accident*? Mark thought about the explosion and a sickening feeling washed over him. Did someone think it was something other then an accident? That meant it was planned, an attack of some kind. He crumpled the note and shoved it into his pocket. Whatever it meant, he did not have the energy to think about it now. He felt drained, as if his life was being sucked from him, and all he wanted to do was crawl in bed underneath his warm covers and dream about what used to be.

THE MYSTERY WOMAN PULLED out into the street and followed Mark making sure to keep her distance, trying to stay three or four cars behind Marks BMW. She picked up her cell phone and hit a few keys; it rang on the other end and a male voice answered. "You got him?"

"Yes… I am tailing him now," she said. "I delivered the note; he didn't seem to know what it meant, or maybe he doesn't want to know, but that will come in time."

"Okay…find out where he's staying, and then come back to base…we will need to debrief you ASAP!"

She shut the cell, and then returned it into a small black purse. This was going to be a long night.

THE JUICY CHEESEBURGER DRIPPED sauce down the front of Kirk's blue T-shirt, and he cursed as he wiped it up with a napkin. The car swerved as Kirk tried to hold onto the burger and clean up the mess at the same time.

"Aw man…this is my favorite shirt!" The cleaning job was only making the stain worse. It was hard to get a shirt to fit these days, with his abs turning into a one-pack as his once sweet six-pack was now merging into itself. Kirk used to be a gym rat but then life, marriage and, well there was no excuse that made it past, *lame*. Now he had a beer belly that was threatening to overflow his belt.

The road turned to the right just like the pictures he had printed off from the e-mail Mooch sent him. He wanted to see the old run down mill from himself. He didn't imagine he would find anything more than dusty tire tracks but it was all a part of being a detective.

He could see the old building standing against the horizon like a sleeping giant. It looked like the entire building was constructed of plywood and old tired planks. Kirk popped the last fry into his mouth, and burped in satisfaction. Nothing like a burger to chase the hunger pains away.

Parking his Charger in the front of the mill, he turned off the ignition and pulled out his .45 from his shoulder holster. Pulling the action back, he loaded a bullet into the chamber and it made a clicking sound as it slammed back into place. Holstering his weapon and looking around one last time, he got out of the car. It was about one o'clock, according to his watch; he had some time to check the place out.

The building was starting to rot due to lack of maintenance; the front doors held chains and twisted boards across the doors in a diagonal fashion in an attempt to keep people out. Kids throwing rocks for fun had broken out most of the windows on the two upper floors. There was white paint across the middle of the building that was what was left of the

sign: *Lakeland Mill*, it was all but washed out but Kirk could still make out most of the letters. Kirk walked to the back of the deserted parking lot and found what he was searching for. Tire marks in the dirt wound around to the back of the main building. A thick layer of dirt and weeds had covered most of the pavement on the parking lot. The tracks must have been from the truck that Gus was driving. He followed them to the corner of the building.

He leaned against the cinder block wall and drew his weapon. Quickly moving around the corner, his eyes darted around, up to the windows, in the adjacent out buildings, anywhere someone could hide. Kirk had been in too many situations to take for granted that he was alone. The area was clear, with only a few tumbleweeds stacking up against the side of the structure like bums in an alley.

Be careful, Detective.

The tracks came to a stop, and he could see where Gus had backed up to leave. Footprints were everywhere and most of them belonged to Gus, or a man with very wide feet. Then he saw what he was looking for…a second set of prints, smaller ones…the mystery woman! He pulled out a small digital camera from his pocket and snapped a few shots of the footprints and of the tire tracks.

Walking toward the back, he saw where the second truck had parked; it was back behind the structure just out of sight from the road. Squatting down on one knee, he looked intently at the tracks; his face scrunched and his eyes closed almost all the way. The tracks looked weird, not like a normal delivery truck, the rear tracks were about twice the size of the front ones. *Must be some kind of armored truck…Ah, it was an ar-*

mored vehicle, one like banks transport money in.

Looking up as he thought, his eyes opened wide, and his lips parted in shock, he couldn't believe what he was seeing… right in front of him stood a large silo tower with a rusty ladder strapped to the side. The tower was about fifty feet tall with a cone-shaped top; it was most likely used to store sawdust or something like that in it, but now sat empty and alone. He could now smell it, sawdust, and dirt, it stuck to the roof of his mouth like a cancer. He stood to his feet, with both eyes on the tower…

"What's goin'…?" The letters painted on the side of the silo blazed out in the sunlight making Kirk's heart miss a beat. *It was the same symbol that he saw on the notes at the prison, "WJA."* He stared, trying to put it all together. What did it stand for? Was it a logo or a symbol, or was it nothing? He pulled out his camera and took a picture of the giant lettering. It was beautifully done, not a hack job, like he was used to from the local gang sign back home in Detroit. This was very professional.

Someone spent some time on that.

Placing the camera back into his pocket, he turned just in time to see a billy-club come crashing down on his forehead. A flash of light filled his vision as he crumpled to the ground with a thud; he vainly tried to reach for his gun…and then a split second later, he felt the next blow smash the back of his skull!

Darkness.

His limp body lay curled up in the dirt as two masked men grabbed him and carried him around to the back of his own car. The trunk opened with a click, and then the sound of a

hard clunk as his body hit the floorboard and then the trunk lid slammed shut and Kirk remembered smelling roses. They smelled good, like a rose garden but so much stronger as if he was thrown in a bed of roses.

Kirk could hear his own heartbeat just before he blacked out again. Thump, thump, thump…

MARK TOOK OUT A silver colored key to open the door to his apartment; he walked inside trying to take in the fact that he had been cheated. His life was turned upside-down, and for *what*? The thoughts of K and Sam tortured him; every time he closed his eyes, he saw them. He could barely eat… he had to keep busy. He would call Hank and go into work tomorrow; he needed to get his mind off his own personal hell.

Opening the cabinet, he saw a bottle of wine that came in one of the gift baskets left in the hospital room when he woke up. He stared at it, then grabbed the bottle and started rummaging through the silverware drawer. Finding a corkscrew, he popped open the wine and poured himself a glass. Mark never drank, it was something that he didn't believe did anyone any good. He used to say that it was the easy way out. Now he wasn't so sure, all he felt was pain. He just needed rest… a break!

The smell of the red wine hit his senses; he breathed in deep taking in the rich sent and the promise of relief. He could almost taste it as he sat down on the couch with the bottle in one hand and the wine glass in the other…"Owww!"

His side screamed out as he tried to sit down, and he clenched down his jaw to keep from waking the neighbors.

The glass dropped from his hand, hitting the floor and spilling the contents all over the area rug. Frustrated, he set the bottle down, and worked his way up off the couch and went into the kitchen to get some carpet cleaner.

After he cleaned the rug he laid it out on the balcony to dry, he went back inside to relax for a little bit… "Ahhh." This time he lowered himself slowly onto the couch and took a breath even though it hurt like fire.

Much better, *you are not invincible, you know!*

He picked up the now empty wine glass…looked at it…then back at the bottle. And with a sigh, he put the glass down on the end table, thinking about the pain in his heart and the grief that he felt. He could not numb those feelings, he wanted to live, to feel. The good feelings are just as much a part of life as the bad ones. This, he thought, is how he can remember how much he loved K and Sam, *the pain was his love*!

A THROB OF PAIN rushed over Kirk's head, waking him from a forced slumber making his skull pulse with each heartbeat. He opened his eyes, or he thought he did although the darkness was so black that it could be felt. He pulled his hand to his face, waving them madly across his eyes…

Nothing,

His head felt like he had been hit with a baseball bat and he managed a slight grin. "You did get hit with a bat, stupid!"

Feeling the back of his skull with his fingers, he felt something wet and a little tacky, it was blood. Kirk grunted and surprised himself when he thought of how happy he was to be

alive. As his brain turned back on, he rolled onto his back, and reached for where his gun was supposed to be. He knew it would not be there but he searched for it anyway. It was gone.

The floor felt like metal when Kirk reached down to investigate what kind of mess he had gotten himself into now. He could feel how smooth and cold the floor was as he drug himself to his knees, and feeling his way around his new home he had to try to imagine what it looked like but he didn't have much of an imagination. This feeling of blindness was a new experience to Kirk and he didn't like it, not at all. He had his left hand out in front of his face, waving it back and forth in front of him just in case he found a wall or something worse; he didn't really want to find it with his forehead.

Stopping, his heart leaped into his throat and Kirk almost gulped audibility but held it in. His right hand felt something…well, not something, but nothing. He felt nothing but air up above him, and now in front of him and below on the floor.

Not good, it was as if the metal floor had simply vanished!

Lowering himself onto his belly, he hugged the floor and reached out, feeling with just his fingertips as he moved. The floor was two inches thick and rounded like a disc, as if he was sitting on a large Frisbee. Kirk traced the edge and began to crawl around the edge so he could find the wall that this cliff was attached too. That would be the safest place to be so if in his sleep he wouldn't accidentally roll off, and fall into nothingness.

"No wall?" Kirk muttered. "Can't be. Something has to be holding the floor up!" He felt sweat begin to form on his forehead and could smell fear, his own fear seep from his

pours.

He felt along the edge once again hoping that he was wrong. He went around the circle or what he perceived was a circle, and found no wall, no strings, or cables suspended up in the air, nothing but this floating crazy metal floor and a deep dark hole below him. Kirk moved to the center of the disc in order to keep himself from falling off into whatever was below him.

Click, click, pop, pop. Blinding white light made Kirk twitch and snap his eyes shut and then open in a weird blinking motion. He couldn't see at first and then when he did see he wished he was still in the dark. Squinting, he held his hand up over his eyes, trying to make out what he was seeing.

Kirk froze as every muscle in his body tightened and wound like a rubber band just before it snapped. What he saw next was something he had never dreamed could exist. His discovery of a floating floor was right, more right than he thought.

The room he was in was about fifty feet around with a dome ceiling and hanging warehouse lights high above him staring down at him like huge monstrous eyes. He was laying on a solid round chunk of metal about fifteen feet in diameter and Kirk pulled himself to the center, for where he was a few feet from the edge was not the center of the death floor like he thought originally in the thick darkness. As he moved to the middle, he felt the heavy metal disc move and sway a little. This unnerved Kirk, he hadn't noticed this before but now he felt at any moment it would tip over and pitch him over the side.

Looking down below him, he could see that this room had

to be at least one hundred feet to the bottom and there, he saw a door, a single door. It was metal as was the rest of this new cell and as far as he could tell it was the only way in and out of this huge round room.

Straight ahead, Kirk noticed a large window, like a two-way mirror…he knew what they looked like; they had a few back at the station in Detroit, and now Kirk thought of how he liked it much better on the other side of the glass, this side wasn't much fun. The walls were smooth and at first glance, they looked like they were swimming. The silver sheen reflected the light from the eyes high above and bounced it back making the room feel like the inside of an oven.

"Hello, Mr. Weston!"

Kirk flinched when he heard the deep voice thunder off the walls. His heart pounded in his ears as he responded. "Who are you? How do you know my name?"

The voice echoed off the room's walls, making his headache even worse.

"Please don't talk Mr. Weston, all you need to know is that you are a prisoner here, and as you can see, if you try to escape, you will die in the attempt. I will explain…You, Mr. Weston, are in what we call the MAG Chamber.

"It is a room we built with magnets and specially engineered metals. All around you, the walls, the floor you are sitting on, even the lights, are set to an exact range and magnetic strength. What is holding you up is the magnetic field all around you."

Kirk looked around and his anger started to build. "What kind of people are you? Do you have any idea who I…" The floor dropped from beneath Kirk so quickly that Kirk left the

disc and was airborne. About twenty feet from the ground, the floor stopped, causing Kirk to crash into it with a thud. Letting out a groan, he pulled himself to the center again and rolled onto his back.

The floor began to rise back toward the top to rest in its original position. "Mr. Weston, we would appreciate it if you would follow the rules. If we want your comment on something, we'll ask."

Kirk made a thumbs-up motion from his back, and then muttered something about what he was going to do when he got out of this God forsaken place.

"Now, the rules are as follows: No talking unless asked a direct question; don't try to escape, as you will be killed on-site if you try; and last but not least, we would like to welcome you to the WJA."

The sound system made a harsh squeal and then it clicked off and all went silent as before. Then just as fast, as the lights came on, they shut off with the same sound of breakers popping, Kirk breathed in a sigh of relief. He figured he was getting close to breaking the case wide open if they were willing to kidnap him to shut him up. Problem was the WJA did not know Kirk Weston. Feeling his head again, he cursed, "Now what?"

"HELLO, HANK," MARK SAID into the phone. "I just wanted to let you know that I am coming in tomorrow." Mark knew he would get resistance from his boss, however he was not going to take no for an answer.

"Mark, come on. You've only been off for like, what, a

day?" Hank protested.

"I really need this right now, Hank. I've got to get my mind off of everything. Just give me some small project to work on and you won't even know I'm there. I need to keep busy."

Hank sighed; he knew it was pointless to argue with Mark when he was like this. He had that all too familiar tone and he knew Mark was determined to get his way. "Fine, but you're going to take some time off later in the year…when you can enjoy it. Are you sure you're ready to come back this soon?"

"I can't just sit around here. All I do is think about…" Mark trailed off and the silence was sharp and made Hank feel uncomfortable.

"All right, all right, see you tomorrow." Hank sighed as he gave in like a house of cards.

"Thanks. I'll see you first thing tomorrow," Mark hung up the phone and looked down at the floor. He knew that this was what he needed to do; he had to get back into a routine. Memories of K and Sam, consumed Mark no matter where he went, he wanted to remember them, and he felt somewhat like a selfish pig not wanting to think about them. He just couldn't do it right now, not now.

Mark sat in front of the TV flipping through the channels going from the extreme to the ridiculous. He thought about getting a hobby, something new to learn to keep himself busy, golf or fishing...maybe, he would start working out harder and really try to get the six-pack he always wanted but just never found in himself the drive to go all the way.

You don't have to be so strong. You're allowed to grieve. He stopped when he saw the Discovery Channel. They were

running a series called *The History of Weapons.* He watched and was surprised how interesting it was, he could not believe how many different guns they had: Semi-auto, full auto, pistols and machine guns, they even had one that could shoot around corners. Mark remembered that Bert down at the office had invited him to go shoot with him at the shooting range a few times but he always had other things in the way but now it sounded like fun. This might be something to take the edge off. He might even like it.

Most guy's like to see something blow up or make a loud noise, burn, and Mark was no exception. He used to shoot a 30/30 hunting rifle back home when he and his dad would go hunting. It was one of the few times that Mark could remember his childhood. He only remembered bits and pieces and the thing that bothered him was the feeling deep down that he should be able to remember. Mark looked forward to having proper instruction in how to shoot a handgun and maybe even get good enough to enter a competition someday.

"Whoa there, bud, let's just take this one step at a time," Mark said out loud. Mark did everything with all of his soul and energy. He did not just stick his tow into the water to see if it was cold or not, he ran toward the shore and dove in headfirst.

Lying down on the sofa, he realized how tired he was it was just after noon but a nap might be just the thing he needed. As he lay on the couch, his eyes got heavy, and soon he was asleep.

THE NEXT MORNING, MARK walked into his office,

avoiding anyone he could in the process. He just didn't want people feeling sorry for him, and looking at him like he was made of glass. He set his briefcase down on his neat organized desk and sat down carefully in his chair. He had a tight wrap around his ribcage and it was amazing how much it helped to ease the pain. He could almost move like normal but sitting was the hardest thing to do with broken ribs.

"Hey, Mark!" Hank walked in just as Mark looked up.

"Hi. I'm going to take it slow, don't worry, my ribs are feeling better so no need to baby me." Mark knew how Hank was, he had a heart the size of Texas, and he didn't want to take advantage of it.

Hank looked at him with concern. "You sure you're up to this? You did break a few ribs, you know!" He emphasized the work *break*, and blinked at Mark like an owl.

Mark rolled his eyes. "I'll be okay; I just move slower than usual…so no running back and forth to the copier for me."

"Fair enough, besides I won't be running anywhere but Maria will. I asked her to give you a hand for a few weeks, just to get you coffee or make copier runs, stuff like that." Maria was the receptionist that would always make sure Mark never forgot his meetings, or a birthday.

"She's wanted to do some more assistant work anyway. You'll have to help her out a little, but I think she can handle it." Hank did not ask and that meant that Mark could not argue this point and he wouldn't have anyway. Maria was a good friend and it would be nice to have her around.

"Thanks," Mark said. "She practically does that anyway, besides she's earned it." Hank left his office and looked at his

watch mumbling something about being late for a meeting. It was like that with Hank, there one minute and gone the next.

Clicking on his computer, Mark opened up his briefcase and shuffled through some papers. Looking up, he saw Maria coming toward his office with a skip in her step. "Congrats, Maria, sorry it had to be me you got stuck with,"

"Mark, I wouldn't have it any other way." She came around his desk and leaned down, and gave him a warm comforting hug. "How are you doing?" Mark held back a tear, closed his eyes for a second, and then looked at Maria.

"Oh, as good as can be expected, I just wish everyone would be themselves…no need for everyone to be so glum on account of me." Mark watched Maria as she walked around and sat down in the low backed chair across from his desk.

"Well, we care about you, and it's hard to know what to say or how to act, you know what I mean?" We want to help you through this hard time and well, we are worried."

Mark smiled, it was a weak smile bet it was the best he could do. "Just know, if you need anything, anything at all, you know where to find me." Maria stood up and looked at him with her big brown eyes that looked like a cross between gold and brown giving them a shimmer that was rare. She was a slender woman with brown hair that was always up in weird-looking buns or clips. If he had to guess, he would say mid-twenties and she was always on the verge of laughing or giggling. That was one of the reasons Mark got along with her so well, she could always enjoy a good joke or prank.

"Yeah, I guess it will take some time…for everyone. Thanks, Maria," Mark smiled as she started for the door; he felt overwhelmed and wanted to change the subject.

“Hey, do you want a coffee, or something to eat?” she asked. “I’m heading up to the cafeteria…”

“Well, if you’re going that way, I could use an Almond Joy mocha…and a bagel with cream cheese. Thanks, Maria!” Mark grinned as she left his office. He thought this new assistant thing was going to be nice, and if it went well he would have to find a way to keep her on permanently.

A YEAR AND TWO months later, the fall turned into winter turning the concrete landscape into a cold hollow shell. Snow fell in the December sky with wind driven force filling some with dread and others with excitement for the coming holidays. Mark was almost one hundred percent healed up from the accident, although his body was the only thing that was healing; his heart was broken and bleeding without any repair in sight.

TIME IS LIKE DEATH, you cannot stop it, and no matter what you do one day, it will overtake you. Time moved on like the world and even though Kirk Weston was confined and imprisoned, no one seemed to notice which made Kirk feel even more alone. His high tech cell was all but escapable, and Kirk exhausted his dense brain going over and over different options, but nothing worked!

This just might be the perfect prison.

Chapter Eight

THE DAY WAS DECEMBER 24TH, CHRISTMAS EVE. The weather was cold, but not unpleasant; snow fell from the sky in big lumbering flakes. Mark was in the process of packing up his briefcase, and his office was all but deserted. Christmas fell on a Friday this year and that made him as well as the rest of the office happy to get a long weekend. The year went by without a second thought to Marks scared body and broken heart. It seemed that every year flew by faster and even though time was constant and unchanging, he felt like father time had some magic up his sleeve.

With each passing day, Mark felt like he should be able to move on with his life, *but he couldn't.* Every one of his friends and coworkers told him that only time would heal his heart, but he still had his doubts.

Picking up his keys, he shut the door to his office and

locked it. As he turned around, he met Maria and just about ran into her. "Whoa! Hi, Maria, what are you still doing here?" Mark regained his balance and smiled.

"Oh, I had a few things to finish up before I took off." She hesitated, Um…Mark, I was wondering if you…might…" She shifted her feet, looking down at the floor; Maria lowered her voice to a whisper. "If you want, I don't have anything going tonight…um…"

Mark decided to help her out of this awkward moment. "Sure. I would love to, but this time at my place. I even put up a Christmas tree the other night!" Mark and Maria had grown close over the last year; she was so kind and understanding. Mark believed that it was her friendship that got him through the last year with his sanity. They had gone on long walks on the rooftop park of their building, and she would listen to him talk of K and Sam. Never once had she made him feel weird or uncomfortable.

"Oh, cool, I was hoping that you wouldn't have anything going on…I mean, not that I hoped you would be alone…I mean!"

Mark laughed and grabbed her shoulder, making her walk with him to the elevator.

"You're a dork, now go home, get whatever you need, and then meet me in about two hours at my apartment. I'll even make some eggnog." She agreed, and they shared an elevator to the parking garage, and Maria chatted about shopping and Santa as Mark listened. Maria was a petite woman with eyes that seemed to sparkle and change with the light. Her face would light up every time she laughed, and with a wild taste in clothes and hairstyle, it just added to her personality. They

were becoming great friends, but nothing beyond that. Mark was not ready for another relationship; it was just too soon. Moreover, Maria respected that and never made any movements as to say any different.

THE HAUNTING DARK LEXUS pulled up to Mark's silver convertible and pulled in a space across the isle. The woman driving was wearing a long black trench coat and black slim driving gloves. The parking garage where Mark worked was easy to navigate, and she knew just where Mark always parked based on a year of surveillance. The last year, she had tailed him almost every day, and the time had come to begin the process.

A phone vibrated in her purse like a coiled snake. She picked it up, looked at the number, and answered with a low soft voice.

"Yes, I'm here…it's time…okay. I will check back in with you in ten minutes. Okay. Bye." The phone went silent as she put the car into park. The garage was empty except for a few cars, including Mark's convertible. Her long black hair moved like silk as she looked around one last time. Stepping from the vehicle, she made her way to the convertible, holding a manila envelope in her hand and a remote in the other.

The headlights to Mark's BMW came on as she hit the button on the remote. "Beep, beep!" The doors to Mark's car unlocked with a clicking sound. Reaching for the door, she opened it and placed the package on the front seat.

She could hear the grinding sound of an elevator approaching, and she knew he was coming. She shut the door, locked it

as she moved back to her car, and entered making sure she shut the door with minimal sound.

The shadow of a man in a suit and overcoat grew on the pavement, just as the woman turned off the engine of her own car and ducked down low onto the seat. She pulled herself up as slowly as she could, and peered over the dashboard. She could hear the beep of the alarm as Mark unlocked his car door.

Mark jumped as if he'd just been shot and he looked over his shoulder, looking, searching for the owner of the package.

He spotted her, and she could see him start to come over to investigate. Her heart pounded as she ducked down and lay as still as possible. The sound of his footsteps came closer; she dared not to look up.

Don't move!

The tint on the windows was black with a mirror finish, so she could only hope that it would be enough to keep him from spotting her. She had her eyes closed like a child who was playing peek-a-boo and thought that just because they had their hands over their eyes the other person could not see them. She could not stand it any longer, so she opened her eyes and turned her head with the utmost care not to move too fast. Her heart stopped as she stared right into the eyes of Mark Appleton!

KIRK HAD NEVER BEEN a fan of beards, or any facial hair for that matter. However, in this case, he didn't have much of a choice. He ran his hand through his now full beard and long hair that somewhere had intertwined with his facial hair. It

had grown in the last year, or however much time had passed since he had been imprisoned. He tried to keep track, but without the sun or anything to mark passing time, he was lost.

The days rolled into the night. Kirk's captors did not allow him outside and the lack of seeing the sun, clouds, or even a nasty rainstorm depressed Kirk. He still didn't know why they kidnapped him or who he was dealing with, outside of the initials WJA. They were a high tech bunch though. The room itself looked like something right out of a movie, metal, wires interlaced in the walls, and the floating floor made him feel like Frankenstein's experiment gone wrong. They fed him twice a day, and they varied it so he couldn't tell if it was daytime that he ate or at night, from six hours apart to sometimes ten.

The guards or as Kirk liked to call them, Ninja's, were always masked and never talked to him. If he tried to engage in conversation, they punished him by darkness or by no food for an extended period. The men would come out from the door at the bottom of the room to let him go to the bathroom, and once a week they would let him shower.

Through the door was a hall with two doors, one to the left and one to the right. The door to the left was a bathroom. It was very simple, with a steel toilet and roll of toilet paper on the back of the cold thing. There was no sink or anything else in the room, not even a light. He got used to sitting down to do his business even if he only had to pee because with how dark it was he would get it everywhere if he didn't.

The other door in the hall was a shower room. It was about a four by four room with a showerhead in the ceiling and no water knob, shelf or so much as a bar of soap, just a metal

room with a small floor drain. They controlled the water and it was always ice cold. Soap would be mixed with the water and it would rain down on him, and then blow warm air at high pressure out of the same nozzle to dry him off. Kirk felt like he was going through a human car wash.

He still wondered how the men got into the hallway. There wasn't any other door or any way in or out of the shower or bathroom, and the hallway ended with a metal wall just like all the others. Nevertheless, there they were, covered with black skintight outfits and masks pulled over their heads like the creepy ninja's they were. He gave up on that mystery a long time ago; he had bigger things to think about, like how not to go crazy just sitting all day, every day, on a fifteen-foot round disc. To keep himself sharp and strong, he made use of his free time to work out just in case he found the opportunity to find a way out he would be ready.

First, he would do push-ups and sit-ups for half an hour. This was easy enough, but the pull-ups proved a little more challenging. He would make his way to the edge of his round home and look over the edge at the seventy-five to a hundred foot drop, and then grab the edge, which was only about two inches thick, which was just enough to hold on to. Then the fun part, he would have to lower himself over the side and hang from his fingertips. The first time he tried it; he fell and broke both of his legs. After this happened, he woke up with a cast on each leg and a lightheaded feeling. At least they had some medical knowledge other wise he would live with a permanent disfigurement if his legs had to heal on their own.

After a few months, he could stand up and move around without much pain and he noticed that they would lower the

floor to about twenty feet once a day for about an hour. He took this opportunity to do his pull-ups and it was safer for Kirk and less work for his captors. His clothes had long since been gone, and they give him a jump suit that was all grey, with no markings or even a tag to show where it was from. A clean one was always waiting for him after his showers.

Kirk had tried to escape a half dozen times but this always ended badly for Kirk. The ninja's at bathroom time seemed easy enough to take out so Kirk threw a left hook at the taller of the two. A crack shattered the silent air and then a gas shot out from his suit filling the small room in seconds. He found himself paralyzed instantly and woke up back on the round floor with a splitting headache. The pain that shot through your body when you regained use of your limbs was the bad part. It felt like a million fire ants were crawling and biting every nerve ending with sadistic pleasure.

This day was no different from any other for Kirk Weston. He started by doing his morning push-ups and sit-ups. He was proud of himself because after a lot of practice, he was now doing handstands on the edge of his metal disc and holding them for the length of a song, he could hear the words from Metallica's lead singer fill his mind as he held his legs straight up in the air. His body fat was all but gone and could tell that he was about thirty pounds lighter, and every muscle felt like a rock and looked like it too.

His hair was down to the middle of his back and with the beard, he was almost unrecognizable from the man he used to be. The sound of the lights popping on brought Kirk to his feet as he waited for the weekly announcement.

"Good day, Mr. Weston, we have a special treat for you

today." The voice was the only one he had heard for over a year, and it was the only thing that brought him any comfort, he felt like he knew the person behind the voice and in his mind he was a friend.

"You may not be aware of it, but today is a special day. It is Christmas Eve! You have been in our care for over a year now," The pit of Kirk's stomach turned as he realized how long he had been there, he knew deep down but hearing it put into words and confirmed made him sick. "And as a token of the Christmas spirit, we have decided to let you go!"

Kirk stood motionless as he heard the news, but didn't believe it. His mind warred with possible outcomes and none of them was good. He was convinced that they were going to kill him after he proved not to be amusing to them or maybe just stop feeding him and let him die of starvation. They would not let him go; they would just kill him when he got out under the long forgotten sun and laugh as his heart surged at the thought of freedom but snuff it out at the threshold. This was some kind of joke…a sick joke!

"Do you have anything to say?" Kirk was silent. "You may speak, if you like."

Kirk tried to open his mouth, but his voice cracked because of lack of use, due to the no talking rule, so all he could do was squeak out a response, which sounded like a cross between a grunt and a squeal.

"Not to worry, Mr. Weston. You will have plenty of time to recover when you get home to your nice, warm bed." The floor started to lower and then came to a rest on the main floor. The door to the small hallway opened and there was for the first time no ninja's standing guard.

The lights hanging high above the floor flickered and pulsed like a movie screen. The walls made of silver metal moved like liquid, and Kirk blinked his eyes, trying to see if this was just his imagination or if it was real.

Then, in one motion, the walls that made up his prison disappeared. Behind them, large magnets all twisted together in a circle all around the room hummed like smooth greased motors of a mad scientist's machine. *This was what held him up in the air!* He started to shake uncontrollably, and his knees gave out as he fell to the floor. He could see past all the wires and cables running all around the big magnet prison to an open warehouse beyond. The second floor window where he assumed the voice had come from was a suspended office that looked like a cargo container sitting atop thick steep beams.

Everything looked vacant for the time being but he knew they were watching him. He pulled himself to his feet as the two ninja's stepped from nowhere and yet they came from the warehouse on the other side somehow. They motioned for him to follow them and they made their way down the hall to the back wall, then they stopped; the two men turned from him and walked right through the wall. It was a hologram, too!

Kirk walked toward the wall as a sinking feeling rushed over him. He could have at any moment just walked through the wall and out to freedom. His mind had kept him there imprisoned and just like an addict the only thing standing in his way was himself. As he walked through the hallway wall, he was standing in the back of what looked like a giant warehouse that stood over one hundred feet tall. He saw bright-blessed sunlight as it streamed into the building through a huge open door at the end of the building.

He squinted as he walked toward the door, shading his eyes from the yellow light that burned into his eyes. When he reached the door, he turned and looked back at the place where he had spent over a year of his life…it was a scary beautiful sight. The engineering and the work put into this building was incredible! He looked one last time, and then headed out into the light, not yet prepared for what he would see next.

As Kirk walked out into the morning air, he felt overwhelmed with emotion. He didn't know how to feel, if he should let himself feel anything, he still thought this might be some kind of trap to kill him. Either way, he was free…even if for a moment.

His eyes adjusted to the new light and as he looked around, his heart sank. What he saw was not what he was expecting…*sand*, nothing but sand! The desert was the last place he thought he might be…maybe the city or in some outbuilding in the woods somewhere, but not the middle of the desert.

He walked a few hundred feet and then looked back to the building that housed him for the last year of his life; it stood like a giant sleeping monster in the sunlight. Then, just as fast as it appeared, it vanished like a wisp of hot air coming off the desert floor. They had a mask for it; too, he shook his head and sighed in amazement. *I guess that's why they don't care if I know where they are. It's not like I could find it again anyway.* Then again, they left me out here to die in the desert so maybe they figure their hands are clean if I die on my own.

Just then, he noticed something off to the west that he must have missed. It looked like a city or a small town of some kind; the flashing of the buildings caught the morning light making them twinkle like hundreds of diamonds. "Well,

why not?"

Wiggling out of the top part of his jumpsuit, he tied the arms around his waist and began to walk. The sun was already heating up the earth and he felt the hot sand under his bare feet. This was going to be hard to explain to his boss back home, if he ever made it home.

MARK HEARD A CAR start then shut off as he came out of the elevator in the dimly lit garage. He had dropped off Maria at her car one level up and then took the elevator down to the second floor where he normally parked. He looked around as he walked toward his car, but didn't see anything unusual; most of the building was now empty and home sipping eggnog with their families.

He spotted a few other cars parked here and there, an old Ford coupe with the license plates hanging to one side took up two spaces. Then he noticed the black Lexus, he had seen it many times before and figured that it belonged to someone in the building. Something inside him made him extra weary, he had this feeling that someone or something was watching him, studying him, and yet everything looked quiet.

The lights flashed with a beeping sound as Mark unlocked the door to his BMW…and then he saw it, a package. This, at first, didn't bother him as he stood in shock, it was the symbol that made him stop; he had a dark feeling that he wasn't alone, and now his sixth sense was at full attention. He just stood there looking at the letters, WJA, and then it hit him…he had seen this before, a note he got this very same way right after the accident.

Mark's eyes scanned the garage looking searching for the devil or maybe and angel who was trying to reach out to him. He tried not to move as he looked at every car, with eyes scanning the windows for anyone lurking.

How did they get in? Nothing was broken into, the doors and locks, from a side-glance, looked fine. Turning around, he looked down the all but empty garage.

Then he saw the Lexus again with a renewed interest. He noticed it on the way in, but it just seemed somewhat out of place, on Christmas Eve with all the work alcoholics well known and Mark was sure he didn't know the owner of this car. His heart pounded as he walked over to the driver's side of the black Lexus.

Nothing.

He cupped his hands, trying to see if he could see through the dark tint on the car's windows. Nothing moved on the other side and he started to worry about someone who might see him and think he was up to something.

You're getting paranoid in your old age Mark, he told himself as he walked back to his convertible. Taking the mystery package and tossing it onto the dash, he started the ignition and pulled out of the parking space.

His mind rolled over the notion of just tossing the package out the window. He was always getting junk put on his car for free weight loss products or something of equal importance. However, the symbol spiked his curiosity and the fact that it was inside of his locked car made him nervous.

As he exited the building, he thought about what this package contained. It looked too bulky to be a note like the last time. Picking it up, he felt it, like a little boy trying to fig-

ure out what was inside his Christmas gifts.

It felt like a CD or maybe a DVD of some kind. Mark couldn't wait any longer, his curiosity burned and the letters…he had to know what was going on. Pulling off the main road, he parked in the front of a diner under an old street light.

Mark tore into the envelope and turned it upside down, a DVD fell out into Mark's lap. He reached inside of the now torn envelope and found a small note that read:

"Surveillance Footage/Super Mart." The date marked on the DVD was the same day of the explosion!

Mark's heart started to pound as he tried to breathe. His vision started to cloud over with tears as the day of the accident flooded his memory. He lived every day with the thoughts and demons that screamed out that he should be dead along with his family but he shoved them aside like he had done a thousand times before.

He had gone so long trying not to think about that horrible day, and now it all came back in one fell swoop with the little note that he held in his hand.

Was this some kind of joke? His sadness turned into anger. Who did this…this person think they were? Grabbing the shifter, he threw the car into drive and lurched into the street. He had to get home…he had to see what was on that DVD.

Chapter Nine

THE SAND BURNED KIRK'S FEET AS HE TRUDGED through the desert. His face flushed red from the glaring sun as it baked his back and chest with scorching heat. He didn't complain, though, because it was a whole lot better then being trapped on a chunk of metal with a shower once a week. He shielded his eyes with his hands, trying to see how much further it was to the city off in the distance.

"The least they could have done is give my shoes back." Maybe keeping his complaints to himself wasn't all that it was cracked up to be. The buildings of the city looked to be about a mile off, so he kept walking, dragging each step through the heavy sand. Soon he would be back to civilization and the thought gave him new strength.

After seventy-five minutes, Kirk made it to a small town

that sat in the middle of nowhere and that was being nice. From the looks of the people who stared at him as he walked barefoot down the street, the town was somewhere in the Middle East.

The buildings were made of stucco and stone, most of them thrown together with not much care to craftsmanship. Some buildings had patches made out of a mix of mud and moss to fill in holes and cracks in the structures. The locals talked in what sounded like Urdu. He had to take a class in collage, on cities in the Middle East for a report and from the looks of it; he was in the center of the food market. Food was set on bright colored rugs and vendors bartered for a good price as they held up their merchandise. Kirk looked at all the food, and his mouth began to water. He had been eating the same slop for over a year now, and the color of the fruits and veggies looked amazingly delicious!

Phone...I need to find a phone. He looked around at the shops and the run-down buildings, but nothing looked promising; the town was very small, and even the roads were made of dirt and gravel.

He spotted a flash of white up ahead in the crowd and it made him stop dead in his tracks. It was a man with a camera around his neck and not many white people were roaming the streets; he might know English. Kirk ran to catch up with him. He could be a reporter or a hit man to kill him before he made it back home, but Kirk didn't care at this point.

The man had a full head of brown hair that curled and piled up on top like a wild bush. His beard was patchy and looked as if he had pulled some of it out with duct tape. Kirk huffed, panted, and tried to catch his breath as he touched the

arm of the tall man in order to get his attention.

"Do you speak English?" Kirk gasped.

"Um…yes, are you okay, sir? You look like you have been dragged across the desert!" The man had some sort of accent that Kirk couldn't place.

"Well, you could say that. I need to get to a phone right away, any chance you know where there's one I can use?"

"Yes, I have one back at my Jeep. It is a satellite phone and around here, it is the only type of phone that will work. My name is Geoff Martin, National World Magazine." He jetted out his hand as a big smile crossed his face.

"Kirk Weston, Detroit PD." Kirk shook Geoff's hand, glad to meet someone that he could communicate with.

"Oh, a police officer, what brings you to the Middle East, or to be exact the United Arab Emirates?"

"The Middle, how the…uh…well," Kirk stuttered. "Well, I'm working on an investigation…can't talk about it, though." The last thing Kirk needed was to end up in a magazine or the paper by some dumb reporter.

"I understand, I haven't seen much of anyone from the States, but no worries. Follow me, and I'll get you that phone," They walked down a side street in between two apartment buildings. The clothes of the tenants hung on lines above them, blowing in the breeze like ghosts waiting for nightfall. They came to an open lot where a few cars had parked, and he saw a Jeep sitting off to the left. He could tell it didn't belong to a local due to the oversized tires and Warn winch on the front.

Geoff opened the door, reached in the glove compartment, and pulled out a large phone with a thick foldout antenna. Di-

aling a few numbers, he handed the phone to Kirk. "Just dial your number with area code, and then push this button." He pointed to a green button up near the top of the phone.

Thanking him, Kirk walked over a few feet away so he would be out of earshot of his new friend. The phone rang two times before his old boss answered. Jacob C. Michelson was a veteran in the DPD; he was pushing thirty years of service, and his attitude showed every year of miserable service. Kirk waited a few seconds before answering.

"Hi, Chief." He waited for a response.

"Who is this? Speak up, son. Who is this?" The chief's voice was firm and commanding. His years of being in charge made him think he was the boss in every situation.

"It's me, Chief…Kirk, Kirk Weston," Kirk could hear Jacob gasp, and then recover.

"Kirk…hot spicy wings, we thought you were dead. Where are you, son? What are you doing?" Kirk butted in, knowing that his boss would drown him in questions if he let him continue.

"I'm okay, but I need some help, I was kidnapped but I got out, and now I'm stuck in a little town some where in the Middle East." Kirk waited for it.

"What!? Who took you? You better tell me what the fart is going on…Weston, I mean it!"

"Yes, sir, I'll tell you everything. Just get me home!" "All right, I'll make arrangements, but you need to get to an airport. Weston, you had better get out of there, and quick. There is some kind of wacky crap going down over there…no matter, call me when you are at an airport and I'll get you home." Kirk agreed and hung up the phone.

Geoff was munching on a Power Bar and sitting on the

hood of the Jeep. He looked like a caveman who just found a cool new stick as he examined each bite before he ate it.

"Hey, thanks for letting me use your phone." Kirk handed it back and gave Geoff a half smile.

"No worries, it's not mine anyway. The Magazine pays for it, so you got a hold of your friend?"

"Yeah, now I've got to get to an airport. You know where the closest one is?"

"Sure. It is about one hundred miles that way." He pointed off to the east with his power bar still in his hand.

"Crap! One hundred miles!" Kirk pounded the hood of the Jeep in frustration.

"Tell you what, I am just about finished up here with the photos I need. I'll drive you on one condition,"

"What's that?"

"You let me buy you some shoes!" Geoff held out his hand with a wide grin spread across his face.

Kirk managed a smile and took his hand, shaking it with all the strength he could muster. "Thanks a bunch, man, you have no idea." Kirk, for the first time in a long time, felt something. He hadn't met a decent person in so long; he didn't know how to respond…but to just say thanks.

MARK RUSHED INTO HIS apartment without even closing the front door behind him. The disc he held in hand had video from the Super Mart surveillance cameras. Throwing the car keys on the coffee table, he leaned down, and pushed the DVD into the player. The TV turned blue with a Sony logo on the screen as it loaded.

Mark held his breath, not knowing what he would see; he didn't even know what he expected to see on the video. As the DVD started to play, the screen turned black, and then fuzzed a little before it cleared up.

The screen then split up into four separate boxes, each showing a different part of the store. It was the Super Mart; he could see the sign up on the wall behind the meat racks, on the screen in the upper left hand corner. Mark's heart started to pound faster, he looked at the date and time on the bottom of the screen, and it read nine a.m.

That is about three hours before the explosion, Mark said to himself. He felt a pang of excitement and he watched with feverish anticipation even though he didn't know what he was going to see. The thought of watching his wife and daughter die right before his eyes did not cross his mind.

One of the views was of the front door, and the other one of the aisles, and one of the stockrooms filled with pallets that stood shrink-wrapped and stacked on twenty-foot tall racks. The views rotated as the camera turned a hundred and eighty degrees, back and forth.

What am I supposed to see? Mark wondered. He sat on the edge of the small coffee table that sat in front of the couch. He leaned over and stared at the screen; he saw people walking around doing their shopping, and as far as he could tell, everything looked normal, but….

"Wait…what's this?" Mark paused the DVD and the screens froze. Up in the right-hand display he saw someone who looked familiar. *Where had he seen that kid before?* Then he remembered, it was the man he saw running for his life just before the building was exploded!

Mark hit the play button, and watched the guy wander around the store, he looked left and right as if he was nervous and distracted. The kid looked to be in his late teens, maybe twenty, with dark brown hair and thick eyebrows. Mark was fixed on this kid who seemed to be looking for something…he picked up boxes of cereal and cans of chili like he expected to find some hidden treasure.

Looking at the time at the bottom of the screen, it read eleven a.m. That was forty-five minutes before the bombing. The dark-haired young man didn't seem to be doing anything exciting; he picked up a few other things, then walked out the front door.

"That can't be right, he was there, and I saw him run from the building!" Mark scanned the screen, looking for any sign of the suspicious man who apparently left the building.

Nothing!

Pausing the video, Mark closed his eyes, trying to clear his head. He needed to calm down and think, this was the right day from the date, and times he knew this was the proof he needed to reopen the case. He breathed in deep as he scooted off the coffee table and sat on the floor.

The video started back up, and thirty minutes went by in real time as Mark sat, trying to scan every split screen for anything out of the ordinary. So far, nothing, except the young man who had left the store and had not returned which made Mark nervous.

Then, as if he was giving a cue to play a part in a sick movie, the young man entered the store with a determined look on his face. Mark jumped to his knees as he watched, and this time, the man seemed like he had a purpose, walking through

the aisles toward the middle of the store in smooth strides as if he knew exactly where he was going.

Mark slowed down the video as he watched to see where the guy was going…then he lost him! Mark frantically scanned each camera view trying to see where he went. *There!* He came into view in the soup aisle when the camera rotated, and then he would lose him again as the camera panned back and forth.

The dark coat looked a little bulkier than when the kid was in the store the last time…or Mark just didn't notice the bulge. Either way, he could tell that this guy had something hidden in his coat.

The store had round steel pillars every forty feet; on most of them, you could find a courtesy phone or a fire extinguisher. He looked at the young man grab a phone on one of the pillars in the center of the store near a stand filled with red Gatorade. He talked into the receiver and looked around nervously like a scared rabbit. Then, without warning, he pulled out a phone from his jacket and switched it out with the one he was talking on! Mark backed up the video, to see what had just happened. A sick feeling came over him as he started to see what was going on.

Looking closer, he saw that this kid was not talking on the phone; he was undoing the clips that held it in place. Like any magic trick, he used the skill of diversion, but this one beat them all. As he switched phones, he slipped the old one on a rack behind him and covered it with bags of brown sugar.

Someone walked by and gave him a sideways glance, but then moved on without giving him another thought. Mark's eyes widened as he saw the dark haired kid dial the phone, but

he dialed way too many numbers to be calling someone. The camera rotated again, leaving Mark waiting to see what was going to happen next. Mark didn't need to see what was going to happen, he knew, he was there and in his heart he still held the scars to prove it.

As the camera panned back, Mark saw the kid hang up the phone, and then with his index finger, he pushed the red light on the top of the phone and bolted toward the door. He ran into an old woman and almost lost his balance, but managed to stay on his feet. The old gray haired woman hit the floor with a thud and started yelling at him as he jumped past her and headed toward the exit. The camera rotated again, and Mark found the front door camera and watched as the frightened man ran right past…K and Sam. They walked through the sliding doors and into the store, holding hands as they went!

The color from Mark's face left him as he dropped his head into his hands. He knew what was going to happen, and he knew that there wasn't anything he could do about it! This was no accident… "*No Accident!"* The note…the note he got a year ago! His heart went into his throat as he saw the bright flash of light as the bomb exploded, and the screen flickered and went black.

Mark started weeping uncontrollably as he watched his family die right in front of his eyes. His head throbbed in pain and he collapsed and curled up on the floor and shook with grief.

The sound of a man's voice brought Mark's head up with a snap. Eyes filled with tears, he saw an older man sitting in a big black executive chair. The office behind the man had large oak bookshelves and they had books filling them in every

shape and size, there had to be thousands of them. He had kind eyes and a gray beard trimmed to perfection, everything about the older man spoke of refinement and wealth.

"Mark, I know that right now you are hurting and confused, but I am here to help you. My name is not important at this time; all you need to know is that I am a friend."

Mark tried to pause the machine, but it would not work, his remote seemed to be not working. He tried the buttons on the DVD player, but nothing worked.

"Mark, I am truly sorry for your loss, but we felt that you needed to know the truth. This was not an accident, as you just saw. I need you to listen to what I am going to tell you because you will only get one chance to hear what I am about to tell you." The man leaned forward in his chair and took off his glasses as he went on.

"I can't help you in what you must do next, Mark. All I can do is point you in the right direction, and the rest is up to you. This crime is more than what it looks like on the surface, if you want the truth, you need to find Pat Rotter. You need to do this alone. Do not go to the police, we do not know how far this goes, and for your safety and for ours, you will need to keep them out of it. Now I must go, remember to find Pat Rotter, he can tell you everything you need to know. And remember that justice will prevail!"

Mark stared at the screen as it went black, and his mind raced with terrible thoughts as he went through everything he just heard. Did the police know it was a bomb? They told everyone it was a gas line. *All the families that this affected and the police did not tell anyone the truth.*

Mark had so many feelings rushing over him, he didn't

know if he should be sad or angry or if he should just scream! What was going on?

"Mark…are you okay?" Maria must have come in the front door that Mark had left open. She looked a little scared when she saw Mark's eyes red from crying and him sitting in front of a black fuzz filled screen.

"Maria…uh…I'm okay. I just…" He couldn't hold on any longer and he desperately wanted to talk to someone, anyone! Mark burst into tears as he collapsed onto the couch, and began to sob. Maria rushed over and wrapped her arms around him as he wept.

"Mark, honey, its okay, just let it out." She did not know what to do; Mark was always in control of his emotions and so level headed even after everything he had gone through. As he cried into Maria's shoulder, he thought how stupid she must think he is, but he didn't care. He had just relived his wife and child dying again, to top it off, this was not some random act of terror, and as far as he knew, the police could be in on it...

The snow outside Mark's apartment let up for the time being, with a cold chill filling the air in its place. It was almost Christmas in the City and millions of Christmas lights sparkled with hope and joy. All around him, children, and their families got ready for bed, in hopes that Santa would pay them a visit tonight.

Maria held her friend in her arms as he poured out his heart to her all over her new dress, but that was okay. She did not want to be anywhere else on this night. Mark needed her tonight and she was where exactly where she wanted to be.

THE JEEP MADE A cloud of dust as it sped through the desert like a cheetah on the run. Kirk had his eyes closed as he tried to get some sleep; he was beat from his long battle with the desert sun, and it was late afternoon before they left the little run-down town. His companion insisted on getting him a pair of shoes, and then gave him a clean shirt and a pair of pants too.

Kirk asked where they were going, and Geoff responded, saying they were going to Dubai, or rather the airport in Dubai. A pothole made the Jeep jerk as they made it onto a paved road and Kirk woke up to see a few other cars on the road. This comforted him a little; at least he was heading back to civilization.

"You made a go at the sleeping thing," Geoff said. "You must have been exhausted to sleep through a ride like the one we just had." He smiled in his goofy way and the wind made his hair blow all over his face.

Kirk rubbed his eyes, and his long beard and hair flew in his face as well. He was sure that he was a sight and he was sure he would have to keep away from children to keep from scaring them. "Yeah, I could sleep for about a year just to catch up. This Jeep isn't too bad compared to what I have been sleeping on."

Kirk could see the writer's face twist in curiosity. He wanted so badly to know the story of his bearded friend.

"So, uh…what were you doing out in the desert wandering around?" Kirk smirked. *He decided he would give him something.* Besides, he had been more than generous.

"Well, most of it would be pointless to tell you. However, to sum it up, I woke up here with a lump on the head and

dragged from an important case in New York. Oh, and I've been gone for over a year now," Geoff's eyes lit up; he loved to hear new stories and this one was a good one. Detroit cop kidnapped and a year later, he escapes.

"Whoa…what did they want?"

"That's the weird part, they never asked for anything or even said why I they took me. It just about drove me crazy not knowing why I was there!" Kirk had a good idea of whom he was dealing with, but he needed more proof. He needed to find out what this WJA was and how far it went and then take them down.

"Hummm…you're a cop. Maybe it had something to do with one of the cases you were working on," Kirk looked over at Geoff in amazement; he didn't know how close he was to the truth. Kirk didn't show his shock on his face but instead gave Geoff a tired yawn and a half smile.

"I just want to get home and sleep in my own bed." The road got busier as they got closer to Dubai, and Kirk wondered what kind of city it was. He had never been outside of the States and he always figured that the Middle East was all run-down and had people living in huts packing machine guns. The town they had come from was exactly the image Kirk had in his mind.

Geoff could tell that his new friend did not want to talk about his ordeal anymore, so he left it alone. He had good people skills; it was the reason he had the job he had. You had to be able to wait for the story, and then know what stories were worth pursuing and what ones would end up in the trash. Besides, he knew that eventually he would get it all.

The sun was on its way down as they came up on the city

of Dubai. Kirk looked through the windshield in shock as he saw what looked like, Boston! The city had skyscrapers dotting the skyline; palm trees lined the streets, along with high dollar restaurants and casinos for every flavor of traveler.

Cars bustled about in the streets; some had only one tire in the front with what looked like an amped-up covered motorbike. Most of the cars were tiny compared to the huge trucks and Hummers you would see in America.

"Well, here we are! Welcome to Dubai, the city of surprises," Geoff waved his hand at a beautiful skyscraper that jutted out of the earth, covered with glass that rounded as it went up to the sky. It looked like a sail on a ship that just caught its wind and sat out in the bay like a futuristic pirate ship.

"Impressive," Kirk looked down a street that took off to the right, at the end; he saw a lush green park filled with green trees and dog walkers. They turned onto what appeared to be a freeway and after a sign with the airplane symbol on it; Kirk knew they were getting close.

"I called my office while you were passed out, and they gave me permission to use the company jet. I need to get back to the States anyway and if you like you can join me. The passports and all the mumbo jumbo of getting a flight out of here, would take you weeks, if not longer." Geoff grinned, showing all of his white teeth.

"Well, I guess if you're going to fly out of here anyway, I'll be glad to join you." Kirk started to see that his new friend was a giving person. Shaking his head in amazement, he wondered if Geoff was his polar opposite.

After parking the Jeep in the rental-parking garage, the

two tired travelers made their way to a hangar in the back of the main airport. He could see the twin engines of a G5 Learjet through the open hangar door. It was a beautiful plane with white paint glinting in the evening light and the magazine logo on the side of the tail.

After they boarded the jet, Kirk soon passed out in one of the beds toward the back of the plane. Geoff smiled when he saw him already asleep, and he didn't blame him…it had been a long day for both of them. The plane pulled out of the hangar and waited in line to take off and soon Kirk would be back home in Detroit. Now he just had to explain to his boss why he was over a year late for work.

Chapter Ten

CHRISTMAS DAY CAME WITH SOFT WHITE snowflakes filling the sky. Mark woke up from his nightmare to find that it was not just a dream. Rubbing his eyes, he looked around his bedroom trying to remember what happened last night. Was the video real or a twisted part of his brain that wanted to make everything make more sense?

"Oh, shoot…Maria!" Jumping to his feet, he put on a robe that hung on the back of a chair as he opened the door. The apartment was clean and smelled of pine trees even though they stood in the middle of a smoggy polluted city.

"Morning, Sunshine!" Maria smiled from the kitchen where she was cracking open an egg and dropping it into a skillet. "Don't worry. I was a good girl I slept on the couch. You were pretty upset last night, are you feeling better this

morning?"

"Uh…yeah, I just had so much built up from everything…and…Wait! The video!" Mark scrambled to the DVD player and saw that it was still in the DVD player, which meant that it was real and now he had the proof he needed.

"You sure you're okay?" Maria did not look convinced.

"Yeah, I just…well, you wouldn't believe me anyway," Mark looked down at the disc he held in his hand and remembered how he told Maria everything he was feeling but left out the parts of the story that made him look crazy.

"Mark, I'm your friend, if you tell me something, I have no reason to mistrust you," She came from around the kitchen counter and sat on the edge of the couch. "What's on that CD, hon?" Mark sat down on the couch, looked up at her, and started to tell her the story about the first note, then the second note and the CD.

She softly placed her hand on his arm as she listened to his story, her eyes did not betray what she thought, and Mark hoped she would not laugh and take him down to the sanitarium. She looked at the note he handed her and ran her finger over the raised lettering on the logo. After he told her everything, he let out a sigh of relief and looked at her for a response.

"Wow. So, the whole thing was a planned attack and not an accidental explosion. You should tell the police or the FBI or somebody,"

"I would, but we don't even know what or who this WJA is! They could have made up the whole thing, created this video although it looks real enough, but I need more proof first. And the only lead I have is this Pat Rotter guy." Maria

looked at him with her big brown eyes…then her face lit up as if a light bulb just went on.

"I am great at finding stuff on the web, Google and all; I was a bit of a techie nerd in college," She laughed. "I got into trouble my sophomore year for hacking into the CDC website!" Mark's eyes widened and he smiled.

"You nerd, And I thought you were a good girl, and this whole time you had a priceless hidden talent." Mark laughed and pushed her off the arm of the couch. He was amazed how much better he felt by letting out all his emotions. She just had a way of making him feel not so broken.

"You better be nice to me, or I'll burn your eggs!" She teased.

Mark waved his hand in the air, signaling that he was not listening. Getting up, he pushed the CD into the player again to see if he could find out anything more about this mystery kid. He wanted to study the video again and see if he could see any distinguishing marks or maybe an address written in neon!

The screen started to play, and then, all at once, it went black…with the words "Top Secret" scrolling across the TV over and over again.

"What!?" Mark tried taking it out and reinserting the DVD into the player. This time he saw a timer in the lower left-hand corner counting down from ten…nine…eight… Mark hit the eject button.

Nothing!

"Come on! Eject!"

Six…five…

Grabbing the DVD player, he pulled it out from the enter-

tainment center, ripping all the cords from the wall. He ran to the bathroom, tossed the player into the tub, and ran out, slamming the door behind him.

He waited…

He heard a sizzling sound and Maria looked at him as if he was insane. Time to go honey, the nice men in white coats will take good care of you.

"What?" Mark tried to look innocent; *I guess it is not normal to run from the bathroom with a DVD player like a freak.* Then smoke came up from under the door of the bathroom setting off the smoke detectors throughout the apartment.

"Aw, man…" Mark opened the door to the bathroom to find his DVD player melted and disfigured in the tub. "See, Maria…and you thought I was crazy, now I don't have any proof!"

Maria looked into the tub and coughed, waving her arms around, trying to get the smoke to leave her alone. "I still think you should call the police…just tell them the truth."

Mark opened up all the windows, letting out the thick dark smoke and covered his nose with his hand. The ringing of the smoke alarms stopped, and Maria went back to her cooking so they would not add burnt eggs to the list of burning things. "Maybe you're right, I'll call Detective Owens, see what he thinks. I just don't think he wants to see me after putting me off about the first note," Mark had hounded Detective Owens showing him the note and insisting he look into it, but after a few months, he got the cold shoulder.

"Well, this is note number two, and you have the video…err had, anyway, you'll have to wait till Monday," Maria said. "It is Christmas, you know."

"Oh, it is, isn't it?" Mark remembered that it was Christmas Eve yesterday…so, naturally, it would be Christmas today.

"So what do you want to do today?" Mark asked. "That is, if you don't have any other plans." Maria faked a shocked look as she finished the eggs.

"No plans, I was actually hoping that this…uh…well, not this…but that…you know what I mean. I wanted to spend Christmas with you!" She grinned and looked down like a puppy that could not take another rejection.

Mark enjoyed her discomfort and teased her by pretending to think about it. "Well…I guess, since you are here, we could do Christmas." Maria looked hurt.

"Stop teasing me! Tell you what, you eat breakfast with me, and later I'll help you hunt down this Pat guy."

Mark put out his hand to her, and offered it to seal the deal with a shake.

"Deal!"

KIRK FELT A HAND on his arm, and he jumped to his feet, grabbing for the neck of the man standing over him. Geoff gasped for air as he grabbed at Kirk's hands that were squeezing his throat in a death grip. Kirk glared at Geoff as he held him up against the wall of the plane. Letting him down and releasing his grip, he looked at Geoff, and his eyes softened.

"Sorry. I thought you were…" Kirk sat down in a nearby chair and rubbed his eyes. He was dreaming about the metal and the ninja's.

Geoff sat down across from him and touched his neck

where a bruise had started to form. "No worries, I'm just glad you let me go before you killed me. Remind me never to mess with you!" His good nature prevailed and it seemed like nothing could get this guy down.

"I just had a rough year, didn't think I would ever get out of that place. You wouldn't believe it if I told you," Kirk stretched and looked out the window at the snow covered ground below them. "Where are we?"

"Just about an hour from Detroit, you've been passed out for over seventeen hours, by the way, Merry Christmas!"

"You're kiddin', right?" Kirk shook his head, trying to clear his jumbled-up thoughts. "Well, Merry Christmas to you too. Sorry it had to be with me, I never was much into the holidays."

"I thought as much, I love them, so festive and fun. People get in the giving mood, and then you've got to love Santa!" Kirk grunted in disbelief, he hated Santa, the dumb elves and most of all the arrogant red nosed whatever his name was reindeer.

"Well, you can have it all to yourself; I think it's just a way for the stores to get more money out of you, and then make you feel guilty if you don't participate."

Geoff laughed, and then patted Kirk on the back. "Hey, you hungry? I can get us some dinner if you like,"

"Great. I am starved."

GEOFF WENT BACK TO where the food was stored; he opened up the mini fridge, pulling out two sandwiches. Looking around for some napkins, he felt his cell phone vibrate and

rumble in his pocket.

Looking at the number, he answered in a hushed tone so no one would hear him.

"Yes, I'm on my way back now,"

"Sure, I'll keep you posted." Hanging up the cell, he gathered up the sandwiches, grabbed two Cokes, and headed into the main area.

"How does roast beef sound?"

Kirk nodded that it would be fine and took the sandwich from Geoff's outstretched hand. "So, what exactly do you do for this World Magazine?" Kirk opened the Coke and took a sip.

"Well, I get assignments to go investigate a story, take pictures and interview people, and then send the info back to our main office where they compile it and print it…that is, if it's any good." Kirk looked satisfied with this answer, finished his hoagie roll, and looked out the window.

Geoff knew Kirk did not want to divulge any more information than he had to about his kidnapping. He didn't want to push him to much, and he believed with time he would open up and then he might have the story he so desperately wanted. Geoff shifted in his seat, trying to get Kirk's attention; his eyes were bright with anticipation.

"I just got off the phone with my editor, and it looks like I got about a month off. I was thinking—if you don't mind, I could help you try to track down the people responsible for your kidnapping." Geoff could see Kirk start to reject his idea, but he butted in before he could say anything.

"I do know how to keep my mouth shut, and everything will be off the record. I know my way around the Middle East,

and Europe is a cinch. I am a great researcher. I could help."

Kirk held up his hand to stop, "Okay, okay, you can help. If you are as much help as you have been so far, you might come in handy. Just know one thing: If I read anything about this in the papers or your crappy magazine, I'll personally hunt you down and kill you!" Kirk seemed to be getting back to his old self.

"No worries. I'll take it!"

For the next hour, Kirk filled Geoff in on everything that happened from the David's Island case, to his hit on the head…leaving out the part no one would believe about the high tech prison he was held in. Geoff made notes on his laptop and asked a few more questions. After Kirk was finished, Geoff shut his laptop and sat back in his seat, thinking…

"So it seems that this WJA group is behind all this, and they are almost daring you to find them with the note and all. Have you cross-referenced that with any other cases?"

"Not yet, but I plan to get Mooch on it as soon as we get back."

"From what I remember from reading about it in the news paper, they said that it was bad meat from a company that sold to the shipping outfit. It was ruled as an accident."

"So the FBI has the case shut down?" Kirk shook his head. "That will mean I'll need to convince my boss to investigate under him, and when we get solid proof, we go to the Feds."

"No worries, I'll get a hold of that CSI lady, what was her name? Oh yeah, Cassy. I'll call her this week and see if she has anything new on that drug."

"Good idea, maybe she found the partner drug and that might just be what we need. I wonder why the Feds still

thought it was accidental after what she found."

Geoff could feel the airplane start to descend, and the announcement over the speakers confirmed it.

"We're here," Geoff said.

"Great, I need a shower, and then I'm going to sleep all weekend. You can crash at my place if you want. Just don't take anything."

"No worries."

THE WEEKEND WAS JUST what Mark needed. He and Maria went ice-skating down at Central Park, and then went to shops and watched all the kids standing in line to see Santa at Macy's. The day had a crisp cool air to it and every hour or so it would start to snow. They talked and hung out just watching movies and eating popcorn at Mark's apartment. He felt relaxed and ready to take on the world. It was the first time in a year that Mark had truly felt happy again. Not all the way down deep in his soul but as happy, as he thought he would ever be without K.

Monday came with the sun rising up over the beautiful New York skyline. The snow had stopped, but still lingered on the trees and the park benches making everything look clean and white. Mark called in to work, telling Hank that he would be late coming in. He needed to get down to the police station to talk to Detective Owens.

He smiled at the front desk receptionist as she waved him back to Owens' office. As he walked past the offices and break room, he thought about the last time he was here. It was about six months ago, and Mark had heard about the gas line bursting, could not accept it and started his own investigation.

Detective Owens finally told him to let it go after Mark kept bugging him to reopen the case.

"Hello, Detective Owens, do you got a minute?" Mark held onto the manila envelope he had in his hand and the tall detective looked at it with half interest.

Clive looked surprised and slightly annoyed to see Mark. "What can I do you for, Mr. Appleton?" Clive knew what it would be about and after he got the plug pulled on him from his supervisor, he had to close the case. It came all the way up from the FBI and they came out with the bad meat story. Clive didn't like it but didn't have a choice in the matter. Mark Appleton was barking up a dead tree and Clive was more concerned about losing his job then anything else.

"Well remember that note I showed you a few months ago? I got another one, it doesn't sound like much, but …" He put the envelope down on the detective's desk and took a seat.

Owens looked at the envelope and sighed; he took it and pulled out the note. After reading it, he looked up at Mark with a frustrated tone laced through his voice.

"So where's this tape?"

"Uh, that's the bad news, after I played it…well, you see…it melted my DVD player and destroyed the disc."

Clive handed back the note, stood up, and looked Mark square in the eyes. "Mr. Appleton,"

"Mark. You can call me Mark."

"Okay. Mark, I'm very sorry that your wife and daughter were killed in this accident…"

But…it wasn't…" Mark cut in.

"Accident!" Detective Owens said a bit too loud for the situation. "Look, Mr.…uh…Mark…this case is done closed,

and no amount of notes or surveillance videos is going to change what happened. Now, if you be wantin' to obsess over this your whole life, you go right ahead. Just leave me out of it!"

Mark started to say something, but Clive jumped in. "No! Mr. Appleton, you'd be needin' to stop. No more notes or videos that aren't working or melted, just let it lay. That's an order! Now, if you don't mind, I got a lot of work to be doin'."

Mark's face turned red with anger. He could not believe what was happening…and they were going to let these men who killed all these people go free! He wanted to take a swing at the tall Texan but held back. He turned and walked out into the hall when he heard Detective Owens call over his shoulder.

"And if I catch you tryin' to investigate this, I'll arrest you for interfering with a police investigation…ya hear!"

Mark stopped with his back turned to the detective, he looked over his shoulder, and then he walked out the front door without a word.

Mark felt a wave of rage and indignation flood over him as he got into his car. This was not over, this was not going to happen to him. He was supposed to protect his family, he was the guardian, and he let them die. He realized it was not his fault, but it would be the same thing as killing them himself if he let these…these monsters get away with it!

Pulling off Main Street, he turned down Third and headed to his office. Picking up his cell from the charger in the center console, he dialed Maria's number.

"Hey Mark, how'd it go?"

"Not good, he basically said to leave it alone and threatened to arrest me if I did anything about it."

"Oh…I'm so sorry, hon …"

"I need you to find out whatever you can on this Pat Rotter guy. He's my only hope of finding out who did this,"

"Okay, I'll get right on it. We'll find him, Mark, I promise."

"Thanks, Maria, and be careful, don't get caught; okay?"

"Okay, I'll use a laptop in the Coffee Bean down the street so I can't be traced…on my lunch break; okay?"

"I'll see you in a bit." Mark hung up the phone and pulled into the parking garage where he parked in the space he always used. His body language changed from smooth, fluid movements to sharp, harsh movements. He slammed the car door and got on the elevator going up to his floor.

After dropping off his briefcase on his desk, he marched down to where Bert was working.

"Hey, Mark, did you have a good Christmas?"

"Hey, Bert. Got a question, you still go shooting at the range much?"

"Yeah, in fact, now that you mention it I'm going tonight. Uh…you want to go?"

"If you don't mind, I need to blow off some steam."

Sure. It is a great stress reliever, I'll bring an extra gun for you to use."

Mark got driving directions to the indoor range, and then thanked Bert and promised to see him later. He wanted to at least know how to use a gun just in case this Pat guy proved to be dangerous.

The day drug on as Mark tried to keep his mind from thinking about the detective. He just could not believe that they would not look into the new information. He knew that

the gas line story was just a cover up, but why would they want to cover up this? Were they involved somehow and what did they gain by blowing up a grocery store?

The clock read one o'clock when Mark heard his phone ring at his desk. "Hello? Oh, hi, Maria, you find out anything?"

Maria's voice on the other end was hushed as she told him of her findings. "I hacked into the police database to see if his name popped up anywhere. I didn't get anything, and then I got into the DMV website and I got a hit. He's twenty-two years old and lives in Manhattan,"

"Great work!"

"There's more, I wanted to see if he had any criminal background or what he does for a living, so I did a search of employment agencies against his name. And guess where he worked two years ago,"

"Where?"

"At Manacore Manufacturing! And guess what they make there, they produce C-4 and other plastic explosives for the U.S. Military. He was fired after suspicion of theft!"

"You got to be kidding; this is the break we needed! Do you think he still lives in Manhattan?"

"Not sure, but here is his last known address," Maria gave him the address of an apartment building in lower Manhattan. Mark wrote the address down and thanked Maria for her help. He planned to visit this Pat guy after he went to the range tonight. He could not go being this upset; it might mean a slip in judgment, which would end up putting him behind bars.

Chapter Eleven

KIRK SLEPT MOST OF THE WEEKEND, ONLY getting up to go to the bathroom and eat a donut or two in a dazed stupor. Geoff crashed on the living room couch where he had to clean off old, rotten food wrappers and one pizza box that in the past year looked like it had grown into a small animal. He just about lost his lunch when he opened the fridge and found mold covering everything making the items in the fridge look like a miniature city skyline of white and green fuzz.

The place had been sitting for over a year, and it was not in much worse shape than it was when Kirk lived there. Kirk was a true bachelor down to never once cleaning his bathroom or ever washing a dish. If he wanted to eat off a plate, he just wiped the plate with his shirt and called it good.

Geoff, on the other hand, could live in a tent on the backside of a mountain or in the desert with not a care in the world. However, this filth disgusted him and as Kirk slept, he began to pick up around the place and clean until he could see what color the carpet was again. The worst was the tub, the brown-black color made it look as if it had sat in a field for a hundred years and Geoff even wrote his name in the side of it before he cleaned it with pure bleach.

In the winter, Detroit was cold and windy making it miserable. Not that it was a delight in the summer but this was like hell but with ice and freezing wind instead of hellfire and brimstone. Kirk's answering machine had about one hundred messages from his boss and one from his ex-wife; outside of that, it looked like someone had broken in to the apartment in order to locate him, but found nothing and figured he was missing of his own accord.

Kirk had done this sort of thing before when he would get out of sorts with his boss or something happened that he didn't like; he would disappear for a while to cool off and return and act like nothing ever happened. After two days and three packs of rubber gloves, Geoff, had the place looking neat, and most important of all, clean.

Kirk stirred from his hibernation on Monday morning to the smell of coffee and bacon drifting through his bedroom. He got out of bed with a grunt and shuffled into the living room in his boxers and a wild tangle of hair and beard wrapping his face like a caveman in the spring.

"Good morning, Mr. Weston," Geoff was always chipper, and if it was going to be like this every morning it could pose a problem. Kirk was not completely awake and he dragged his

feet making a scuffing sound on the hardwood kitchen floor.

"Morning, Mom, I'm not sure if it is good or not yet, but it's morning," Kirk sat down on a wooden stool that faced the bar and into the kitchen and rubbed his eyes. Geoff placed a cup of black coffee in front of him followed by a plate of scrambled eggs and bacon.

"So you feeling better?" Geoff asked as he sipped on his own cup of coffee from a mug that said *"don't drink and drive you might hit a bump and spill your beer."*

"Much, better, I…uh…hey, what happened to my place?" Kirk jumped up, looking around as if he had been robbed. He liked to live comfortable and now the apartment look as if it was a set for a television sitcom. Now he could smell the faint pungent glow of bleach and pine, lemon and something else he could not place.

Geoff laughed, "I cleaned, and I must say it wasn't a pretty job, you should get a maid."

"Cleaned!? It was fine the way it was, now how am I supposed to find anything?" Kirk sat back down and looked around with a confused and annoyed look on his face.

"I put your clothes away in the closet, and you will find your shirts hung up and your pants folded in the dresser."

"Man, you are some kind of fruit. I thought my ex was bad," Kirk settled in and started on another plate of eggs, he was temporally distracted when he spotted more bacon and grabbed three more slices. "But if you keep up this cooking, I'll hire *you* to be my maid." Geoff laughed as he polished off his plate of food and started to wash it in the sink.

"I don't think you have the money to hire me, did you see the stack of bills I left you on the coffee table?"

Kirk looked over his shoulder at the past due rent, the power bills and other pink and red envelopes all warning him that unless he paid them he would be out on the streets. “They can wait, if they haven’t kicked me out yet, then they can hold off another week or so.”

Geoff nodded and began washing the skillet he cooked the morning’s meal in.

“Hurry up; we’ve got to get down to the station and see if we can make boss man have a heart attack.” Kirk got up, and shoved the last mouthful of food into his face before heading out the door. Geoff grabbed his notebook and followed Kirk to the parking garage. Kirk pointed to a Harley Davidson motorcycle with a sidecar attached to it and grinned. He loved the beat up old hog and now he was back home and back in the saddle with Sandra. Sandra was what he named the bike, don’t ask why, it just seemed to fit.

“That’s where you ride!” Kirk nodded in the direction of the small sidecar and laughed devilishly. Geoff folded his long legs into a tight ball to get in; he was too tall for this sort of thing, and the cold wind wasn’t going to make it a pleasant ride. Kirk started it up, a cloud of thick black smoke billowed from the tailpipe, and Geoff gagged and coughed.

“This is going to be a long day!”

MARK LOOKED DOWN AT the directions that Bert had written down on a piece of paper. Taking the next exit, he made a right and headed out of the City toward the shooting range that sat about ten miles to the west of off-ramp 109.

He could not think of the last time he had shot a gun, but it had

been a long time. He went hunting a few times in the Colorado mountains with his Dad, but they never got much, it was not really hunting, more like hiking with a gun.

The range was lit up like the White House; it had lights along the outdoor shooting lanes where you stood under a heated canopy. The lanes looked like mini runways just waiting for a plane to land. No one stood under the canopy this night and with the weather, Mark was not surprised. Pulling into a nearby parking space, he got out and locked the door behind him. He shivered as the cutting wind hit him in the face taking his breath away in an instant. He began to think this wasn't such a good idea in this cold. Mark was not aware that the range also had a basement range as well so at first glance he thought that they would be outside in the wind.

Bert yelled at Mark from the doorway, waving his arms above his head. He smiled at Mark and watched him walk toward the warm building through the blasting cold. "Hi ya, I see you found it okay. I know what you're thinking…but they have an indoor range in the basement. You're only allowed to shoot pistols there, but it's still a hoot!" Mark was relieved and smiled as he unzipped his thick winter jacket.

"Good. I was thinking that you'd be crazy to try to shoot in this cold!" Bert laughed and patted Mark on the back as he showed him around.

The building was built of big logs with cracked white grout in-between the logs keeping out most of the outdoors. A huge chandelier made of deer antlers hung from the ceiling with flickering lights dancing like candles. The front desk had a gun case built into it with handguns under the glass and a stocky man standing behind it, polishing a pistol with his big,

well-muscled arms. He looked like he could crush the gun like a empty pop can, but his fingers touched and cleaned the weapon with gentle precision. Behind the counter was a wall full of rifles and shotguns of every make and model. Most of them were for rent if you did not want to shoot your own gun or if you didn't have one.

Bert walked over to a leather couch that sat in front of a roaring fireplace in what appeared to be a sitting area. He plopped down a black case on the coffee table and opened it, revealing two handguns lying in the foam lining. One was a silver revolver and one was black metal and looked different then the revolver.

"Now, this one is a .45 cal. It packs a punch, and this here is a .357 magnum. This guy will take someone's head off if you ever need it to!" Bert then explained how they worked and how to use the safety, which he said was "The most important thing to know."

"So which one do I get to shoot?" Mark asked as he looked at the silver and black metal gleaming in the firelight.

"I think you will like the .45 cal. And if you want, you can take your chances with the .357 later." Bert grinned as he handed Mark the .45 and a box of bullets.

After they signed in at the front desk, they went down a flight of stairs that opened up to a big room with individual counters separated by a half wall. Each lane was about thirty feet long with targets on a pulley at the end. Bert showed Mark how to draw the target back to look at it and how to put up a fresh one. Mark put up a fresh target that looked like an angry man holding a gun and pointing it at you with a look of rage on his face. Mark pushed a red button, and the pulley

activated and ran the target out as far as it would go.

Bert looked the part with his hair slicked back and his black fingerless gloves. He was a gangster wannabe, and with the .357 in his hand, Mark would not want to meet him in a dark alley.

Bert was Italian, down to his short legs and thick waistline. He looked just like a character from The Godfather. Mark hired him five years ago after Bert moved from Chicago to New York. He was a single guy with a few girlfriends here and there, but for the most part he was too busy *living the life* as he would say, too be to serious with any of them.

Bert motioned for Mark to shoot first so he could make sure he did not have any problems. The place had a few other people shooting down a few lanes over, but for the most part, the place was empty. Mark put on his earmuffs and began to put one bullet at a time into the magazine until he could not fit any more. He slid the clip into place until he felt it click, and then slid the action back and let it drop forward again.

Mark tried to remember if he had ever actually shot a pistol before. He could not think of a time that he had, but somehow it felt natural as he held the loaded gun in his hand.

He felt a sense of power come over him as he looked at the dark metal glisten in his hand. The feeling of remembrance from a far away part of his mind took over so strong, Mark for a minute thought he was in another world. He looked at his hands and noticed that they were shaking slightly, was he scared? Bert looked at him from the other lane, waiting for Mark to do something besides just stand there and look confused.

Mark sprang into action in what seemed like slow motion, but in reality Mark moved with the speed of a gunslinger. He

lifted the gun with his right hand holding the handle, and with his index finger on the trigger and his left hand cupping his right just as he had seen in any good cop movie. He saw the target and closed his eyes to focus, and slow down his heartbeat. He did not know why but something told him he needed to be calm and stop his shaking hands.

And just like that, it was over; a whiff of smoke came from the barrel and floated up to the ceiling. Mark looked down the sights at the target, not knowing if he had shot it or not. He lowered the handgun and looked over at Bert who was just staring at him with his mouth hanging open.

Mark was not sure how many times he had fired, so he dropped the clip, it was empty. Bert finally got a word out in his stunned condition. "What was that? I've never seen anyone shoot that fast, not even in all the years I've been coming to this range. Holy crap, man!"

"Was that good?" Mark looked more confused than Bert did. Walking around to Mark's booth, Bert took the gun from his hand and looked at it trying to see if it was made of pure magic or if it was a real gun and he was just seeing things.

He examined the clip and shook his head. "Well, I don't know what to say, that was…was amazing! Its one thing to shoot fast, anyone can pop off a clip, but did you hit anything?" Mark looked down the lane but was not sure what it should look like. The target looked the same as it did a minute ago, no huge gaping holes like he imagined it would, maybe he missed.

Bert hit the button to return the target. As it got closer, Mark noticed that there was light coming through the center that looked like a golf ball had gone through it. Maybe he did hit it!

"No way," Bert was shocked and shook his head in half amazement and half disgust. "There is no way…man; you said you've never shot a pistol before. You're a dirty rotten liar!"

"No…really, I haven't! I shot a few times when I was younger, but it was just a rifle," Mark held up two fingers and said, "Scout's honor," to show he was telling the truth.

"Well, it must be beginner's luck, try that again. I bet you can't hit a thing this time."

Mark held out his hand to shake on it. "Fine, load me up and let's see." Mark grinned, not knowing if he could do it again or not, but it was fun either way. Bert filled the clip and slid it into place, looking sideways at Mark as if he suspected him of cheating somehow.

Mark took the gun from Bert and stepped into the booth. A man from another booth had been listening in on the conversation had made his way over to see what all the commotion was about.

Slipping his ear protection down low, Mark looked at the new target down at the end of the aisle. Closing his eyes, he thought about the target, seeing it in his mind. A wave of raw energy filled his body, and like a bolt of lightning, he opened his eyes to see the magazine slide back and then forward, sending a flash out the end of the barrel. He watched the single trail of smoke rise up in the air like a lick of used up fire going home never to return.

'Click'

Lowering the gun, he looked at it, thinking that the gun must have jammed. Dropping the clip, he stared at it in shock…it was empty. Now it was Marks turn to stare at the

gun like a deer in the headlights.

The two men behind him just looked at him in utter envy and before now, Mark had not noticed the two men who were transfixed on him as if he was a celebrity or something.

"Do it again!" Bert yelled from behind him.

Repeatedly, Mark filled targets with golf ball size holes and not only that; he could empty the clip in less then four seconds. Just about, everyone in the building formed a crowd, and cheered as he brought in the last one and held it up for all to see. He could not explain it. He felt this surge of …of something come over him, and he just knew what to do. Bert took full advantage of the situation, making fifty bucks off the newcomer who had shown up at the end.

After the guys went back to their own aisles, Bert showed Mark how to clean the hand guns and then they put them back in the black case where they sat on dimpled foam.

"That was something, Mark, you've got a natural gift, you know,"

"Thanks, it just felt easy, as if I just instinctively knew what to do, I can't explain it."

"Cool, I wish I could shoot like that,"

Bert put away the .357 and closed the black carrying case. Looking around, Mark noticed a big hairy man sitting on the couch in front of the fireplace.

"Who is that?" Mark pointed out the big man to Bert. "He has been hanging around all night and looking over at us."

"Oh, that's Fred; you want to stay away from him. Word is that he sells black market guns on the street and is moving a butt load of drugs along with it."

"Wow. So he just hangs out, trying to pick up new cli-

ents?"

"Yup, a lot of guys that come here want to buy a gun after they try it, it's addicting."

Mark nodded in agreement, seeing how you could get addicted to shooting. After they buttoned up their coats to brave the cold winter wind, Mark thanked Bert and promised to come with him again. Bert shook his hand and grinned like a mobster with only half of his face.

As Mark watched Bert pull away, he sat in his car with the heater running. He wondered if this Fred guy would have anything on him. Not a fix he was never into the whole drug thing, what he wanted was a gun. He shook his head and put the car into drive. As he started to pull out, he saw the directions to Pat Rotter's house sitting on the passenger seat like *an omen* prodding him to act. He changed his mind, pulled back into the parking space, and got out of the car. What was he doing? He wasn't a hero, or a detective, he was just…well ordinary!

Walking back inside, he quickly made his way over to where Fred was sitting. When Fred saw Mark, he grinned with a toothless grin, showing his blackened teeth…or what was left of them.

"Hey." Mark paused, "I'm Mark. I was wondering if you've got a minute?" Mark shook Fred's hand and sat down on an overstuffed chair across from the large man.

"So what can I get you this fine evening?" The smoke from his fat cigar drifted from his lips as he talked.

"Well…" Mark lowered his voice. "I need a gun,"

"Ah, I see, now what kind of gun are we looking for, I wonder." His voice grumbled from deep within his heavy

chest. After a bout with a nasty cough, he shoved the cigar back into his mouth and took a long drag.

Mark looked at the man and leaned toward him as he spoke. "I need something for home protection, something that can take out more then one person at a time, you know, close up. Do you have anything like that?"

His thick beard bounced like worms on a hook as he laughed. His voice sounded like gravel and he coughed after each laugh, which sent him doubling over for a few seconds, until he caught his breath.

"Yeah, I think I got what you might be looking for, follow me." Getting up, he headed to a side door that led to the parking lot without going by the front desk. He led Mark to an old paint chipped car with a long nose and huge trunk. Pulling out a set of keys, he opened the trunk, where he pulled out a black carrying case. The case looked a lot like the one Bert had, but it was much larger and heavier judging from the way Fred grunted and groaned trying to lift it out of the deep trunk.

The wind made Mark zip up his coat as he stood in the dim light of the moon. The side of the range was out of view of the road and Mark looked into the strange man's car wondering what he might see, wondering if he was losing his mind standing here in the dark drunken night considering buying a gun from a drug dealer.

"This is a riot gun or a modified shotgun, it holds nine shells and is semi-auto," He pointed to a little slide on the side of the gun, and Mark liked the look of the weapon. It had a short barrel and was a dull black color with a light mounted to the side of it so you could see what you were aiming in the dark.

"Now, the beauty of this baby is that all you need to do is point it in the general direction and you'll hit whatever you aim at." Mark held the shotgun and felt the cold metal against his hands—it felt good.

"So how much do you want for it?" Mark asked.

Fred thought a minute and took another drag from his cigar. "Eight hundred dollars and I'll throw in a box of shells,"

Mark fired back, "Seven hundred and I'll pay you cash right now." Mark pulled out seven hundred dollars from his wallet and held it up in Fred's face.

Fred looked at the money and an evil glint crossed his face, he looked over his shoulder and grunted and took the cash. "You've got a good deal, man. Now get out of here before I change my mind." He handed Mark the case after he placed the shotgun back into it. Mark thanked him and took the shells and his new toy to his car, which he had left running. He put the case in the back seat and pulled out of the parking lot. He did not allow his mind to think about what he had just done, he did not want to know, he just knew somehow he had to, he did not have a choice.

KIRK WALKED INTO THE Detroit Police station and past all of his long-time coworkers without being recognized. He forgot that he still had a bushy beard and was about fifty pounds lighter, and hair! He never let it grow out and now he resembled a bum that lived under a bridge rather then a Detroit detective. He marched into the chief's office and startled him; he stopped mid-sentence with whoever he was on the phone with and started to stand up.

"I'll call you back," Hanging up the phone; he stared at

Kirk and Geoff, who stood behind Kirk like a trained puppy.

"Well, what story have you got this time? And you look like hell!" The chief sat back down in his torn brown chair and leaned back with his hands folded across his chest.

Kirk could see that the chief was in no mood to play catch-up, so he decided to get right to the point.

"I'm going to need some time off to gather evidence against whoever kidnapped me. I think I might know who is behind it, but I need more proof."

"No, you're not getting any more time off, you were kidnapped, and it's now an active case. You will report anything you have and any new information directly to me! You got it?"

Kirk nodded, but let the warning pass over him like he always did. He was not going to let this go no matter what this old windbag said.

"Now, I know you want to keep looking into the prison case, you had better not even think about it. That case is closed, and I can't afford for the two of you to go chasing down ghosts!"

Kirk could tell from the way his boss was acting that he was under a lot of pressure to keep a lid on the whole thing. *I wonder what freaked him out, or who freaked him out!*

"But…" Kirk stuttered, "I have…"

The chief leaned forward in his chair and glared at Kirk as he raised his voice. "I mean it, Kirk. You let it lay!"

"Fine, have it your way," Kirk was ticked and it was pointless to stand here and argue about it. Kirk opened the door, letting Geoff out, and then slammed the door behind him, sending the chief yelling out curses after them. Kirk grinned and went over to his desk to get a few things. Opening the

bottom drawer, he pulled out a .45 and a box of rounds. Surprisingly his desk was just as he left it, he figured they would have given it to someone else by now, but then again who really wanted it after Kirk Weston had it?

"Might need these,"

Geoff looked horrified, but did not say anything.

"Let's get out of here, we need to get in touch with Mooch and see if he's turned up anything."

As they left the parking lot of the police station, Kirk smiled at Geoff, who was scrunched up in the sidecar like a giant riding in a Barbie car. He rather enjoyed seeing him uncomfortable…it was his sadistic nature and he grunted at Geoff who didn't complain.

Kirk needed something solid and he was going to run out of time in a hurry if his boss decided to put his foot down.

Chapter Twelve

MARK'S FACE HARDENED AS HE THOUGHT ABOUT the death of K and Sam. His anger rose even more when he remembered what Detective Owens told him, the case was closed, no matter what new evidence turned up or how much proof he uncovered. There was something else going on, Mark did not know what it was, but it bothered him down deep in the back of his mind. What kind of justice system was this? Rapists go free on a technicality; murderers get a slap on the wrist because they had a bad childhood or they didn't get to go to Disneyland, as if it justified their crimes.

His eyes narrowed as he drove toward Manhattan; he was going to get some answers one way or another. The sky was a smothering black with only a few stars sparkling like tiny pinpoints of light, but Mark did not notice the time as he drove, it

was past eleven o'clock in the evening, but it would not have mattered anyway, he was on a mission and nothing was going to stop him from getting some answers.

THE BLACK LEXUS STAYED three or four cars behind Mark's vehicle as they made their way through traffic. She was an expert in tailing and keeping out of sight but a voice in the back of her mind told her that whatever Mark was planning to do tonight would require supervision. Her black leather-gloved hands gripped the wheel with control. As the lights from street lamps, business signs and traffic signals flowed past the Lexus, the mixed colors bounced off her silky black hair making it look like it was wet. She wore dark sunglasses even though the sun had gone down several hours ago, everything about her announced professional, dangerous, mysterious, and beautiful. She was that and much more…

AFTER TWENTY MINUTES ON the expressway, Mark made his way into a lower class residential area. He looked again at the address he had written down, making sure he did not miss the street he wanted.

East Bower Street.

Mark turned right down a tree-lined road that had apartment buildings standing on both sides of the road for about two blocks. Seeing a sign marked, 'The Birches' in the front of a large brick complex, he pulled in and drove around to the back.

There…he saw the number he was looking for, *eleven*

forty-seven, Apartment C. He pulled in a few doors down and shut off the engine. The red brick building looked worn out from years in the weather and abuse from its tenants who did not treat her with the same respect a homeowner would. Lights from scattered windows lit up the three-story complex like fireflies in a jar; all was quiet in the apartment building but not in Mark's heart.

Now what?

He pulled out the shotgun from its case and loaded it until all nine rounds were in the magazine. Pumping it, he placed it down next to him on the passenger seat. He opened the door and met a blast of bitter cold wind; he quickly made his way up the stairs to the apartment.

Apartment C faced the street, so Mark had to round the corner on the second floor landing to get to it. He noticed the porch light was on and hoped that someone was home. As he knocked, his mind raced with possibilities, and not all of them were good, but before he could go through them all, a little old woman opened the door a crack and peaked out underneath the chain lock.

"Hello, is there something I can help you with?" Her voice was weak and quivered when she spoke, and she was wearing a pink flowered nightgown that went all the way down to her wrinkled toes.

"Yes," Mark said feeling a little sorry for the old woman. "I was wondering if Pat Rotter still lives here." She looked up at Mark and nodded making her thin white hair flutter and flit like cotton balls.

"Yes, he lives here, but he's out right now. He should be back in a little bit; do you want me to tell him you stopped

by?" She squinted nervously as if she knew that Mark was not here for a cup of coffee and a conversation about the old days.

"No, I'll come back some other time," Mark thanked her and hurried off before she could ask any more questions. He pulled up his collar around his neck and shuffled back around the building and down the metal stairs toward his BMW.

Getting back into his car, he turned on the heat full blast and sat there, thinking about what to do next. He figured he could wait, he didn't want the old lady to warn him of the strange man that was looking for him, he might spook and run. He needed an answer, and it wasn't going to wait until morning.

THE WOMAN IN THE Lexus sat across the street facing the apartment where Mark had just been. She could see him sitting in his car through the breezeway, and her mind raced as she watched him from her warm car. *What was he going to do?* She had watched him purchase the gun an hour ago and thought that this might be taking things a bit too far. She sipped on a cup of warm cocoa and waited. She liked cocoa better than coffee and somehow on this miserable night it felt like the right thing to do, funny how the littlest things can put you in a better mood. She smiled…

AN HOUR PASSED AS Mark sat waiting and hoped to God that he would find some answers. *How would he know who he was? What could he tell him about the explosion?*

Mark's mind tortured him as he waited and just when he

was about to give up, he saw a car pulling up in his rearview mirror.

The little rice burner slipped on the ice as it pulled to a stop just a few spaces away from where Mark sat. The car was red, with little donut tires that did not have much tread left on them. A kid in his twenties opened up the door and got out. He was wearing a beanie cap and a thick winter coat, and he held onto a North Face backpack as he tried to lock his car door with the key, but the lock wasn't cooperating. Mark looked at the college student and from the flat skater shoes to the skinny jeans and thick messy hair, he figured he liked to skateboard rather then go to class.

Mark felt a surge of adrenaline pump through his body as he exited his car and started toward the man. Mark tried to stay calm, but it was too late for that. As he got closer, he filled with rage. He didn't know what he was going to do and his mind went blank as if he just stepped through the looking glass and now was on the other side in a world completely foreign to him.

Coming up behind the kid un-noticed, Mark grabbed the back of his jacket and spun him around. The kid staggered and a look of shock and then rage ran across his face.

"Hey! What the…" The kid stared at Mark and tried to break free, but Mark held on and shoved him against the side of his car with more force then he intended but it worked.

"Are you Pat?" Mark demanded in a flat dead tone, and just as he asked, he noticed who Pat was. His memory flooded him like a freight train on speed, as the image of a man running from a building and the same man setting the bomb in the supermarket flashed before his eyes.

It couldn't be, he died in the explosion! Nevertheless, here he stood, his face scarred from skin grafts, and surgeries, half of his mouth sagged down to one side like Batman's adversary the Joker.

"You!" Mark was enraged, took both hands, grabbed hold of the now-terrified young man, and dragged him across the parking lot.

"What do you want from me? I don't even know you, man!" The helpless kid tried to get free, but was met with a knee to the gut that sent him sprawling across the ice-covered pavement. Mark opened his car door and reached in, grabbing the shotgun, he turned toward Pat, who was trying to get up but kept slipping on the ice, between his flat shoes and the fear that tore through his body, he couldn't get any traction.

"One move—and it will be your last!" Mark was surprised at how calm his voice sounded. Inside he could feel his heart pounding faster and faster, any minute he expected a heart attack, but it never came.

Pat froze when he saw the shotgun in Mark's hand. "Hold on, man! Don't shoot!"

"Get into the car, and you might live!"

Pat nodded and slowly moved toward the BMW. Mark opened the back door and shoved Pat inside. He slammed the front door shut and got in the back, making sure to keep the shotgun pointed at Pat.

"Look, man, I don't want any trouble!"

"Too late, you should've thought of that before you blew up a Super Mart!" Mark felt his heart rate start to slow down and wondered if he was calming down or if he was just adjusting to the situation.

Pat's face went white in horror. "Uh…what are you talking about?" He stuttered and the brief pause made him sound like the world's biggest liar.

"Don't even try it, I have you on video from the store's security cameras…and I was there, I saw you!"

Pat cowered in the seat, trying to think of a way out of the mess he found himself in; Mark leaned over and shoved the end of the shotgun in Pat's neck, making him squeal out in fear.

"Now, you tell me everything you know, or I'll splatter your brains all over this car!" Mark's lip curled as he put more pressure on Pat's neck digging the end of the barrel into the side of his neck.

Pat started to whimper and tears ran down his cheeks, his shoulders shook and snot bubbled from his red nose. "It wasn't me who made the bomb, it was someone else. I just supplied the C-4; they offered me fifty grand to get them some C-4 and fifty more if I put the bomb in the store. Please don't kill me; I needed the money, please, mister…"

Mark looked at the kid who should have died in the blast and raised his voice in frustration. "Who are they?! I want names!"

"I don't know! I swear! They just call me on a cell phone that they shipped to my house," He pointed to his jacket pocket, and Mark reached in, pulling out a red cell phone.

"How do you get a hold of them?" Mark growled.

"They told me to sit on a park bench at First and Holly whenever I want to talk, or if I want to do a job. It has to be at nine a.m. on a Tuesday, if I'm there, they call me an hour later!" Pat was blubbering and his eyes puffed up making his scarred face look even more hideous in the dim moonlight.

"Well, it's your lucky day, it's almost Tuesday, and that means I still need you! Now, you're coming with me, and if you try anything, I mean anything, I'll shoot you faster then you can kiss your butt goodbye!"

Pat nodded, and Mark got out and pulled Pat around to the front of the car. Shoving him inside, he went around to the trunk and opened it up, pulling out three large zip ties. Mark got in the driver's side, told Pat to put his hands together, and slipped the zip ties around his wrists until they were tight then bound them together with the third. Mark searched him looking for any weapons but only found an *I-pod* and a small bag of pot.

Starting the car, he pulled out of the parking lot holding the shotgun across his lap pointed toward the frightened collage student's midsection. He knew if it came down to it he would kill him, this was now officially out of control, but Mark was determined to go through with it.

GEOFF SAT IN THE warm coffee shop typing on his laptop. It was already getting to be late in the afternoon and it seemed like the day was speeding by with or without them. He turned to Kirk and gave the thumbs-up, signaling that he was online and good to transmit. Kirk was on the phone with someone named Mooch, and from the sound of it, Kirk had something over him.

Kirk asked for the IP address of his laptop, which Geoff wrote down on a napkin and handed him. He hoped this was going to work, it was always hard to revive a dead case…, and Kirk was a bit of a pessimist.

"Okay. You should be getting something," Kirk said.

"Looks like a video feed from a satellite," Geoff saw a run-down building with a truck pulling in and parking behind it, just out of sight. "The picture is kind of choppy, like it's in stills."

"It is, but it's all we've got, Mooch, come on, give me something new," Kirk grumbled into the phone. "This is old; I've already seen this stuff!"

Geoff could hear the voice on the other end saying something about how Kirk would like this next shot, and then the screen changed to a single photo of a different truck. It looked like it used to be an armored transport vehicle of some kind; it was painted white with the words *Food Services* on the side.

Kirk took a sip of dark coffee and winked at the redheaded waitress when she walked by his table. "What's this? Is this the other truck?" The picture zoomed in closer and soon you could make out the shape of the driver. It was fuzzy at first but cleared up as Mooch worked on the other end. It looked like a woman with dark hair and sunglasses.

"Can you get closer, Mooch?" The screen zoomed in once more, and after it cleared up, you could see plainly, what the woman looked like. Kirk was excited, and this was a new thing for him, Geoff gathered that it did not happen very often.

"Great job, Mooch, I'll check you later," Kirk hung up the phone and asked Geoff if he could save the image.

"Sure, I have my printer docked if you want to print it."

"Yeah! That would be great!"

Geoff hit the print button and waited until the photo came out; he handed it to Kirk, and asked, "So who's the woman?"

"This friend, is our hard evidence; she's the only person who I know is connected to the WJA group and now we have a

photo to prove that I'm not crazy."

Geoff looked at the picture; the woman looked to be in her late twenties maybe early thirties and had jet-black hair. "She is beautiful, in a dangerous sort of way,"

"Yeah, well, now we need to pay our friend Cassy Meyers a little visit and see if she can find out who this woman is," Kirk waved the redhead down for a refill in a to go cup. "Let's pack up and get going, I think we can catch her before she is finished for the day."

"Sure thing. But I got one question for you,"

"What's that?"

"Can we get a rental car? I'll buy!"

Kirk laughed. "Sure…no worries," he mocked.

Chapter Thirteen

THE SUN CREPT UP OVER THE TREES OF A small park on the corner of First and Holly. Mark sat sipping on a steaming cup of coffee that he had purchased from a street vendor a block down. The air was sharp and cold but not bitter like it was last night. The wind stopped and now the sun was out, making the snow almost blinding to look at.

The long night was almost over for the scared captive who sat in the passenger side of Mark's car. He would just get his hands to stop shaking, but they would start up again every time Mark moved in his seat, which, in turn, moved the loaded shotgun.

"Calm down, it'll be over soon, as long as you play along. You're lucky I don't just kill you now, do you even know how many people you killed in that blast?"

Pat looked up at Mark with anger in his eyes. "They told

me it was just to scare them, I didn't know they were going to blow it up!"

"That, I don't believe. You knew it was a bomb, for all I know, you built it." Mark didn't believe a word that came out of his mouth, but with each passing hour he started to doubt his initial reaction. Maybe he was telling the truth, maybe this kid just made a bad judgment call and got in over his head.

"They tried to kill me, too, they're the ones who had the remote, I just activated it."

"Well, now it's your turn to pay them back for using you. You help me, and I'll let you live; you try to run or try anything, I'll take you out. You got it?"

Pat nodded and turned to look at his watch, eight a.m. Only one more hour, and then he would be rid of this mess.

Mark thought about what Pat said about the remote detonator, which meant they were within a certain distance to the bombing. They paid this numb skull to set the bomb and activate it and tried to get rid of the evidence all at the same time.

Mark reached for the radio dial to check out the news. "Gas prices are on the rise again, bringing the price at the pump to an all-time high, and with the dollar weakening against the Euro they don't expect it to go down any time soon,"

"Man, what a bunch of junk, they could just pull it all from Alaska or Texas and drop the prices, but *no*; we've got to get it from overseas," Pat rambled on about the government and how they were forcing the prices up and how it was a big conspiracy.

"Shut up and just sit there!" Mark Growled. He was not in the mood for Pat's take on life or government. He glared at

him, trying to see if this kid had any brains. It was beyond him how he could kill hundreds of people and go on as if it did not matter. He could have gone to the police and turned himself in or at least tried to make it right.

Mark sipped his coffee and looked out the window. He had to think. *How am I going to find these guys?* He needed a plan. He was going to send Pat out to sit on a bench under a tall oak tree, and then he was going to stroll through the park to see if he could spot anyone or anything out of the ordinary. If the bombers lived close by then he might see them or if they sent a goon out to the park every Tuesday, which he doubted, they would see Pat, and hopefully call him. It was a long shot but at the moment it was the only shot he had.

Mark reached in the backseat and pulled out Pat's backpack, and started to go through it. He could see Pat start to interject, but then a look from Mark made him turn back toward the window in silence.

Finding a wallet, he pulled out a driver's license and credit cards and anything else he could spot that could be useful to find Pat, in case he decided to make a run for it.

"Okay, here's the deal: I'm keeping your license and credit cards, so if you think of running, I'll find you and report you to the police. There is a video of you setting the bomb, and soon there will be a warrant out for your arrest, but if you run, you better pray that the cops find you before I do." Mark lied about the video, it was real but his copy was no longer working. Pat did not know that and he didn't think Pat was smart enough to ask to see proof.

"I won't run, besides I wouldn't mind giving them a little piece of my mind after they tried to kill me and all!" Pat ran

his fingers over the deep scars that covered his face. "Not like I can hide, anyway, everyone stares at me like I'm a freak with these scars."

"It's almost nine, you go sit on the bench, and I'm going to keep an eye on you from that bench across the way there," Mark pointed to a bench that sat about one hundred yards from the one Pat would be sitting on. "How long do you have to wait?"

"About ten minutes and then I would leave, and they would call about an hour later."

"You better be right, if we don't get a call, then I'll know you are a lying coward." Mark opened the car door and went around to Pat's side. After he got out, Mark cut the zip ties, freeing his hands. Pat rubbed them, started across the street, and sat down on the snow-covered bench.

Mark walked around on the sidewalk to the crosswalk, taking the long way to the other side of the park. The park was a whole block long with slides and swings in the center of a playground. The old oak trees and trimmed shrubs made a beautiful picture with the fresh blanket of snow covering the ground, but Mark was not in the mood to enjoy the scenery.

After Mark made his way to the other side of the park, he sat down on a bench and looked across the park to keep an eye on Pat. Mark grabbed a newspaper on his way across the street and began to flip through it as if he were reading. He glanced at his watch and noticed it was two minutes to nine.

Looking around, he noticed through the trees a four-story apartment building that faced First Street, and also looked down on the park bench. The windows had small balconies with wrought iron rails. Mark inspected each window for

movement; he glanced up from his paper trying to check out each one in-between reading.

When he got to the third floor, he spotted something. His heart raced as he watched a man open the window and light up a cigarette. He was wearing a wool sweater and had unkempt hair that stuck up in weird places and was smashed down in others. He looked around as he drew in the nicotine and blew out a ring of smoke. His eyes scanned the park and spotted Pat sitting, shivering in the cold. Mark could tell that this upset the man as he quickly went back into the apartment.

Could this be one of the killers? Mark tried to keep calm; he needed to be sure. The man came back to the window, but this time he had a cell phone to his ear. Mark looked at Pat to see if he was on the phone too. Mark's heart skipped a beat as he looked at Pat.

He wasn't.

He must be on the phone with someone else; Pat just sat there hunched over, shivering with his coat pulled up around him. The window closed, and the stranger disappeared. Another five minutes went by and nothing more happened. Mark got up, rolled the paper up under his arm, and headed back to the car. When Pat saw him across the street, he got up and came toward him.

"Get in,"

Pat opened up the passenger side door and got in, and then shut the door behind him. Mark started up the engine and turned the heater on high; it was waiting time. Pat didn't say anything, he just sat there shivering and holding his hands over the heater vent.

Pulling out into the street, Mark turned left down one block and pulled into the alley right behind the apartment

building. The car stopped behind a large dumpster that sat off to the side of the alleyway. The green dumpster had thick brown grime on the lip and running down the sides. The back of the building had a covered patio where tenants could park their cars, and there were about ten vehicles parked in a row all the way down the alley.

Mark could see steam coming from the back of a grey pickup truck down the row about fifty feet from where Mark and Pat sat. He could not explain it but Mark knew that the truck belonged to the man in the window. He was going somewhere.

Then the truck backed out and started down the alley away from them, heading for the street. Mark could tell from his viewpoint that it was the same man who stood in the window. His hair stuck up on one side, and smoke trailed out from the cracked window of the truck.

Mark tailed him through the city and onto the expressway. They made their way toward the Rockefeller State Park where many hikers would spend the summer to get away from the city. The drive took two hours and forty-five minutes, until trees filled the sides of the road and up along the mountains.

"Ring-ring." Pat's phone rang making both of them jump. Mark handed the phone to Pat and glared at him with a look that said what Pat already knew, *'Be cool, and don't set them off.'* Pat opened the phone and answered.

"Hello,"

"What do you want?" The gruff voice filled the car as Pat turned on the speakerphone.

"I need my money."

"What money do you think you're getting?"

"You said to set the bomb and I would get paid fifty grand and now I want my money! Or we can just talk to the police to see what they think about it." Mark looked at Pat, half-impressed at his boldness when just a short time ago he was cowering and snotting all over the leather seats.

"Well, we thought you were dead, with a year going by and not hearing from you," The man sounded confused as to how Pat could have made it through the blast.

"Well, I was in the hospital and just got out a few weeks ago. Don't think I don't know what you tried to do!"

"Don't get all hot with me, kid. You just shut up and listen," The man on the other end did not like being accused of anything. "I'll get you your money; do you remember the KOA campground where you met us the first time?

"Yeah, I know the one, the same one you used to get me the package?"

"That's the one. You go past that, and you will see a road off to your left, a dirt road. Take that, and it will take you to a cabin about a mile down that dirt road. Meet us there in two hours, and you'll get what's coming to you."

Pat hung up the phone and handed it back to Mark. "Yeah I'll get it, all right."

"They'll kill you, you know," Mark said.

"Yeah, I figured, so now what?"

"Well, you see that sign up ahead?" Pat sat up and looked as a KOA sign came into view.

"Guess we'll be a little early."

"Yup," Mark saw a dirt road coming up on the left, and the truck they were following disappeared. "So you better pick whose side you are on, because it might get ugly."

"You do what you've got to do; I'll stay in the car." Pat said. Maybe the kid was not as dumb as he looked after all.

KIRK LOOKED UP AT the CSI building from the rental car that Geoff had rented for them earlier that morning. It was a dark blue Ford Mustang with a sunroof and all the extras. The CSI office looked a lot different than he had imagined it would look. The walls were brick with a simple design and two small windows on either side of a single glass front door. The building was a one story square box with bad landscaping in the front and a bent handicap sign looking at them sideways through the early morning air.

Geoff opened his door, got out, and started to walk up to the front door. He looked back at Kirk making a cloud of steam, which he puffed out, and motioned for him to hurry up. They had caught an overnight flight from Detroit and had arrived a few hours before daybreak. Kirk was beginning to like having Geoff along; he could always get cars or good deals on hotel rooms, with a discount through the magazine he worked for, but he would never tell him that.

As they went inside, a withered middle-aged receptionist who had a bad case of smoker's voice met them. She greeted them with a half smile and pointed them in the direction of Cassy's office.

The inside of the building was bland and small, the lights flickered off and on from lack of maintenance, and the pictures on the walls looked like they were from the 70's. They came to a wooden door that had a sign posted on it that read Cassy Meyers. Kirk knocked and was greeted by Cassy, who just

looked at him without expression.

"May I help you?" she said.

"Yeah, I wanted to go over an old case with you," Kirk forgot that he looked a lot different than he did a year ago. "It's me, Kirk Weston."

She looked at him as if trying to remember who he was. By the look on her face, Kirk knew he would need to help out. Pulling back his hair and smashing his beard down he scowled and pushed out his belly, trying to look fatter than he really was. "This ring any bells? I lost weight, and I need a shave and a hair cut."

Cassy looked confused, and then smiled as she recognized who he was. "Oh, Detective Weston! You were on the David's Island case, right?"

"Yeah, that's the one,"

"Okay, wow, you do need a shave, and a haircut. For a minute I thought you were a bum looking for a handout. The weight looks nice, what did you do, go on some boot-camp diet thing?"

Kirk chuckled. "Something like that."

Cassy stood up and pointed to the two chairs in front of her desk, motioning for them to sit down. "So who is this?"

Geoff held out his hand and smiled, making his patchy beard crinkle. "I'm Geoff, a friend of Mr. Weston, good to meet you."

"And you, so what brings you down my way, Detective?" She sat down behind a cluttered desk in a big, black, high-backed chair. The office was about ten feet wide and just as deep. Pictures covered the walls and were tacked up with pushpins and tape; they looked like something you would see

under a microscope, with blood samples and pictures of hairs and fingerprints and a few Kirk couldn't place.

"Well, I wanted to get some information about the case and see everything you gathered during your investigation. I'm trying to tie up a few loose ends and wondered if you have anything on it still lying around?"

"Hmmm, well, I think I have the file still, but most of it I gave to the FBI after we were done with it. I might have something, though. Hold on, I'll go look."

She got up and walked over to a tall file cabinet that sat in the corner of her small office. Opening up the second drawer, she flipped through some files until she came to the right one. "Yup, here it is, or at least my findings, anyway."

Closing the drawer, she sat down again, opened it up, and went through the papers inside. "So I thought this case was closed. Did they reopen it?"

Geoff jumped in. "No, we have reason to believe that there is something else going on, but the FBI deemed it as an accident of food poisoning. We just wanted to find out what you think based on what you discovered."

She looked at Geoff and then back at the file. "Well, I did find it odd with all the evidence that I uncovered that they would still come to the conclusion that it was an accident."

"What did you find out about the second drug? Did you ever find traces of it in the victims?" Kirk asked.

"No, but we did find something interesting in the sewn-in notes. They are made of a cloth that we can't trace. It is some sort of disintegrating fabric. Most of our samples are gone with only a few pieces of thread left."

"Weird," Kirk rubbed his long beard. "Is it toxic in any

way?"

"You know, we didn't check it for toxicity, but that is a good idea, I didn't think to check seeing as it was not food or anything that they could consume." Cassy looked at the file and thought for a brief moment. "You know, if it puts off a gas or fume of some sort as it disintegrates, that could be the missing piece of the puzzle!"

Jumping up from her chair, she asked Kirk and Geoff to follow her. She walked out of her office and down the hall, where she led them to a long staircase that led down to the basement. The basement looked like it belonged to a bachelor, not a branch of the police force. Boxes were stacked along the walls and the air smelled like mothballs and old dust.

Flipping on the lights, she hurried over to a small room off to the right that was filled with metal locking drawers. They looked like security boxes, but a little bigger in size. Looking at the numbers on the front of each one, she ran her finger down to one almost at the bottom.

"Got it."

Pulling out a small key that was taped to the inside of the file that she had carried down with her, she opened the box and pulled it out. Inside was a small plastic bag with a few strings of off-white thread in it. "This is all that's left of them; I think I have enough to run a few tests on it."

"Great. How long will it take?" Kirk asked

"A few hours, you can wait, if you like, or come back. I'll run them right now,"

"We'll stop by in one hour; we still need to run a few errands." Kirk thanked Cassy, and they headed back up the staircase and out to their rental car.

After they were on the road, Geoff looked over at Kirk and

asked, “What do you think?”

“Well, it could be the break we need, but we still really don’t know how they died. And one thing confuses me,”

“What’s that?”

“If they handed over all that evidence, why did they ignore all the signs that led to foul play? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“It is a little odd, with the note and all. You would think that they would jump all over a thing like that.” Geoff shook his head then looked out the window.

“I think we need to find out exactly who had access to that file in the FBI.”

“And how do you plan to do that?”

“Not sure yet, but I’ll find a way.”

Chapter Fourteen

THE DIRT ROAD SHOWED A FRESH SET OF TIRE tracks leading through the snow that covered most of the road like a white blanket. The rolling hills were covered with pine trees and patches of quaking aspen running up the draws. The dirt road looked more like a goat trail and the ruts were deep but with the packed snow, it made it possible for Mark's BMW to make it through without scraping the bottom of the undercarriage. Mark drove slow over the crunching snow and wondered what he was going to do if he found what he was looking for. He knew without hand delivering the criminals to the police himself, the case would stay closed and lost to the memories of the public, and then again he wondered if there was something else going on, some sort of cover-up to protect someone or something.

He went over the items he had put in his car right after he

had the conversation with Detective Owens, the one where he was all but told to never come back and to forget about the so-called accident. Zip-ties, a shovel, and some plastic, he also filled a gas can with gasoline and had a lighter in his pocket, which he bought from the Zip Trip. He didn't smoke so he bought a pack of Marlboro lights just to make it look like a normal thing to purchase a lighter and a gas can full of gasoline, you just never know. He thought of how crazy he must be to go into an unknown place where there were people who thought it was okay to bomb supermarkets.

His adrenaline started pumping when he saw a cabin down in a small valley at the end of the winding road. The road crested a small hill, and then dropped down to the other side spilling out into a small valley that was tree lined on all sides. The log cabin had smoke billowing from the stacked stone chimney and a few out buildings off to the west side, one looked like a storage shed and the other one looked like it was an outhouse. Mark found a wide spot in the road and pulled the car off as far as he dared, he could not afford to get stuck, just in case things got bad.

Mark sat in silence for a moment trying to gather his thoughts; he remembered how K smelled and that special smile that she saved for him only and how he felt with her in his arms. He thought about Samantha and her blond hair bouncing as she ran to meet him at the door after a long day at work. She was so innocent and perfect, so full of life and now she was dead and nothing in the world would bring her back. Mark flipped on the radio, tuning it until he found a station that was playing opera; he did not know why but in times of stress, it was the only music that seemed to clear his head. He

closed his eyes and listened as the rich sound filled the car.

After a few minutes, Mark shut the car down, got out, and took the keys with him. He walked around to the passenger side and opened the door, and pulled out two fresh zip-ties from his pocket.

"Hands,"

"Come on, I'll be good, I swear!" Pat squealed.

Mark grabbed Pat's wrist, slipped a zip-tie around them, and reached across the seat, attaching his wrist to the steering wheel. "You better be here when I get back," Slamming the door shut, Mark popped the trunk and grabbed a handful of shotgun rounds and shoved them into his pocket.

The shotgun sat in the back seat where it waited to see some action like a bomb ticking away for the exact moment to explode. Mark put a few more zip-ties in his other pocket and shut the trunk lid. Opening the back door, he grabbed the shotgun and asked Pat if he knew how many there might be.

"Don't know—I only saw three, but there could be more."

Three.

Mark shut the door and started down the road on foot cradling the shotgun in the crook of his left arm. After about ten minutes of hiking and moving from tree to tree in the crispy snow, Mark could see the cabin through the trees, standing backed up to the side of a mountain that closed off the small valley. The snow was too loud next to the road so Mark made his way deeper into the woods in order to keep hidden from view of the cabin windows and anyone who might be looking out.

His heart was racing as he crouched in the snow holding his shotgun in one hand. The cabin was just beyond the next

row of pine trees. He could see the gray pickup truck sitting next to a brown Chevy extended cab that was even more beat-up than the gray one.

Mark studied the cabin and the trucks for a few minutes and didn't see any movement coming from either. He pulled up his collar on his jacket as he made his way closer to the cabin. He could see smoke coming from the stone chimney and a stack of wood sitting next to the front door, it had the faint odor of coffee and hickory.

The cabin looked like any other log cabin Mark had seen in the woods on the drive down; he even used to go to one similar to this one when he was a kid back home on summer vacation with his parents. The place was square and only had a main living room and one bathroom. Some of the nicer ones had a separate bedroom, but most of them just had bunk beds in one corner, which made up the sleeping area.

Angry violent thoughts flooded Mark's mind as he made a dash for the gray pickup, and as he got to it, he slid to the ground and crawled under the truck. His heart all at once went down to a normal heart rate and his nerves calmed down, his breathing slowed and his blue eyes sharpened.

In one quick movement, he rolled under both trucks, stopped at the edge of the front porch, and looked up at the clear blue sky as he lay on his back in the dirt and snow. Jumping to his feet, he leaped onto the porch, without a sound and lowered his shoulder, and went crashing through the front door like a raging bull.

The three men inside sat stunned for a brief second as Mark broke through, sending wood splinters flying and flooded the dimly lit cabin with bright sunlight. Two men sat

at a rough-cut wooden table with bits and pieces of wire and material for a bomb that looked just about completed. The third man, who was the driver of the gray pickup, sat in front of the TV and turned his shaggy head toward the door as Mark broke through.

As Mark went through the door, he hit the floor and rolled to the left, coming up in a smooth action to his feet and lowered his shotgun aiming it at the two men sitting at the table.

The two men jumped up like a fire ant had just bitten them, and the third man ducked down to the floor behind the couch knocking over the beer he was drinking.

"Don't move—or I'll shoot!" Mark commanded.

The two men at the table threw up their hands when they saw the shotgun pointed at their chests.

"Get up from behind that couch or your friends will get it, from what I hear, a riot gun will do the job!"

The third raised his hands from behind the couch; he hollered something about being unarmed as he slowly stood up.

"Come over here and sit at the table, and keep your hands where I can see them."

The three surprised men sat down at the table as Mark walked around and stood in front of them in-between the open doorway and the bomb parts, He leveled the shotgun at the thick man on the far left. Mark's face was cold and hard as he glared at the three men and the look of rage and complete control made the three men do exactly as he said. They knew the look and it was the look of a man with nothing to lose.

"Now, here's how this is going to happen: You're going to answer with a yes or a no. If you try to move or do anything that sets me off, you will all die. Got it?"

The three men nodded.

"Now, first—you on the right stand up and empty any weapons you might have onto the table,"

The man had on a red, tattered flannel shirt and ripped blue jeans from which he pulled a six-inch long hunting knife. Slowly reaching down to his boot, drew out a revolver, and placed it on the table. After he was finished, Mark had the next man do the same, then the third, until the table had a pile of pistols and knives on it.

"Now, if any of you feel the need, you go ahead and reach for one of those guns, but I would strongly advise against it." He took the shotgun and fired off a round in the air, sending wood chips and dust through the dank cabin and it rained down on the three angry captives.

No one made a move.

Mark glared at the men as they sat with their hands up and looks of surprise and confusion on their faces. They looked like a bunch of wild hogs that were just waiting for the right moment to stampede. Mark could see the door to the bathroom, the kitchen off to the left and steam rising from a pot of water that was boiling on the stove. The place was empty and stank of burnt metal and old coffee.

Moving toward the left as he kept the gun pointed at his prisoners, he walked over to the stove and pulled off the pot of boiling water, and held it in one hand. Mark looked down at the boiling water as he spoke in a calm low voice. "First question, and don't bother lying to me,"

They glared up at him with shooting glances at each other not sure who this half insane guy was and wondering if they could take him. "Did you have a kid named Pat steal C-4 for

you?"

The three heads turned to look at each other, trying to decide who was going to speak and how their little secret had gotten out.

"No." A slim man in the middle spoke up, he had a long sleeved brown shirt on and a thick black beard that made him look like a mountain man. He looked to be the leader of the group and from the size of his arms; he looked like he was an old time logger. Mark shook his head in disappointment as he moved over to the messy haired drivers who sat on the end closest to the kitchen. Standing behind him, he pushed the shotgun barrel up against his neck and the driver squirmed and shifted nervously in his seat.

"I'll ask again," Mark lowered his voice and narrowed his eyes at the leader of the group. He didn't wait a second before he growled out the same response.

Mark took the hot boiling water, and without hesitation, he turned it over on the messy-haired driver's head. The driver cowered in pain and writhed screaming out as the water blistered his skin and sent him crashing to the floor like a sack of potatoes. Mark grabbed the back of his coat and pulled him back up into his chair. His body shook in pain as he tried to brush the hot water off his arms and head.

The driver wiggled in anger and obvious pain, trying to figure out a way to get free from Mark's iron grip. Mark quickly moved around to the front of the table, pointed the gun right in the face of the leader, and growled, "You move, and you die! Now, I'll ask one last time, and this time you better tell me the truth!" Mark was yelling now and his blood was thumping in his ears as he stared into the dark brown eyes of

one of his wife's killers.

"Okay! Yes! Yes, we did," The red flannel spoke up from the other end glancing at his partner who was turning red as a lobster and whimpering in agony.

"Good, see, that wasn't so hard, now was it?" Mark could feel his instincts taking over; he could predict every move as if he had done this before in some other lifetime. He felt like he did at the gun range where the things he needed to know just came to him like a sixth sense.

"Two, did you make a bomb then have Pat put it in the Super Mart?" Mark backed up from the table one-step and pointed the shotgun in the air.

"Screw you!" The leader spit toward Mark as Mr. Red flannel reached for one of the pistols on the table.

Bringing the gun down, Mark leaned forward and pulled the trigger just as the barrel touched the heavyset man's hand. He screamed and pulled his hand back, clutching the now bloody stump where his hand used to be, blood spurted up like a leaky pipe and he stared at it in shock and horror.

"Don't push me!" Mark pumped another round into the chamber and looked down the barrel at the leader of the group. "You want to die?" His voice gritted with anger.

He shook his head and looked over at his friend who was trying to stop the bleeding with his belt. "Yes, we had him plant the bomb!" the leader yelled out in frustration and rising anger.

"Last question and we will be done," Mark walked over behind the three men, leaned down and almost whispered. "Who detonated the bomb?"

The room went silent and even the panting from the hand-

less fat man stilled, as the full weight of what was happening to them sunk in.

No one spoke as Mark placed the cold steel against the back of the handless man's head. "Was it you?"

Whimpering in pain, he shook his head no and Mark slid the barrel over to the driver of the gray pickup truck and put it to the back of his head asking again. "Was it you?"

His neck was blistered up in great white boils and one broke open as Mark pushed the shotgun to the back of his scalded neck. He shook his head no and hunched over trying to pull away from the still warm barrel. Mark grinned as he put the barrel of the shotgun to the back of the black bearded leader's head.

"So it was *you!*"

Leaning down and whispering in his ear, Mark said, "You killed my wife. You killed my daughter!"

The room fell silent once again as Mark stood up and looked at his three captives, at the back of their twisted perverted filthy heads! Mark turned the gun over, and slammed down the stock on the back of the leader's head. He slumped over, and his face slammed against the table with a dull thud.

Slipping around to the front of the table, Mark pulled out a few zip-ties. "Tie your hands, one to each of his," pointing at the unconscious man. They each tied one of their hands to the man sitting next to him, one to the right, and one to the left. The fat man in red had a hard time zipping the tie tight without fingers and the driver reached over to help him. After they finished, they looked up at Mark with anger flashing in their eyes. The fat one on the end was looking pale from loss of blood, but he just gritted his teeth, determined not to let it

show. The driver had one eye swelled shut and his messy hair was now hanging in wet clumps over half of his blistered face.

Mark walked over to the kitchen stove and ripped the gas line from out of the wall. A hissing sound came from the gas line as it began to fill the air with toxic gas. He went over to the table and picked up the almost-finished bomb that they were working on. Placing it on the stove, he looked over at the men who sat staring at him.

"Justice will be done today!"

Mark turned, with his back turned to the two conscious men; he stopped for a brief second, and then walked out the front door and onto the porch.

Just as Mark was about to step off the porch, he saw something out of the corner of his eye.

A third truck!

Mark saw a glimmer of steel from the corner of his eye; the shadow of a man stood about one foot away from Mark on the porch crouching, waiting for him to emerge.

Like a bolt of lightning, Mark dropped to the ground and rolled toward the figure, grabbing his ankles. Pulling with everything in him, he knocked the man to the floor, sending a pistol flying into the snow a few feet away.

The man grunted as he hit the ground, and like a tiger on a wounded deer, Mark leaped on top of the man. In one quick movement, he punched the man in the throat, crushing his windpipe. Mark stood up as the man gasped for breath and clutched his throat and wiggled like a fish out of water kicking his legs trying to get a lungful of life-giving air. He stiffened his back and his eyes bulged from his head as a final gasp of air escaped his lungs; then he lay still.

Dead.

Picking up his shotgun, Mark ran as fast as he could back down the road to where he had parked his car.

THE LEADER, WHO MARK rendered unconscious, began to stir, and his head throbbed from the knot on the back of his head. Coming to, he tried to rub the back of his head but found that he was attached to his partners on both sides with thick white zip-ties. Reaching for a gun on the table, he grabbed one and jumped up as the other two protested and tried to grab the gun from him twisting and pulling his hands like a three-headed dragon fighting for ultimate control.

"No…" he growled.

In an effort to get free, the big, gruff man who had led this group for the last nine years turned in confusion and pulled the trigger, sending a bullet through the skull of the scruffy driver splattering blood across the kitchen floor.

MARK FELT THE FAMILIAR heat on his back just as the earth shattering sound of an explosion raced through his ears. The force of the blast almost pushed him to the ground, even though he was a good hundred yards away but he managed to stay on his feet. He turned to see a ball of fire coming from the cabin and covering the trucks that sat in a row and then one by one, the trucks exploded with a thunderous KaBoom!

Mark turned and kept on running as panic overcame him and his heart rate sped back up, almost causing him to scream. His lungs felt like they were going to explode as he saw his car

and the fear in the back of his mind were confirmed. The passenger door was open and he could see a blood stain in the snow with Pat's hand dangling from the open door like a white flag.

Falling to the ground, Mark sobbed and held his head in his hands. He was so overcome with emotion, he did not know what do. He felt relief and rage all at the same time, his mind reeled, and his body trembled as he cried.

Struggling to his feet, he wiped his eyes and walked over to his car. Inside, he could see the single gunshot wound in Pat's chest oozing blood, he was slumped over, almost falling out onto the snow, but was held back by the zip-tie that Mark had tied to the steering wheel.

"Get it together, Mark!" Breathing in deep, he cut Pat loose and dragged him out of the car and onto the side of the road, where he covered him over with snow.

Getting into the car, he started the engine and headed back toward the main road.

ISIS SAT IN HER dark Lexus and enjoyed the view of the white snow covered mountains as she drove toward the cabin where Mark had just left. She could see dark, thick smoke rising from the tree line off to her left. Her thoughts wandered a little, but were brought back to reality when she saw Mark's car coming toward her.

"Just be calm," she whispered to herself, and as if she did not exist, he passed her without even seeming to notice. She looked at a small screen on her phone showing a map of the area. The dirt road coming up on the left was the one she

needed.

As she turned on to the rough dirt road, she pushed a small button on the dashboard. A red light went on, and outside the car, small studs grew from the tires like cat claws.

She drove on.

The sight of blood on the side of the road was bright against the snow and she slowed and looked around, then spotted a pile of snow off in the ditch. Pulling out a set of black sunglasses, she put them on and looked through the snow to see the dead body of one Pat Rotter. She knew him from the profile she had in Mark's file and was not half-shocked that he ended up this way.

Turning a small dial on the earpiece of her sunglasses, she could see in polarized vision. This cut down on the glare of the bright snow. She kept going until the cabin came into view—or what was left of it.

The fire was still burning the remains of the three vehicles in the front of the now gutted cabin. All four walls were blown apart from the force of the blast; everything was black and charred as smoke rose to the sky from the ruined cabin.

She stopped the car and stepped out to get a closer look at the destruction. Examining the cabin floor, she could see parts of the couch and the bottom of where a fireplace used to be. No one had survived the explosion, between the gas and the C-4 that was in the house, the heat consumed anything that would burn like a hungry lion after catching a lonely gazelle.

Walking up to where a section of the porch was still intact, she saw a charred hand sticking out from under the rubble. Looking through her glasses, she could see that was all that was left of him.

Pulling out her cell phone, she hit send button until she heard the voice on the other end. “It’s done,” she said.

“Good, you know what to do; do we need a clean-up crew?” The man’s voice was firm, confident.

“Yeah, we have one whole left, but the partials will be okay.”

“Okay, I’ll send them right away.”

Placing the cell back in her coat pocket, she walked back to her car. After she made it back to the main road, she put in a CD of Giulio Gari. A smile crossed her face as the sweet sound filled her ears.

Chapter Fifteen

GEOFF LOOKED BORED SITTING IN THE waiting area of a small barbershop. He flipped through a magazine as Kirk got a shave from an old, haggard barber. The pile of hair grew with each stroke of the razor as the old shaven Kirk came through. The shop had three chairs and was owned by the old man who now worked with steady hands. He was known as Big Bill and his son Billy looked on from the second chair where he sat watching and staring off into space as if to question his choices in life.

The old barber was anything but big, he stood five-foot six and resembled a toothpick that was now bent over with age. His white well-trimmed hair and wrinkled face told thousands of stories if someone was only to ask. He worked with skill as he finished up with a warm cloth, cleaning off the leftover shaving cream from Kirk's face. He had shaved Kirk's head

just the way he liked it, no more *missing link*.

"There you go, son." The old man hunched over as he put away his razor and Billy who was not as fortunate in the hair department ran a hand over his own baldhead.

"What do I owe you?" Kirk asked.

"Forty-five dollars,"

Kirk pulled out some cash from his pocket and handed it to the thin old man, then took his coat off the coat rack and looked at Geoff motioning him to follow him. A tiny bell rang as they left and the door closed behind them with a small clunk. The air felt extra cold on Kirk's now baldhead and smooth face; he ran his hand over his head and reached inside of his coat, and pulled out an old beanie. He pulled it low over his ears and hunched his shoulders against the bitter winter's breath.

"What now, boss?" Geoff asked.

"We head back to the crime lab and see what Cassy found out. I think she might be able to tell us something about our mystery lady, as well."

The day looked warm, with the sun shining and not a cloud in the sky; but it was deceiving, a downright cold knife like wind cut up the boxed in city streets like a tunnel and when you stepped out into its path it would take your breath away. Kirk liked the rental car better than his open motorbike, but he still grumbled about all the gas it took.

The CSI building stood alone with a parking lot in the front as well as in the rear of the building. Kirk parked the car in the back lot and proceeded to go inside with Geoff in tow.

The old receptionist nodded them back, and they went down the long, dingy stairs to the basement. They could see

Cassy looking through a microscope at something and she didn't look up as they came down the stairs. The room was open in the middle and had tables covered with all kinds of equipment, glass test tubes and machines that could test blood samples. Clean white tables that had under lighting so you could see what you were looking at from all directions. The place was jammed with boxes, file cabinets and a host of other storage devices, but everything was in order, not messy, just in dire need of a bigger room.

Cassy Meyers looked up when she felt Kirk breathing over her shoulder. "Hi guys, you won't believe what I found." Her smile lit up the room, which was a pleasant addition next to the clutter and dim blinking lights.

"What? Please tell me you have good news," Kirk said.

"I think you'll be pleased," She said with a twinkle in her eye. "The sample of cloth came back with no poison or any other substance in it, but I looked closer and found that this string from the cloth notes isn't cloth at all!" She motioned to the white single strand of string that lay in a round dish under the microscope.

"Really? What is it?" Geoff leaned over to look in the microscope.

Cassy pointed at a stool for Kirk to sit on and placed an open book in front of him. "See this here? It's a form of plastic and acid mix of some kind that eats away at the material. When the cloth starts to deteriorate, it put off a gas that the inmates breathed in as they slept."

Kirk looked puzzled. "So this gas stuff is what killed them?"

"No, by itself it is nontoxic; but I ran a few tests, and guess

what could be mixed with it to make it a lethal?"

Kirk shook his head.

"*Botconie*," Cassy looked at Geoff and Kirk, expecting them to understand what she was saying. "Okay. Remember that theory we talked about last year, about how every drug has its partner opposite?"

"Yeah, so what?"

"Well, Botconie is the partner to the anti-drug that was found in all the guards, it acts like a repellent to Dypethline,"

Geoff looked even more confused then Kirk did. "So what are you saying?"

"I'll just tell you what I think happened. The pillows somehow had this note put in them, over time, it filled the prison with a gas that could not be smelled or detected, and then the antidote, if you will was administered to the guards through their coffee, seeing as the guards have their own pot in their private break room, which is inaccessible to the inmates. The food was injected with Botconie, and when it mixed with the gas, it caused anyone who had it in their system to die instantly."

Kirk looked over at Geoff and nodded. "You're one smart cookie, Cassy, how did you come up with all this?"

"Easy, I mixed the samples of coffee with the sample of the note and nothing happened. I found traces of Dypethline in the coffee back when I was first on the case, and it was in the file with all my other findings."

"So the gas had been pumped into their systems, and the coffee drinkers were saved. I guess coffee does have its advantages."

"Yeah, and lucky for them, all the guards drink coffee, or

we would have a few dead guards too. Whoever did this did their homework, not one guard or any other staff member down to the janitor was hurt. I do have some bad news, though, with all the tests I had to run, I don't have anything left of our note sample, which leaves us without any hard evidence outside of our own testimony."

Kirk scratched his head, trying to figure out a way to get something hard to nail this case shut. "What we need is a witness and to find out who is behind all this. That's the only way we will get this to stick and without something concrete we are still standing with nothing more then a fancy story."

Kirk pulled out a photo of the mystery woman and handed it to Cassy. "You think you can look in your computers and find me a match?"

She looked at the photo and nodded. "It's worth a shot," She took the photo and scanned it into the computer. "NCIC will pull up anyone who has any kind of criminal record. It matches facial structure and bone lines, so even if they change their looks, it can tell with a ninety four percent accuracy rate who they are or were."

The pictures flipped over on the screen with the original on the left side. The screen ran through for about five minutes, as the three looked on, hoping to hit something.

Beep.

The sound jerked Kirk to attention. The screen flashed a sign, which read 'No Matches Found.' "Crap!" Kirk tried to think. "Can you access all past and present government employees?"

Cassy nodded. "Sure, hold on…this will pull up anyone in the CIA, FBI or any other government program."

Geoff wondered aloud. "You think she might work for the FBI?"

"Well, the file was given to the FBI. Nothing was done about it, even though the evidence was clear that this was no accident, so I think somewhere along the line it was compromised," Kirk said as he looked at Cassy. "Who did you give the file to, exactly?"

"I gave it to Jenkins; he delivers all the files for our office to wherever they go, but it couldn't be him; he is the last person in the world that would be in on some sort of cover-up."

"Why are you so sure?" Geoff asked.

"I've known him for like ten years; he is very loyal; I trust him with my life."

"Okay, I still want to talk to him and see who he delivered that file to and everyone who had access to it in the FBI." Kirk rubbed his chin. "Is he here now?"

"No, he'll be in tomorrow, he had to go to the dentist today, and so I gave him the day off." Cassy turned her head to the side as if just noticing, "Oh, and nice shave, by the way!"

"Oh, thanks—the beard was a little out there for me."

Beep.

The screen flashed up the same message from before, *No Matches Found.* Kirk tried not to show how frustrated he was getting. *There had to be something else*, "Think, what else can we try? She has to be there somewhere!"

Cassy looked down at her keyboard deep in thought. "I could try one other thing, but it is a little on the—well, how do I put this? Risky!"

"I can do risky, what do you got?" Kirk perked up.

"There is a *top secret* project database we can run it

against. It will pull up any active duty or underground programs that the government is running or used to run, but if they find out I hacked in, I'm dead meat!"

Geoff looked worried. "It isn't worth it, you could lose your job, and we don't even know if we will get a hit."

Kirk looked angry as he leaned over, looking Cassy dead in the eye. "Please, I need to find this woman; she is our only lead left. Without her, we're finished!"

Cassy thought for a minute. "Okay, I'll do it, but you better cover me if the fur hits the fan."

"Great!" Kirk said.

Typing in a series of commands, she pulled up a page filled with file names and a search box, and started running the list against the photo. Pictures flipped past the screen, and then suddenly stopped when a message in green flashed up on the screen: *'Positive Match.'*

"Yes!" Kirk jumped up when he saw the message. "Isis Kanika—that's her, for sure, that's her!" Kirk was beyond excited and the likeness was undeniable.

Cassy read the bio from off the screen. "Looks like she used to work for the FIA, which is an intelligence agency based in foreign countries, mainly in European countries. They were disbanded about ten years ago, and she was killed in action on a mission in Paris but no body was ever recovered. Well, we know that's not the case, my bet is that she went rogue, and no one knows who she is working for now."

Geoff kept reading. "She was an assassin with over thirty-five confirmed kills, with training in hand-to-hand combat as well as heavy weapons. Boy, I'd hate to be on her bad side."

The list went on for twenty more pages with notes on her

assignments and what missions she carried out. Kirk shook his head. "So we have a professional on our hands, and she isn't working alone; I am sure of it… That's weird, it looks like she was born in Egypt and moved here to the States after she entered the program."

"What is this program supposed to do…err, what was it doing?" Geoff asked.

"They—as far as I can tell, would go in under the radar and carry out hits for the military. However, what is unnerving is that this program seemed to be shut down for doing some sort of experimentation on its soldiers." Cassy scrolled down, trying to see if she could see anything more about the now dead program.

Kirk leaned back on his stool and tried to clear his head. This program must have set her off somehow and what was it doing that would cause the same government who set it up to shut it down. Something must have gone wrong. "Can you print off her information for me?"

"Sure, and if you know a good hacker, you might want them to look up anything on this so-called agency. The code name that is in her file is *Black Widow*. I'm not sure if that will help you, but it's a start."

"You've been a great help, Cassy." Geoff smiled and shook her hand.

Kirk took the papers from off the printer and nodded in agreement, as he walked from the printer. "Thanks for everything; I'll keep in touch, if you find out anything more, give me a call."

"No problem. I just hope you can find out who is responsible. Who knows what else they are capable of." Cassy

walked with them up the stairs and waved as they walked down the hall toward the front door.

THE FIREPLACE ROARED WITH flames as they licked up the leftovers of Mark's clothes, coat, and anything else that he thought might have blood or DNA to trace him back to the cabin explosion. The warm heat drifted over Mark's face as he lay crumpled up on the floor in his apartment. He didn't know what to do or say or think; he just let his mind go blank, thinking about absolutely nothing.

He had driven straight home and ran up to his place, grabbing a bottle of carpet cleaner and bleach from under the kitchen sink. The blood came out with ease from the leather seats, but the floor mats were a different story. They ended up in the fireplace along with the clothes Mark was wearing.

After scrubbing out his car, he dragged himself to the elevator and up to his apartment. He was exhausted and drained of everything in him. His mind was racing as he saw the cabin exploding in his head over and over again. *What had he done?* He tried to feel guilty about the last two days, but he could not. He knew that this was the only justice his family would ever see but somehow he did not feel better and at the same time, he felt like a huge weight had been lifted off his shoulders.

After an hour, he passed out in front of the fireplace and did not wake up until the next morning. He looked around, trying to wake up from this nightmare, but it was not all in his head; it was real. Making his way to the kitchen, he started the coffee pot and jumped into the shower. The water seemed to clear his head as he began to notice something—

The past few days something was happening to him. He could turn on and shut off his emotions at will as if he had an internal switch, his reactions were quick and precise, and it was as if he were two different people. He thought back to the gun range. *How could he shoot like that without any training?* And the ordeal at the cabin, his movements just came to him like they had been imprinted into his brain. Maybe he had watched too many movies; maybe it was a reaction from what he saw on the bloody actions movies he liked to watch.

Wrapping a towel around himself, Mark wandered into the kitchen and poured some coffee into a medium-size mug. As he sipped on the black, dark brew, he looked at his hand. It was fine, no marks, and no bruises. He walked over to a nearby mirror and turned around to look at his back; same thing, not a scratch or a mark anywhere on his body. He tried to think back, *was he hit or punched at all through everything.* He could not remember. *Maybe not.*

"Weird, that was lucky," he muttered as he walked from his bedroom, where he had just thrown on a black shirt and a pair of Lucky jeans. Just as he was finishing buttoning up his shirt, he noticed something in the corner of the room.

A woman.

Mark froze; he could see her outline up against the wall over by the fireplace. Without even thinking, he dropped to the floor, diving for the fire poker to his left, and came up with it in his hand. Her dark hair reflected from the sunshine coming through the window, but she did not make a move due to the sharp poker that was now at her throat.

Mark's hand was steady as he whispered in a dark voice that did not even sound like him, "What do you want?"

ISIS KANIKA COULD SEE Mark waking up from his slumber from the building across the street. Her window was about two stories above where Mark's apartment was and was a perfect vantage point to spy on her new assignment.

Her cell phone made a chirp sound, indicating that she had a text message. Opening her phone, she read the words aloud, "Bring him in."

She smiled with her dark eyes half-closed; this was the part she loved. It was not just the danger, but it was the feeling she got of being in control. Okay—so maybe, she was a control freak, but even when it looked like she was not on the top of her game, she always knew.

She was.

She opened the window without much effort, and with a quick look to make sure that Mark was in the other room; she buttoned up the top button of her long black coat and jumped out the window.

The frigid air hit her lungs like an icy bolt of lightning as she fell from the window, bringing her senses to a heightened state. Rolling over onto her back as she fell, she made a fist with her right hand extended toward the building to the right of Mark's apartment.

A burst of air came out from a small device attached to her wrist and shot out a tiny, sharp spine that blazed past Mark's building. The tiny arrow made its way to the adjacent building, digging itself into the side of the concrete and expanded to make a solid hold. The cable tightened as it stretched, causing Isis to swing parallel to Mark's building.

As she swung toward the side of the apartment, the device on her wrist began to reel up like a fishing line on steroids, pulling her up. With the momentum, she was heading straight for a crash landing with the side of the apartment building, and she did not want to do that so just before she smashed through the glass-lined building, she flipped her feet out in front of her and hit the glass running.

The line was attached about four stories above Mark's apartment, causing Isis to swing upward toward Mark's window. She saw that she was about one story higher than the target window and heading straight for the edge of the building, which would send her around to the other side if she kept on her current course.

The reel made a zipping sound as it reeled in and would have pulled her over to the next building, but Isis quickly hit the release button and began to fall once again straight down past Mark's window. Reaching out her hands, the suction from her gloves attached to the glass and slowly added pressure and as she slid, they brought her to a stop with the perfect timing so she would not snap her wrists.

She ended up only two windows below where she wanted to be and she smiled. *Not bad*, she thought to herself as her foot suction controls engaged and she began to climb up one-step at a time.

Each hand and foot suction would grab in precise order and with only enough suction to hold her up. Her left hand would lose its suction, allowing her to reach a little higher, then her right foot, then right hand, left foot and so on. The suit she wore under her long coat was designed just for her, made to react to her heart rate and body movements.

She stopped just below his window and peered up to see if the coast was clear. With no one in sight, she pulled herself up, reached for her sunglasses, turned on the x-ray lens, looked through the apartment, and saw Mark in the bedroom.

She reached her right hand out and allowed it to hover just centimeters from the glass, the magnetic pulse that came from her gloves allowed her to unlock the window from the outside. Moving her hand up, she could see the latch slide up and unlock with a click. After deactivating the magnet, she slid open the window and vaulted inside, not making a sound as she landed.

After closing the window, she went over to the fireplace and looked at a picture of Mark and his family standing in front of their house filled with joy, so much, so she could almost feel it coming from the photograph. She felt a wave of sadness wash over her as she thought about her family, her son.

Just then, she saw Mark coming from his bedroom from the corner of her eye. Before she could react, she was looking down the end of a sharp fire poker. Her heart did not even race or skip a beat; she felt no fear as the poker touched her neck. Reaching up, she took off her glasses and looked Mark right in the eye.

“Hello, Mark.”

Chapter Sixteen

"MOOCH." KIRK TALKED INTO HIS CELL PHONE AS he drove toward downtown Manhattan. "I've got a name for you; I need to know where to find this chick."

"Hold on, man—you're so demanding. Sometimes I think I would've been better off going to jail," Mooch grumbled as he made a racket in Kirk's ear.

"What are you doing?"

"Trying to find my chair under all this mess I call a bedroom. Hold on one sec," Kirk could hear Mooch yelling at his mom, telling her not to go into his room. Kirk just got more annoyed when he had to wait for anything, and that *anything* lived with his mom in a basement. "Okay, I'm back, give me her name,"

"Isis Kanika, *K-a-n-i-k-a.* She is the woman from the drop-off; I need to know where she went or anything that will give me a last known address, place of employment or who her

family is and if she was married, I want everything."

Kirk could hear Mooch typing over the phone and his eyes darted over to where Geoff was sitting; he seemed engrossed with something on his laptop. Nothing made him angrier than all this techno garbage like the internet and cell phones, I-pods and the like. Kirk liked it better before the world turned electronic and people actually had to talk to each other rather then check their Twitter or Facebook. "What have you got?"

"Hold on, I am tracking her from where she left the warehouse and following her truck. Okay, she turned into a parking garage on Forty-Fourth and Fifth Avenue. It looks like an office building of some kind."

"Great. Does it show her coming out?"

"No. Just going in; that's all I got. As far as a home address or anything like that, all I could find is her files from the 'Black Widow' Project."

"Yeah, I got that already. Okay, keep looking, and one more thing: Try to find out what this project was and why she left, if you can. They said she was killed in action which is a lie; we both know that is code for she left and we can't find her so let's bury our heads in the sand."

"Fine, but I want four large pepperoni pizzas delivered to my house. I don't work well on an empty stomach."

"Ha! Now you're pushing it, just get to work Mooch or I just might forget to be so nice to you!" Kirk hung up the phone and turned to Geoff. "Hey, I need you to send some pizza to Mooch's house, you think you can take care of that?"

"Sure. I can even order it online," Geoff began typing, and was soon finished with the order and sent it off. "So what did you find out?"

"There is an office building at Forty-Forth and Fifth where we might find Isis. That's where she went after the switch."

"That's the Merc building, I think." Geoff pulled up a website and was soon on the site of Merc, Inc.

"How did you know that?" Kirk looked over at Geoff, picked up his coffee mug, and took a sip.

"Well, I was an intern there before I got hired on at World Magazine. They put out a publication that goes out all over the world, big stuff on politics and global warming, stuff like that."

"Are you talking about The Global Advisor?"

"Yup, that's the one, multibillion-dollar company and very big on saving the world." Geoff's face lit up as he talked about them. Kirk could tell he admired what they were trying to do. Kirk could care less about the poor earth and its fever, not as if he could do anything about it anyway. The environmentalists were all up in arms about carbon and cow farts, when China, India and every other country polluted ten times what America ever thought of doing. We cannot build a nuke plant so they do and in the end, the world gets polluted faster, but we sleep better at night because we didn't do it.

"Well, if they're involved in this, then they will be going against everything that they claim to believe in."

"If you think about it, these people think they are doing the right thing. They killed all the prisoners, which were all convicted rapists and murderers, and they didn't kill anyone that was considered innocent, like the guards, for example. They did a good job at burying it, too, with the whole food poisoning thing."

Kirk rubbed his chin as he thought. "I think we've got a vigilante group on our hands."

Thinking about the case so far, how he was kidnapped to give the FBI time to close the case and hoping that he would forget all about it, it all started to make sense. However, to keep him alive was an example of how much they believed in their so called convictions—No innocent would be killed.

"This is not going to be easy, with the technology I've seen so far in the prison I was in, and how good they are at covering their tracks. We might be neck deep into an underground operation." Geoff nodded as they turned onto Fifth Avenue.

The Merc building was made of brick and stone with dark glass covering the windows shooting up into the skyline like a crystal breaking through solid rock. Pulling into the parking garage and finding a space on the fifth level, Kirk put the car into park and turned the ignition off.

"Well, are you ready?" Kirk asked.

"Ready as I'll ever be!"

MARK'S HAND WAS SURPRISINGLY steady as he held the weapon at the intruder's neck. He could feel his heart slow down until all he could feel was his adrenaline pumping through his body.

"What do you want, and how do you know my name?" Mark demanded as he stepped closer; cocking his arm, ready to thrust it in a moment's notice.

"Mark." Her voice was calm and soothing. "I am here to help you. If we could just talk, then I can explain everything." She reached up and carefully touched the end of the poker. Mark looked into her dark almost-black eyes and slowly low-

ered his weapon. He brought it down to his side and motioned for her to sit on the couch behind him.

She walked over to the couch and sat down, leaned back, and looked up at him. "Mark, my name is Isis, and I'm the one who left you the surveillance video as well as the note in your car over a year ago. I'm also the one who knows the truth about the bombing that day."

Mark looked at her as if he wasn't surprised in the slightest. "You drive a black Lexus, don't you?"

She smiled and laughed. Shaking her head, she said, "Well, you're better than I thought, but he said you would be, and after seeing the cabin…"

"How do you know about that?" Mark tensed up as he looked around.

"I know more about you than you do, and that's why I'm here. We have been watching you for some time now; it's only a matter of time until you begin to wonder…"

"What are you talking about? Wonder what? I am fine!" Mark didn't even convince himself, let alone her. He knew something was happening to him and he didn't know why and maybe he didn't want to know.

"Have you noticed anything different about yourself, such as knowing how to shoot a gun without any training? Did you ever think you were capable of killing four people? I know that this is a confusing time in your life, but I need you to come with me. I can help you find the answers you are looking for."

Mark tried to think of a good reason not to agree with her, but then, he knew that she had evidence to put him away for life. He thought for a second; he did not think he had much

choice.

"Who are you people?" Mark was frustrated, but somehow he knew the answer.

"I'm with the World Justice Agency, and I can take you home."

MARK WAS TRYING TO put all the pieces together as they drove downtown toward Central Park. He sat in the Lexus that he had seen many times but never thought anything of it until now. She must have been watching him for who knows how long, months maybe even years.

The traffic brought them to a crawl as they hit Forty-Fourth Street. He looked around him, trying to implant everything he saw in his brain. The car was spotless, without anything out of place. He could smell the faint scent of a soft perfume, she seemed so confident as she drove. She didn't say a word, but every now and then, he saw her looking at him out of the corner of his eye.

Mark saw a big building off to the left that stood about forty stories tall with a parking garage attached to the back of the building. They pulled into the garage and turned to the right, going up one floor. After she had parked, they got out. Mark looked at Isis, who was walking toward an elevator at the end of the aisle.

"You coming?" Isis asked as she held the door for him.

Mark looked up, and then walked to the elevator without a word. The door closed, and he could see the buttons marking all the floors. Isis reached for them and pushed floors nine, five and two; then the elevator began to go down.

Mark could not tell, but it seemed like they had gone at least six stories down. He could have sworn that they had parked on the first floor. When the doors opened, it led to an open room that looked like a large foyer. The floors were made of glass that led up to a front desk. Mark could see a shark swim right under his feet, and a starfish was attached to the bottom looking up at him with tiny almost invisible eyes. They had an aquarium underneath the floor and after taking a second look he would say that it was huge, two maybe three hundred feet deep.

The receptionist was an older man who looked up at them from his reading glasses. He smiled when he saw Isis and stood up to greet her.

"Hello, my dear. It is so good to see you this fine day." His voice shook a little as he took her hand and held it in-between his withered fingers. He turned to greet Mark and smiled up at him. "And who is this young man?" Mark felt like he was on a first date and was about to meet her father.

Isis smiled and introduced Mark to the old man. "This is Mark Appleton. Mark, this is Mr. Able, he has been with us since the beginning."

Mr. Able looked shocked as he stared at Mark's face, as if trying to remember. "Mark, it has been a long time—great to see you again!" He grabbed Mark's hand and shook it as he grinned.

"Uh…good to meet you, too." Mark looked up at Isis a little confused. *Again? What did that mean?* Mr. Able ushered them to a nearby couch where they sat down and waited. The white leather couch was so smooth that for a minute Mark did not want to sit in it. He guessed it was imported and after

he sat down, he knew from the feel of it that it was from Italy.

"So now what?" Mark asked.

"We wait for the boss. He is in a meeting, but he will be finished shortly," She smiled at him and leaned back, losing herself in the soft cushions. "Don't worry,"

Mark tried to relax, but it was hard when his mind was racing with questions. Sitting back, he looked at the exotic sea life that lived under the floor. The room had to be at least twenty-five feet round, and the floor was made completely of glass. The front desk was made of some sort of metal that had a soft shine to it but did not look like anything he had ever seen. Right behind the desk on the wall were big letters in silver and black, WJA, and in small print below that, *World Justice Agency*. Mark thought it must be some sort of government agency or something, but not like anything he had ever seen.

The corner where they sat had a big couch with a huge plasma screen up on the wall and a beautiful Persian rug on the floor. It was a waiting area with a weird-looking coffee table made of metal and wood.

To the left of the front desk was a large door that had no handle on it. At the moment he was looking at it, he saw it slide down into the floor and a tall, dark black man came through. He had on a black suit; there was a cigar in the corner of his lips, and he was huge compared to Mark.

He smiled as he entered the room. He had a baldhead that picked up the light as he walked. He looked at Mark, and a big smile crossed his face. "Mark, my man, how'd 'ya doing?" Holding out his giant hand, he grabbed Mark's hand and pulled him to his feet. "I'm Brian, or as I'm called around here, Big B."

"Hey, good to meet you, I suppose you know me, too, huh?"

"No, man, but you have been the topic of many conversations," He laughed with a thunderous noise that sounded from the bottom of his soul. "Come with me, I'll lead you to…well, you'll just have to wait and see. Come on, Isis, my little lady, you're invited, too."

Isis got up and followed as they walked through the sliding door. The door led to a long hallway that had nothing on the walls, they were pure white with a door at the end and a keypad next to it. When they got to the door, Big B punched in a code, then looked into a retinal scanner that came out of the wall like a flip down car stereo Mark once had when he was a teenager. The door slid up into the ceiling, and the three of them walked through.

The next room had an X-ray machine and fingerprint center. The people working each station carried sidearms and full police belts loaded with batons and walkie-talkies. Each of them went through the X-ray machine and Mark entered on a conveyor belt, and it ran for about five feet. He imagined what it must look like to watch a full live scan of the human body, to see bones move without skin.

Then Mark had to put his thumb on an electronic pad that a tall guard held, it made a beep as he did, and the guard motioned him on. Mark saw that Big B and Isis had made it through faster and were waiting on the other side, standing in front of a set of three elevators.

"You ready?" Isis asked.

"Sure, not like I have much choice." Mark shoved his hands into his pockets and looked at Big B, who could not stop

smiling. “What?” Mark asked, just a bit annoyed.

“Nothing man, don’t worry, you’ll be okay as long as you just do everything we say.” He laughed and slapped Mark on the back, it hurt and just about knocked the breath out of him, but he acted as if a girl administered it.

Mark conceded that this was happening and he might as well enjoy it. The place so far was cool, and it seemed to be safe with the security and all. The place was better fortified then the White House.

Isis hit the arrow button on the elevator, there was only one arrow, and it pointed down. After the doors closed, Mark noticed that this elevator was made all of glass, even the floor. He could see all the way down the very deep elevator shaft. They must have a thing for glass because it seemed they used it a lot in the construction of this building.

As they descended, the wall behind them opened up to a huge room with people sitting at desks and standing around. It looked like a command center of some kind, with the far wall covered with screens that ran from floor to ceiling. The room had to be two stories tall and there were people sitting at desks and typing on keyboards. Mark tried to get a closer look, but they went lower and the room disappeared from view.

Looking down, he saw that they were almost to the bottom of the elevator shaft. When they came to a stop, Mark almost fell over when the elevator began to travel sideways. Going underground, it made a right hand turn and he could see a light ahead of them. As they came closer, he felt the machine slowing down.

“This is our stop.” Isis straightened her hair and waited for the doors to open. This floor was different from what he

had seen so far and the walls were made of brick and had lights implanted into the side of the walls. The entry ceiling was amazingly high for how far underground they were. Hanging from the top of the rounded sphere was a beautiful crystal chandelier.

There was a desk with a short dark-haired man sitting behind it. He looked up from his computer as they walked in. The room had two exits, the elevator, and a set of great double doors made of thick wood.

This must be the boss's office, Mark thought.

"Welcome to the WJA, Mr. Appleton." The man behind the desk stood up, pointed to the double doors, and said, "He's expecting you."

Big B walked over to the heavy door, turned the handle, and opened it for Mark. He looked at Isis, who nodded for him to go in. He thought for a minute, and then walked through the open door into a large office.

The dimly lit room had bookshelves on all the walls; it looked like an eighteenth century library. The smell of oak and paper made Mark want to grab a book and curl up and read with a good cup of coffee.

Down at the end was an old oak desk filled with papers and a computer sitting off to one side. A large black chair was turned away from Mark, but he could see that someone was sitting in it. Whoever was sitting in it was looking intently at a leather-bound book that looked to be over a hundred years old.

"Mark Appleton, it's been a long time!"

THE ELEVATOR DOORS OPENED as Geoff and Kirk

walked into the main lobby. The Merc building was everything you would expect from a billion dollar company. The floors were covered with marble, interwoven with a globe of the world, the elevators they had come out of ran along the east wall with six different stations, and they were lined with intricate engraving, which Kirk couldn't read.

Kirk looked up to see the huge glass dome that covered the whole lobby area, sunrays streaming in, making the place glow with natural sunlight. He looked over at Geoff, who was examining a group of palm trees that shot out of the ground some twenty feet tall in the middle of the entryway.

"Wow, some place, huh?" Geoff said as he looked up to admire the palms.

"Yeah, real fancy. Let's see if anyone remembers our lady friend from a year ago."

A large front desk curved in a half-moon shape and had three receptionists working at it. The one in the middle was talking on the phone, trying to give driving directions to someone, and was butchering it royally. Kirk made eye contact with a shorthaired blond girl that couldn't be older than twenty and she smiled and asked if she could help them.

"Yeah, I'm Detective Weston, and this is my partner. We're trying to track down this woman." He held up the photo of Isis and showed it to her. "You ever seen her here before?"

The young college student looked at the photograph and shook her head. "No, can't say that I have," She turned to the receptionist next to her who had just hung up the phone. "Hey, Barb, have you ever seen this woman before?"

Barb stood up, took the photo from Kirk, and looked intently at it. "This picture is a year old, so it would have been

at least a year ago that she was here." Kirk said.

"Hmmm, she looks familiar; does she work in the building?"

"We were hoping you could tell us that."

Barb sat down at her computer and began typing. "Do you have her name?"

"Yeah, but she would be under a different name. Do you keep surveillance tapes of the parking garage that far back?"

"A year ago? No, sorry, we only keep them for around six months. Hold on, I think I have something. I looked up employees that are female and ethnic and came up with Katrina Meskhenet. She sure looks like the same person."

Kirk leaned over the counter to look at the computer screen. "Bingo, that's her, what floor does she work on?"

"She is on the fourteenth floor in Suite 102. She is the supervising field officer for the Middle East division."

Geoff smiled and thanked them for their help as Kirk walked over to the nearest elevator. Kirk could feel his heart start to race. *Middle East.* He wondered if she had anything to do with his kidnapping.

"Easy, man. Let's just question her and not fly off the handle." Geoff could tell Kirk was thinking too much and patted him on the shoulder as they came to a stop on the fourteenth floor.

Kirk sucked in a deep breath and walked out of the elevator. The floor had a long hallway with suite doors about every ten feet on each side of the hallway. They walked down until they came to the corner office that had a brass 102 marker on the door.

They were greeted by a young dark-haired man who sat

behind a desk off to the right of the room. "How can I help you?" he asked in a friendly tone.

"We are looking for Katrina Meskhenet." Kirk said as he looked around. The room was filled with Egyptian décor, from the pictures of pyramids to the tall half-dog; half-man statue that sat guarding the office door that Kirk assumed was Katrina's.

"I'm so sorry, but she is out to lunch. If you like, you can wait, she should be returning shortly."

"Thanks. I'll wait."

"Do you two have an appointment?"

Kirk held up his badge and said, "Yeah, she has an appointment with me."

"Very good, sir, I'll show you to the waiting room." The short dark man stood up and ushered them back to a small waiting area with a couch and a TV in the corner. Kirk plopped down and tuned the TV to ESPN to see what was going on with the Lions—not much, as usual.

ISIS FELT HER PHONE in her pocket vibrate as she waited outside of the office where Mark was meeting with… "Bah!" she muttered when she saw the text message. "Cops, that's all I need." Then she saw who it was, she looked up at Big B. "Detective Weston is waiting in my office."

Big B looked at her without expression and said, "You know what to do."

Chapter Seventeen

“HELLO, DETECTIVE. MY NAME IS KATRINA, YOU may come in if you like.” Isis greeted Detective Weston and Geoff after she talked with Biba, her intern in a hushed tone not wanting the two men to hear what she was saying.

Isis was calm as she opened the door to her office and let Kirk Weston and his friend in. After they had sat down in the two chairs across from her desk, she went around and sat in a sleek leather chair with a high back. She knew Kirk Weston from pictures and surveillance videos from the MAG Chamber where they held him in order to get him out of the way of a case she was working on. It seemed that this man was not one to give up easily and proved resourceful.

“So, Detective, what can I do for you?” Isis folded her hands and looked at the two men across from her. Detective Weston was dressed in a white T-shirt and blue jeans. His

leather jacket was tattered and was in dire need of replacement, but he looked much better than the last time she saw him.

"We just want to ask you a few questions." Pulling out a photo, he placed it on her desk and slid it toward her. Isis picked it up and looked at it and without expression, she handed it back to the detective.

"Is that you, Miss Meskhenet?" Kirk asked although it didn't sound like a question, at least not one he didn't think he knew the answer too.

"May I ask what this is regarding, Detective?" Isis avoided the question, hoping that the detective didn't notice her evasion. She knew that the trail to her was cold and the case was closed but something in Kirk's eyes told her that this would not be the last time she saw him in her office asking questions.

"That's confidential Miss Meskhenet, but I do have a photo that looks a lot like you driving away from a crime scene and into this very office building. Can you explain that?"

She could tell that this would get out of hand, if she didn't give them something he thought was a help or maybe she should shut him down so hard that he had no reason to ever come looking her way again. She was a smart and complicated person but she was not careless, quite the opposite, she was detailed and covered her tracks in every situation. Now with a cop in her office poking his nose in a high profile investigation she was glad she was so thorough. "When was this taken, might I ask?"

The detective looked over to his partner and then back to her with a knowing look in his eye, he knew now that she

knew he was chasing a cold case and had nothing on her other than a blurry picture. “Last year in October, October Fifth, to be exact, can you tell me where you were on that day?”

“I am not sure where I was a year ago, do you remember where you were a year ago detective Weston?”

Kirk grinned at her and nodded. “Actually yes I can tell you exactly where I was,” Isis regretted asking “that question” the moment the words came out of her mouth.

“Let me see what I can do,” Isis pushed a button on her phone, signaling Biba. “Biba, can you please pull everything on my schedule from October Fifth of last year?” She smiled at Kirk and said. “I keep very good records due to how much I travel with the company, it’s a quirk of mine.”

The intern came into the office a few minutes later with a folder marked October. He glanced at the two men sitting across from his boss, handed the folder over to Isis, and left the room without saying a word.

“Okay,” Isis flipped through the folder until she came to the Fifth. “Here it is, you said the fifth of October right? I was in Baghdad working on a story about oil drilling and its effects on our environment; here is my hotel receipt and a few from a local restaurant.” Isis smiled politely as she handed over the contents to the detective.

KIRK TRIED TO HIDE his disappointment as he looked through the folder. Everything was signed and date stamped for the Fifth of October. This had to be wrong, it didn’t feel right and there was no way she had time to manufacture the documents without her even knowing they were coming. Isis

was his only real lead, and now it was turning up to be a big waste of time. Maybe this woman wasn't Isis Kanika, and just a wild goose chase. He thought back to her file; he couldn't remember if they had fingerprints on Isis or not.

"Well, this seems to be all in order. So do you have any idea who the woman in this photo is?"

"It is a little fuzzy, but I can understand how you could mistake her for me, same hair color and skin tone and the fact that she drove here to my building is very strange, but this is a big parking garage, and maybe she just went in to drop something off."

Geoff sat silent and watched the whole thing from his chair and Kirk looked over at him, hoping that he had something to offer the situation, but got nothing extraordinary from his expression. "Well, sorry for wasting your time."

"Not at all, if I can be of any help, you just let me know." Isis stood up and walked them to the door. As they were about to leave, Kirk turned and asked, "Oh, one other thing: Does the name Isis Kanika ring a bell?"

Katrina thought for a minute and said in an unwavering voice, not betraying any hesitations or breaks signifying that she was lying. "It sounds Egyptian in origin, but, no, can't say that it does."

Kirk nodded. "Thanks anyway," As they made their way down the hall toward the elevators, Kirk thought about the interview. Man, everything fit so well, the picture leading them to the building and then this woman looking just like this Isis woman.

"Geoff, I think we're being played with,"

"How so, boss?"

"Everything fits too well, the picture, the building, and this Katrina looking like our suspect. I think we were set up to think that it all came from here. Something is going on here, and we need to find out what it is!"

"I guess we're back to square one, huh?"

"No, we ruled out this Miss Meskhenet woman, which leaves us with one other option,"

Geoff looked confused, and then his face lit up as he figured out what Kirk had in mind. "Follow the file, right?"

"Yup, the file was sent to the FBI, and then from there the case was ruled as a freak food poisoning accident, something went wrong, or should I say someone! We find who touched that file, we find our guy."

ISIS SHUT HER OFFICE door and sighed in relief. That was too close for comfort, but at least she convinced them… or did she? Sitting in her leather chair, she spun around to look out the window. The sun was shining on the frost-covered ground, sparkling like a gem in a clear stream. She could see the outline of Central Park with the trees, the faint sparkle of the light as it hit the water, and she saw a few ducks sunning themselves in the sun's calming rays. Picking up her phone, she dialed Big B. He answered with concern in his voice on the first ring.

"Its okay, Big B, they're gone, can you text me when Mark is out?"

"No problem."

Hanging up the phone, she closed her eyes and leaned back as the sun warmed her face. She wondered just how

much of her story the detective believed. Was he on a vendetta now that he was free and out for blood? She hoped he wouldn't be a problem and made a mental note to bring it up in the next meeting, they might need to intervene again in the life of detective Kirk Weston.

THE MAN WHO SAT in a big overstuffed chair turned around to meet Mark's gaze. He had on a tailored black pinstriped suit and a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. Mark looked stunned as the older man rose from his chair; it was as if he knew him, but just could not remember who he was or when he had met him before. The thought bothered Mark because it was happening a lot these days. Was his memory going or was he in some sort of twilight zone show where everyone in this building knew him and the only one who could not remember was him?

"Who are you?" Mark's simple question broke the silence and made him feel a little better to know that no matter what happened he did still have some sort of control, as slim as it might be. The man seemed to be in his late fifties, with thick silver hair and a cane that he leaned on that had a bright-red ruby on the top, it sparkled and glimmered looking at him like an all-knowing eye.

"That's a loaded question, Mark, and, in time, you will remember everything." He walked over to where Mark stood and held out his hand. Mark looked down at the strong hand and took hold of it. It was firm and warm to the touch, this made him feel a little better in spite of everything in his mind telling him something was wrong.

"I'm the leader of the World Justice Agency; you can call me Solomon. Now, I know you have many questions, and we will try to answer them all in due time. Just be patient with us, if I might be so bold."

Pointing to a chair, he motioned for Mark to sit down. Mark walked over to the wood-lined chair. He sat down and watched this boss or mastermind or whatever he was pace back toward his desk clicking his cane, which from the looks of it he did not need, but used anyway. He stood with his back turned to Mark and stroked his neatly trimmed beard as if to gather his thoughts.

"I am going to tell you about who we are, and what we do. After I am finished, you may ask any questions you like. Does this sound okay to you?"

Mark nodded without saying a word. He looked around and marveled at the tall bookcases wondering what wisdom they held and the years it must have taken to collect this many books. It was more books than Mark had ever seen in one place, there had to be thousands, hundreds of thousands covering every wall, all around the great room.

"The world is filled with violence, evil, and hate. For thousands of years, justice was up to kings or judges… or in our current situation, the government. In centuries past, the people would be driven to rise against their own government to restore justice once it had been lost," Solomon walked over to the bookshelf in front of him and pulled out a leather-lined book that looked old, and about to crumble if not handled carefully.

"The history of this great country was founded on the rights of the people, where the people ruled themselves in the

light that everyone had the same basic values of what was acceptable, and what was considered a crime or a sin if you will. Today we are losing our rights with every perverted law that is passed in the name of saving us from ourselves and then the Supreme Court houses judges who crave power and over turn whatever laws they are not paid to support! We have lost the passion and the common sense to see the difference between what and a why."

Turning and looking at Mark, he leaned down and looked deep into his eyes. Mark felt like he was looking into his very soul and the feeling unnerved him so much he wanted to turn away but couldn't.

"Do you see the murder, the rape, the evil going on all around you? Do you feel the fear of a dark alley where a woman is raped and killed without retribution? I do, Mr. Appleton. I see that our justice system is *not* doing what it should. I see where they are understaffed, unable to keep up with the amount of hate that is splashed across our streets every day!"

Standing tall, he raised his voice as he paced the room. "Throughout time, there were groups of people who were appointed judge and jury. In Bible times, it was the Levites, and in the reign of the British Empire it was Parliament and in our great country, it is the Supreme Court."

His eyes blazed with passion as he slammed his cane on the floor. "We are here to bring balance to the court that thinks they are supreme! We, the World Justice Agency, carry out justice! We are here to uphold the law that says that if you kill, then you will pay with your own life. The only thing that criminals fear is the wrath of the people. This is our country,

and we going to take it back!

"We have two choices: Sit by and let our country burn under the flag of tolerance, or we take it back and have a world where our children and grandchildren can live in safety."

Sitting down in the oversized chair behind his large desk and turning his back to Mark, Solomon sighed. "You see, Mark, we are the last thing holding America together. We are involved in every part of government and in every agency, and the reason you are here today is because of us. I'm your father, Mark."

Mark sat stunned, not knowing what to think. His brain went numb as he tried to think back to his childhood. He never could really remember his parents or much of anything before the age of twelve. He lived with foster parents most of his life; his parents had died in a plane crash when he was a baby.

"What are you saying?" Mark managed to get out a few words.

"I'm not your blood father as you know it, but I'm the one who rescued you after your parents died. You lived here with me until you were eleven years old. I taught you and trained you from a child."

Mark looked up at Solomon in utter shock. "I don't remember, why can't I remember?" He stood up and tried to walk, but he was too lightheaded to stand. He plopped back down in his chair with a thud feeling his stomach turn and a lost confusing loneliness washed over him.

"Try to relax; it will all come back to you." Standing up, Solomon walked over to a dial on the wall and turned it on. The room filled with music, and the strong voices of someone

singing—opera! When Mark heard it, he closed his eyes and lay back in his chair. It was so soothing, it felt like…like home.

The music filled his ears and his mind making everything come into focus, the fear and confusion left him and he could feel a sense of peace fill him. As Mark thought of his wife and daughter, he suddenly felt different. *He could remember*. His memories, which were buried deep within his subconscious mind came to the surface. He remembered!

It felt like a movie in fast-forward. The images of his childhood flipped through his mind, skipping from one event to another flashing through his mind taking him back into a world he had forgotten. What felt like days took only seconds. Mark opened his eyes to see Solomon standing in front of him with a kind smile on his face.

"Welcome home, son!"

THE REST OF THE evening, Mark spent walking through the underground buildings guided by Solomon, Isis, and the rightfully named Big B. Isis was quiet and stood back just looking at Mark taking it all in and not missing a thing. Big B was loud and happy, rather cheerful in an intoxicating way. Mark smiled at him and as they went along, he would crack jokes here and there and slap Mark on the back almost knocking him down on a few occasions.

The Merc building and publication was the front they used and where most of the field operatives worked. It allowed them to go into otherwise inaccessible areas, such as the Middle East and other places where no one but a tree hugging

newspaper could go because if you didn't let them in then you hated the environment, and who wanted to be known for that?

To say that it reminded Mark of James Bond or the like would be an under statement, the place was a maze of training rooms where hand to hand combat was taught too classes on reading satellite maps to French, Chinese and even some ancient Greek. It was far from a group of hell bent assassins who went around dealing out revenge; they were trained and organized in a way that made the CIA and the FBI look like a bunch of schoolyard kids playing hide-and-seek.

Mark learned that there were three classes of assassins, hit men, and hit women. The first was the *'Avenger Class.'* This was made up of people who came to the origination from some sort of family crisis. Like Mark, their families were killed or were somehow taken from them; they were here to avenge someone or something. They were trained to take on the deadliest missions and proved to be the only ones to jump when someone else wouldn't. In other words, they had nothing to lose!

The second was the *'Co-op Class.'* These were trained in highly sensitive missions involving stealth and agility. Most of these killers were made up of women, due to their ability to blend in. Isis, as Mark found out, was a CC assassin. Their missions had to do with chemical warfare and had to be carried out with absolute accuracy and discretion.

The third was the *'D Class.'* They were trained in everything to do with explosives and heavy weapons. They were called in when the WJA got involved in a warfare-type operation and in situations where multiple targets or buildings were to be eliminated.

Then, there was a Forth class that was rare; only a select

few would be advanced to this class, and it was called the *'Sniper Class.'* These highly trained snipers were trained in all three classes and also in hand-to-hand combat. The SC could only be held by a born assassin, one who was brought up by the WJA and had their training taught to them from birth. Only a handful had ever made it to this level.

Mark soon realized that was what they were going to be training him for. At first, he cringed at the idea, but as he slowly began to remember his past and everything that he had learned, he knew that this was what he was born to do.

As they walked through the main command center, he looked at all the people working and hurrying from one place to another. Screens lit up with live feeds and surveillance taken from every known device in order to accomplish the intended mission.

Solomon looked at Mark with interest; he was wondering how much of this, he was taking in and if he was going too fast too soon. "Each person in this room is responsible for a single operative. They are making sure that they have everything they need, as well as monitoring their progress. If you have any questions, feel free to ask at any time, Mark."

"I do have one: Why is it I don't remember all the training I supposedly had as a child? I remember bits and pieces, but not everything." The memories were still jumbled and came in slow bursts, which Mark tried to process and figured it would take time to put it all together again.

"We use a process that buries the information deep within your subconscious. It was taught to you before you could even talk. The mind before the age of three years old is like a sponge, we simply put the information in there through a ma-

chine that I created. Come with me and I'll show you."

They walked along a walkway that wound its way around the command center. It ran next to the wall about forty feet up in the air and was suspended by large cables coming from the ceiling. Along the way, they passed five doors in which all of them were closed without any windows to see in. When they reached the last door, Solomon opened it and they went inside.

The room was dimly lit and almost dark and Mark could see into a second room through three large rounded windows on the south wall. It was a small computer room with three men in bunny suits working at the machines. Through the glass, he could see a small chair-like thing suspended from the ceiling like a giant robots hook. It had a rounded bottom with a soft velvet lining and a pillow at the top. The cradle looked like a half egg shape and wires with white round pads dangled from them like spider legs.

"You can see what I mean in a few minutes. We have one of my children now." Solomon pointed to a woman dressed in normal clothing holding what looked like a five-month-old baby. She held the child close to her body and looked down at it with love, and he could see even through the round glass windows that she cared deeply for the baby.

The lights dimmed so the room with the suspended baby cradle would be comfortable for the baby. After the sleeping child was put in the bed, the woman placed small electronic pads on the baby's feet. She then pulled down a clear plastic top and locked it in place.

After everything was set, the men at the computers began to work.

"What are you going to do?" Mark asked. He felt a little

sick at seeing the whole thing and for a brief second thought that he was about to witness some sort of evil sacrifice or at least a mad scientist moment where the crazy old man yelled at an Igor to—*pull the switch!*

"Don't worry; we won't hurt him, just watch."

The baby looked around content as could be, as if in a baby swing. The clear plastic top acted like a monitor, and it flashed images so fast that you could not even tell what the pictures were. Mark looked over at the baby expecting the poor thing to be crying out in fear with great big tears rolling down his cheeks, but he just sucked his thumb as he looked up at the images with an indifferent look on his face.

"What's happening?" Mark looked confused.

"What you are looking at is all the information being delivered to the baby over there. Right now, he is learning everything there is to know about hand-to-hand combat. When the image is sent through the electronic pulse, it sends a signal to his brain and makes a muscle memory of it. So his brain retains the information and thinks he is actually performing the actions, like taking apart a weapon or pulling the trigger and so on." Solomon's voice grew excited as he talked.

"Does it hurt him?"

"No, no. Everything on a subconscious level, so the baby is just sleeping or watching the screen and will not remember anything. And the best part, is if the child grows up and doesn't want to be a part of the WJA, then they won't have any memory of it."

"How is that possible? I mean, I remember some about this place."

"Yes, but you only remember me, maybe a room or when

we played catch in a park, you remember places, people and experiences but not any of your training. It will only come to you when you need it, and with practice, you will be able to turn it on and off at will."

Mark looked at him in disbelief.

"Don't believe me?"

The next instant Mark felt the cold steel of a knife blade on his throat. Before he could even think, he grabbed the back of the knife with his hand and pulled down as he dropped to the ground. The attacker was thrown off balance as Mark twisted, and in a swift movement, Mark was on top of the attacker with the knife to his temple.

"Hold on!" Big B yelled as he touched Mark's shoulder, it was just a test. Don't kill him, buddy." He laughed and shook his head in amazement.

Mark looked up at Solomon, who had a smirk on his face. The attacker got up and pulled off his ski mask. He was one of the men who were standing at the first checkpoint on the way in; he just smiled and walked away.

"So, Mark, how did you know how to do that? Have you ever had any training or experience with someone putting a knife to your throat?" Solomon asked.

Mark thought a moment. "I don't know, I just reacted with my instincts."

"Exactly! That is what we do here, in this lab; we create instincts. You don't remember them until you need them!"

Mark thought for a minute and smiled as he began to see what was going on. Everything began to make more sense as he thought about the explosion and the men at the cabin. He just did what was natural, he just knew what to do, how to talk

and kept the situation in his control at all times as if he had done it a thousand times.

"Oh, and one more thing," Solomon said. "All the children in this program are either orphans or children of current employees. We make sure that they are placed in good foster care at around age eleven. All the employees' kids are free to come in for training and go home afterwards if they like. Anyone who lives here is cared for and assigned to a current family already in the program."

"So I was in the orphan program?"

"Yes and that older man you saw on the way in was your caregiver. He and his wife tried to give you as normal a life as possible—they loved you very much."

"I thought he looked familiar. Mr. Able, right?"
"Yeah. His wife passed last year, but he is still here with us. Big B will take you up to get checked in and run through all the rules and legal information. I will see you later tonight. We will sit, and I will try to ease your mind over a drink."

Big B opened the door and walked with Mark back to the main lobby area. Mark looked around him as they entered the elevator. If this was one wild dream, he did not know if he wanted to wake up from it.

Chapter Eighteen

"CASSY, WHERE IS THIS JENKINS GUY?" KIRK ASKED with a tone of anger in his voice. He was tired and most of all he was a sore loser. The meeting with Meskhenet was a bust and now he and Geoff found themselves back in Cassy's office and Kirk had a red hue flushing in his cheeks.

"Jenkins? Why… you think?"

"Is he here? I need to talk to him."

"No. He is running some errands and won't be back until late, but I'll write down his home address and phone number—but just for the record, he's clean!"

"I'll be the judge of that." Kirk took the note from her and turned to leave.

"What got you all grumpy? You hit a dead end with the woman?"

"You could say that, we've got nothing but a witness that

seems to be invisible. The other one has an airtight alibi," Kirk ran his hand over his smooth head and cursed. "And all I have is a fuzzy picture with no fingerprints or any witnesses."

"Didn't you shoot your last witness?" Cassy had a glint of steel in her voice and she shot a tight look at Kirk and then broke into a cheerful *"I'm just joking,"* smile.

Kirk glared at her and could tell that she meant to sting his ego. "Fine, I'll be taking my depressing mood elsewhere." Kirk knew he was being impossible, but he didn't care, this whole thing stunk to high heaven and he knew it and they knew it but for some reason were covering it up.

"Glad I could help," Cassy giggled and hollered after Kirk, who was almost out the door. "Next time, a thank you would be nice!" Cassy hit the stapler a few times in frustration even though there wasn't any paper in the stupid thing. Detective Weston could be infuriating, and down right rude.

Kirk slumped into the seat of the Mustang where Geoff sat staring intently at his laptop. "We got an address, and this better go somewhere or I might go mad and shoot someone! This is our last real lead so you might want to cross your fingers; this might just shut us down."

Geoff looked at the address and typed it into his laptop. "Okay, we're about ten minutes from this address; do you want to go tonight or in the morning?"

Kirk looked at his watch and saw that it was almost ten o'clock. "We have time; we'll pay him a little visit; I won't go to sleep in this mood anyway, besides, he's sure to be home at this hour."

As they pulled out of the parking lot and onto the busy street, Kirk had this uneasy feeling that someone was watching

him. He looked around and noticed headlights shining in his eyes through the rear view mirror. Kirk looked again as he realized the car behind them had been there throughout the day and he kicked himself for not seeing it sooner. From the classic dark Ford sedan, he knew it had to be his friends down at the station… or worse, the Feds.

"I think we might have company," Kirk said in a low deep voice as if the other car might hear him. Geoff turned to look, but Kirk hit him in the chest and scowled at him. "Don't look, you numb skull—just keep an eye on them in your side mirror."

"Sorry, man," Geoff muttered as he rubbed his chest. "I'm a little new to this whole detective, shake-down thing.

Kirk shook his head from side to side and grunted. "I'm just a little frustrated, it's not you. Just don't listen to me, okay?"

Geoff nodded, he could feel the thick dark cloud that had moved over Kirk's head, and it seemed to loom there waiting for someone to dare enter its range and strike with a bolt of lightning.

Kirk switched lanes to see if the tailing car would follow, and a few seconds later, he saw the car move over as well. He sighed and pulled up to a nearby doughnut shop. "Hey, you want a coffee or something?"

"Yeah, I'll take a bottled water and a plain bagel, no cream cheese." Geoff laughed when he saw the look Kirk gave him. Kirk rolled his eyes and wandered into the shop muttering something about, *"A sissy only drinks bottled water,"* as he walked up to the counter and looked over his shoulder to see if the boys in blue were following.

Just as he suspected, they pulled in a few cars down and turned off their headlights as if that would help conceal what they were up too. After getting a large twenty-ounce black coffee and a coconut-covered doughnut, he asked the man behind the counter if they had a back door to the place.

"Yeah, back there," He pointed to a door down the hall just beyond the bathrooms. Kirk grabbed his items tossed the skinny balding shop owner a twenty, and walked out the back door, making his way to the rear of the building, circling around, he came up behind the Crown Victoria that was tailing him and set the coffee and doughnut down on a blue and white newsstand.

Ducking down to the ground, he pulled out his .45, crawled right under the door of the driver's side window, and took a deep breath. Jumping up, he smashed the glass of the driver's window and pointed the gun at the stunned man's temple.

Glass sprayed the man hitting him in the face, showered across his body and landed in the lap of the passenger. "Hey! What… What are you doing?" The driver reached into his jacket to draw his weapon but stopped short when he saw Kirks finger tighten on his own weapon.

"Easy, pal, don't do anything you'll regret. I've got an itchy trigger finger, so nice and easy. You two place your guns on the dashboard and no funny business or I might slip and make a mess of your face and your shirt!" He motioned to the man sitting in the passenger seat. He had a huge dunlap belly that had done lapped over his belt and a pitted face from a hard teen life of zits and pimples.

The two men slowly took out their handguns and placed

them on the dash. The man in the driver's seat was thinner than his partner, but not by much. He grimaced and his lips made a line and disappeared when he did this. He was tense and his face was flushed red with rage and embarrassment that a washed out cop got the drop on them.

"Now, hand them over nice-and-easy-like," Kirk lowered his voice and taunted them with it like a teacher talking to two bad kids who were in detention.

As soon as he had their side arms, he leaned in and said, "So what are you boys doing tailing me?"

"We're FBI, and if you know what's good for you…"

"Good for me—*is* you two staying off my bumper unless you want to have it shoved down your throats!"

"You better watch yourself, Detective! And drop your interest in this case or…"

"Or what?" Kirk demanded, "What pray-tell do you think you are going to do to me? Huh? Let me guess, you might run to your daddy and tattle on me?"

Kirk took out a knife from his pocket and slashed the front tire, causing it to deflate with a loud hissing sound, the two feds yelled, but were soon quieted down with a wave of Kirk's gun.

"Now, you two just sit tight, and we'll be on our way, and next time, I won't be so nice." He grinned at them showing them all of his teeth. The driver managed to turn a brighter shade of red and Kirk laughed in his face daring him with his eyes to try something.

Kirk leaned in, took the two service issue pistols, and shoved one in each of his jacket pockets. Walking back to the newsstand he grabbed his coffee and went back to his car.

Geoff looked concerned as he watched the whole thing from the rearview mirror.

"You okay?"

"Yup," Kirk said as he sipped his coffee and a slight devious smiled pocked up from the corner of his mouth.

"Where's my water and bagel?"

Kirk looked at him and hit his forehead. "Right, water—uh, want a doughnut?"

MARIA WAS BEGINNING TO get a little worried since she hadn't heard from Mark in a few days. She tried to be cheerful at the office, but everyone could tell that she had something on her mind, or *someone*.

The weekend with Mark was wonderful, and she feared that she was beginning to have feelings for him, she tried to push them away and hide them in the deep recess of her mind, but they came up like cream to the top. She tried calling his cell phone a few times, but just got the machine.

Sitting in her brown leather La-z-boy watching the news, she saw a report about a cabin explosion out in the nearby forest where she used to go hiking as a kid. The reporter said that the cabin appeared to have no one in it at the time and looked to be a terrorist hideout due to the amount of C-4 that the police found in a nearby barn.

Letting the words hit her ears but not really paying attention to it, she flipped to a game show and sipped on a cup of warm herbal tea. *Where is he? Why hasn't he called me back?* Her mind wandered, and the more she thought about it, the sicker she felt inside.

Picking up her cell, she dialed Mark again and listened as it rang.

No answer.

Closing her eyes, she let a single tear slip down her cheek as she thought about what could have happened to her friend.

MARK SAT IN FRONT of a warm fire staring at the flames as they shot up into the air. Solomon's office was a comfortable place, much like his own living room. The firelight flickered off the dark bookcases and bounced back, reflecting off Isis's black hair. The four sat, talking, and filled Mark in on his past as the night wore on.

Solomon was a wonderful host; he made them any drink he could dream up, and Isis talked in such a smooth tone that it would lull you to sleep if you let it. Big B could wake the dead with his laugh and his energetic presence and Mark found himself bonding to the big guy as if they were long lost brothers. Mark sat and looked around at his new friends, not sure yet what to think of it all.

The orientation took over two hours, between getting a new driver's license and ID that could not be traced and new fingerprint laser transference, amazingly enough, it was painless. The new credit card was what Mark liked the most, it was what he was to use for any and all transactions. It was untraceable, and all the money came directly from the WJA, not through any bank. It was then routed through hundreds of cities to throw off the scent, if it was ever needed.

His credit cards and student loans were paid off with a simple phone call, and he put everything that made him Mark

Appleton into a vault in the lower security room. His name stayed the same, but any past record and his Social Security number was erased. On paper, he did not exist, no birth certificate, no traceable fingerprints, and no identity. Everything was replaced with his new one, which had him working for the Global Advisor as a consultant.

Mark thought about how he was going to break the news to Hank that he got another job. It would be hard, but he knew Hank would understand. Then he thought about Maria. He had grown close to her this past year; he did not know what he would do. He feared that he was developing feelings for her, but the fact that his family were killed and the realization that he couldn't move on and live a normal life after knowing that, changed everything.

The WJA would allow him to lead a somewhat normal life, but he had to commit full-time to the project. He would be living a lie with Maria if he kept this from her. He thought hard about if she would accept a friend who could never tell her where he was or what he was doing.

Mark took a sip of his iced coconut mocha, and smiled as he thought about how you can change who you are to a point, but he would always love his mocha's.

The morning brought a fresh start and a new life for Mark. He slept undisturbed for the first time since his family's death. He didn't get back to his apartment until late, and he crashed on his bed fully-dressed.

As the sun hit his face, and he began to stir wondering if the morning would bring something wonderful, or something from a horror novel. Opening his eyes, he looked at the ceiling, trying to get his brain to exit dream mode. A beep from

the answering machine brought him into reality and he pushed the past few days from his mind.

Rolling out of his bed, he shuffled into the living room and looked down at the phone as if it was foreign to him. The little number light read fourteen messages.

"Hey, Mark, just wondering if you want to do anything tonight. I'll call you later,"

It was Maria—he hit the *next* button.

"Mark, just wondering where you are…"

Maria.

Next was the same, with her sounding more urgent with each message. One was from Hank, who was wondering if he was coming in this week. He said with the New Year coming up, that he could just take the next week off if he needed too.

Picking up the phone, Mark dialed his office, hoping that Maria would answer. He heard her sweet voice as she did and he felt his heart jump in his throat.

"SED, how can I help you?"

"Hey, kiddo," Mark could tell that she recognized his voice right away from the excited tone and the rise in the speed in which she talked.

"Mark!" She tried to contain her excitement. "Where have you been? I've been worried sick!"

"I'm so sorry I didn't call—I had to go to a long meeting and got tied up."

"It has been three days, Mark. I thought you might have gone off and done something stupid. You were in a funky mood the other night."

"No, I just had some business to take care of. However, it's taken care of now. I do need to talk to you about some

things though; do you want to go out to dinner tonight?"

"I have to work a little late to get ready for the weekend, but if you'll pick me up at eight, then I'll be ready."

"Okay, eight, it is. Hey, can you get Hank on the line? I need to talk to him."

Maria transferred him to Hank, who seemed pleased to hear from him. "Hey, bud. You okay?"

"Yeah, I just wanted to see if you could break away for lunch, I need to talk to you," Mark tried not to sound nervous. He loved working at SED, but it just was not going to work out. The full impact of what he was now involved in had not yet hit him, but he had this feeling deep down where it hurt, that it was something that would change his life forever.

"Yeah. I'll meet you at Hugo's at eleven."

Mark hung up the phone, going over in his mind what he was going to say to Hank. He was not only his boss, but also his friend. It was going to be hard to quit, and he only hoped he would understand.

Mark jumped in the shower, trying to hurry. It was past ten, and he would need to leave soon to get down to the deli on time. As he pulled on his favorite pair of blue jeans, he grabbed his wallet. It felt lighter than normal; he flipped it open and remembered that everything had been replaced.

His driver's license and everything personal were replaced with ones that the WJA could trace and track. He pulled out the credit card they gave him. He flipped it over, looking at the strip on the back. It looked just like any other card, but this one had no limit, or so they said.

He smiled; it was like winning the lottery, but without the exposure. He wondered if it was really unlimited and thought

that he would try it out later today.

THE STREET WAS LINED with cars and a few trashcans rolling in the road after being tipped over by the wind or a bunch of kids who thought it would be funny to wreak havoc and destruction. Kirk drove slowly as Geoff looked for the right number. The houses were jammed close together, and almost all of them were two stories with absolutely no yards or privacy, tall and skinny, like living on top of each other, Kirk thought.

"Next one, I think," Geoff looked at the number on the old black mailbox. "Up on the left."

The house was stucco and had a few concrete steps leading up to the front door, which was painted blue and needed another coat. The yard was all dirt and had a little doghouse in the front yard with the name *Fluffy* over the door. It had a few patches of grass left and showed at one time the yard was a lush green lawn before *Fluffy* became the new tenant. Kirk touched the butt of his gun as he got out of the car, he had *that* feeling again, and *that* was never a good thing.

The house had a light on in the living room, and Kirk could see through the half-drawn curtains a man reading the newspaper in a lounge chair. Geoff shut his door and followed Kirk up to the cracked peeling blue door. Knocking, they could hear someone moving around inside, and Kirk tensed as he waited.

Kirk could hear the dead bolt click and then a chain slide open. The door cracked open as a middle-aged man peered out looking at them with a look of curiosity and fear.

"Yeah? What do you want?" He barked in a gruff shaky voice.

Kirk held up his badge and said, "Detective Weston, and this is my partner" He pointed over his shoulder to Geoff.

"We just want to ask you a few questions Mr. Jenkins." Jenkins sighed and opened the door waving them inside acting a little disturbed but he knew the program and something in Kirks face told him he was not going to detour him from his mission. He asked them to sit down and if they wanted anything to drink.

"No, I'm okay, but my partner would like a glass of water, if you've got one." Kirk smirked at Geoff, who just rolled his eyes.

"Sure, I'll be right back."

Jenkins walked back into the kitchen. The house was decorated with photos of family and simple trinkets you might find in an old spinsters house. Kirk could see by the photos on the mantle above a white brick fireplace, that Jenkins was married. Hanging on the wall and staring back at Kirk, was the happy couple, smiling, dressed in a tuxedo and a wedding dress.

The morning paper lay open on the coffee table next to a book on criminology. "Here you go." Jenkins handed Geoff a glass of ice water.

"Thanks," Geoff smiled and took a sip.

"So what can I do for you detective?" Jenkins sat down in his recliner and looked at them through his thick glasses.

"We're trying to get some information on a case that you and Cassy Meyers worked on a year or so ago."

"Oh?" Jenkins raised a single eyebrow and settled back in

his chair.

"The prison, David's Island, I was on that case and had some new evidence come to my attention recently that made me curious. I was told that you delivered the file to the FBI?"

"Yeah, I think I did, Meyers and I work on a lot of cases together, and I am the spokesperson to the FBI. That was a weird case, as far as I remember it," Jenkins took off his glasses and started chewing on the earpiece. "I'm not sure, but I think the lead person on that case was a Jacob…uh…yeah, Jacobson."

"Captain Jacobson?" Kirk remembered the tall captain who so passionately encouraged them to investigate the case *his way*.

"Yeah, that's the one, I delivered it to him, and I went over everything we found in detail."

Kirk rubbed his chin as he thought. That didn't make any sense; Jacobson seemed to know that it wasn't an accident from the very beginning.

"Why are you interested in that case? It has been closed for a while now hasn't it?"

"It just got reopened and we are just following the evidence, and so far it leads back to Jacobson."

"Well, if there's anything you need, just let me know."

Jenkins was cooperating and he was a little too helpful for Kirk's liking. "Thanks, we'll get out of your hair," Kirk got up and headed out the front door. Geoff thanked Jenkins for the water and his help. As they drove away, Kirk looked over at Geoff. "Well, what do you think?"

Geoff scratched his head and looked at Kirk. "He seemed on the up-and-up, but it seems fishy that Captain Jacobson

would have anything to do with covering up anything."

"Yeah, I know what you mean, I have a feeling that our friend Jenkins is lying to us, and he knows something and is scared. Now I have to figure out how I'm going to interview Jacobson, the last time I saw him, he kicked me off the case."

Geoff smiled and looked out the window.

"Geoff, you!"

"Me?"

"Yeah, you can get an interview for your paper or magazine thing. Come on, man, you could say you are doing a story on the case,"

"I guess I could do it,"

"There you go."

"No worries, I'll get a story yet!"

Kirk laughed and looked over at his partner. "You deserve it, man. After this is all over, you might have more than you bargained for."

JENKINS LOOKED OUT THE window at the detective's car as they drove away. He put on his glasses and went into the kitchen, picking up the phone; he dialed and waited for an answer.

"What do you want? I told you never to call me at home." The voice on the other end was gruff and very irritated to be disturbed.

Jenkins' voice shook a little as he spoke. "I know, but I just got done being interviewed by Detective Weston."

The man on the other end went silent. *"And?"*

"I didn't tell him anything he didn't already know. He

wanted to know who was in charge of the investigation, I told him Jacobson."

"Good, now you stay out of this, or you can kiss your wife goodbye!" The gruff voice gargled and coughed as if he had a bad cold. Jenkins was glad that he was on the other end of the phone and not standing there in his kitchen.

"No, I won't say anything, as far as they were concerned, I was just a delivery guy."

"I'll take care of Weston; you make that file on your end disappear. You hear. I don't want anyone else poking their nose into this."

"I'll take care of it," Jenkins promised.

Hanging up the phone, Jenkins hiked up the stairs and went into the bedroom. His wife was asleep with the lamp on the nightstand still on. He leaned over, kissed her on the cheek, and stopped to look at her soft snores as she slept. Grabbing his car keys, he walked downstairs and out the back door. He needed to get that file from Meyer's office.

His old Ford Escort smoked and sputtered as he started it up. It did not like this cold weather any more than he did. He opened his glove box and pulled out his service revolver, checking it to make sure that it was loaded. He set it on the seat next to him.

The parking lot was dark and empty, giving Jenkins a creepy feeling that he was being watched. The back door was locked and had a sign reading *'Under video surveillance.'* Jenkins knew where the camera was, and he made sure to keep his hood pulled over his head as he made his way across the icy parking lot.

He made sure he parked out far enough so he could not be

detected on the camera, he unlocked the back door and went down the hall toward Cassy's Meyers office. Her office door was locked, but he had a key and was in without any trouble. As he flipped through her file cabinet, he muttered as he looked for the right file.

Not here!

He took off his glasses and looked around the dark office that was littered with pictures and papers.

There, on the desk.

The file was open sitting out on the desk like a mocking, staring judge looking at him with sharp, knowing eyes. He recognized it right away, grabbing it; he shut the file cabinet drawer and left her office, making sure to lock it on the way out. As the back door slammed behind him, he turned and locked it. Making his way across the frozen parking lot, he hid the file under his coat.

What had he done?

He got into the car and drove back toward his house. He never thought that he could get involved in something like this, but he needed the money. Now he was beginning to think that it was not worth it no matter how far in debt they were. He could save and pay it all off, but then the easy way out looked so good, and now it turned on him like a snake wanting his blood for repayment.

It will be over soon. I have nothing to worry about. His car was cold as he pulled it into the back alley behind his little house. The darn heater would only work when it felt like it, and he was shivering as he turned off the engine. He sat in the dark trying to think. He had to get rid of the file… *or should he keep it?* He might need it, just in case things got bad.

Walking up the stairs to his bedroom, he ducked into the closet and opened a small safe that sat on the floor in the back under a box of Christmas wrapping paper. Placing the file inside, he closed the safe, undressed and quietly got into bed. His thoughts ran wild and he tried not to think about everything that had happened.

Nevertheless, his mind would not let him rest and he could feel dark eyes staring down at him waiting, waiting for his soul.

Chapter Nineteen

"MARK, IT'S GOOD TO SEE YOU!" HANK SHOOK Mark's hand as he pointed to a nearby table. Hugo's Deli was family owned and operated for the last thirty years or so, and the old man behind the counter smiled at each customer as they came in. The walls were made up of broken plaster and brick and the place at closer glance looked as if it was about to fall in on itself. However, the food was famous and delicious, Mark and Hank had been here many times for lunch, and it made Mark a little sad to know that this might be his last time here with his boss and friend.

"Hi, Hank," Mark smiled as he sat down and looked out the window and onto the street with an absent look in his eyes. The deli was small, with about six round tables, all of which were filled. The waitress brought them two glasses of water

and a menu. Mark picked up the menu and looked at it but not really seeing the words.

"So what's been going on, Mark? You haven't called in, and Maria has been acting weird." Hank took a sip of his water and took off his long gray trench coat, folding it and draping it on the chair next to him.

"I've been a little preoccupied lately; that's what I wanted to talk to you about. Hank, you're a great boss and an even better friend," Mark figured the best way to do this was head on and fast or he might lose his nerve.

"Oh, come on, Mark, I don't like where this is going," Hank looked at Mark with concern. "I know you have gone through a lot this last year, but just hang in there. In time, it will be better; these things take time to heal themselves."

Mark looked at the menu again and tried to focus on what he knew in his heart he had to do. "I know, and I am thankful for all the help you have been to me. I just need a change, I need to regroup and start my life over."

The waitress took their orders. Mark didn't feel that hungry, but he ordered a club sandwich anyway.

"Look, I'm leaving the firm and taking another job. I will be traveling a lot and might even relocate. I know it's hard for you to understand, but this is something I have to do."

Hank leaned back in his chair and looked out the window. His silence was unnerving, and he seemed to be in a far away place that Mark knew so well. "You know, Mark, you have been there for me every time I needed you. If this is what you need to do, then I support you in it. Just don't go crazy on me and do something stupid, okay?"

Mark smiled, thinking about the cabin and the last few

days touring the Merc building and the secret WJA city underneath. Hank didn't know how close he was to the truth. "No, I'll be okay. I just need new scenery, fresh air and a place where I don't have to fight off old memories, if you know what I mean."

Hank nodded and smiled. "So what is this new job? Are you going over to the enemy?" He laughed.

"No, nothing like that, it is somewhat of a government-type of job. I'm not too sure of what it all entails, but I think I'll like it."

The food came and looked better than Mark remembered and suddenly he found that he was hungry, very hungry. As they ate, Mark looked around the room, noticing a woman sitting in the back reading the newspaper. He took a second look and realized it was Isis. He looked at her and nodded as she smiled and got up, leaving a tip on the table.

"Hank, excuse me for a minute, I need to hit the men's room—I'll be right back."

Mark got up and headed toward the back of the deli. Isis's table was the last one before going down the hall to the restrooms. He saw a folded piece of paper sitting on top of the tip, and he slipped it into his pocket as he walked by.

Closing the door and locking it, he took out the note and read it. *'Answer the phone.'* Just then, a ringing came from one of the stalls behind him. He opened it up and saw a slim black cell phone sitting on the back of the toilet, he took it and flipped it open. "Yes?" Mark smiled as he heard Isis on the other end.

"Sorry for the runaround, but I needed to talk to you in private."

"No problem. What is it?'

"We have a case for you, and we need to meet. One hour, in the bookstore on Second Avenue."

"Okay. I'll be there,"

Slipping the phone into his pocket, he threw the note into the toilet and flushed it down. Sitting back down at the table, he bit into his club sandwich and sighed with delight as the sweet juices mixed and made his taste buds tingle.

As Hank ate, he talked about the new high-rise they were putting in up the street and how they just started talking with Trump Enterprises and it looked like they might reach a deal. Mark liked working for SED, and the people were great too. The whole experience was something he wouldn't trade for the world. He was going to miss it, but at the same time, he was excited to begin this new chapter in his life and see what his future held and learn more about his past.

Mark handed the keys to the car back to Hank before he paid for the meal. Hank protested, but Mark insisted, that he had a new car and not to worry about it. Mark held out his hand and thanked Hank for everything. Hank took his hand, pulled him close, and embraced him.

"Come on, man, friends hug! Now get off me, I've got work to do!"

Mark laughed and told him to call if he ever needed anything. He had twenty minutes to get to the bookstore so he hurried out of the deli and hailed a cab. He told the driver to take him to Second and Seventh; the cabbie nodded and flipped on the meter.

The bookstore was almost empty, with a college student here and there reading at a table or lost in the screen of a lap-

top. Most of the students had gone home for the holidays, but a few stayed to catch up on homework.

Mark wandered over to the fiction section and flipped through a Stephen King book.

"So you made it." Isis was good at sneaking up on people, but this time Mark did not even turn; he could smell her perfume and knew she was close, if not right behind him.

"Yeah, books are becoming a thing of the past with the internet and all, but I still love the smell of books, the feel of holding it as you read. Those are things you will never find with a computer."

"True, are you ready for your first assignment?"

"I guess. I hope it is an easy one, I'm new, you know."

"Yes, it was picked out by Solomon himself," Isis pulled out a small white card from her pocket. She handed it to Mark and smiled. "Good luck,"

Mark looked at the card as Isis walked away, and saw the letter M and the number 359. He thought it might be the number on the back of a book here in the bookstore. He looked around and found that every book had a letter and a number on their spines so he searched and after twenty minutes he found the book marked M359. It was a book about the *systems of governments and states*. Walking over to a private reading room, he went inside and closed the door. What fun reading he thought, not much of an imagination or maybe they picked the book that was sure to be shelved due to the fact that no one wanted to read it or was interested in its contents.

Sitting down at the desk, he flipped open the book and flipped through the pages. Noticing a bookmark, he turned to the page where it was placed. The heading read *'Law and the*

Government.'

Picking up the bookmark, he noticed a small earpiece attached to the back of the bookmark. Pulling it off, he placed it into his ear and heard the voice of a woman. Not Isis's voice but one much harder, maybe of a woman who had been with the organization a long time.

"Welcome to the Agency. This is top-secret and will only be played once, *pay close attention*."

Mark sat back in his seat and listened.

"The daughter of an important government official in Pakistan has been kidnapped. Her name is Alexis Moritiff. She was taken two weeks ago from her school and is being held in an abandoned office building just outside of Islamabad. Your mission is to extract her with any means necessary and bring her back to the point of origin. You will be instructed upon completion where to take her. You are to go to the shop on the corner of Twenty-Third and Forty-Second. There is a smoke shop there, and you will be given further instructions. You are to meet your contact at Eleven p.m. Good luck."

Mark took the earpiece out of his ear and placed it in his pocket. His excitement rose, he was supposed to go half way around the world to rescue a kidnapped girl? *How can I get this girl out?* Easy, huh? He thought it might be a simple look and tail to get information, or something like that but no, they had put him in the heat of everything, and to boot, sent him to a war torn volatile place.

Leaving the bookstore, he got a taxi and told the driver to go to the nearest car dealership. He needed a car, and he wanted to make sure that this was all on the up-and-up before he flew across the world and entrusted his life to the so-called

World Justice Agency.

ISIS WALKED INTO SOLOMON'S office after she was waved in; Solomon stood up and smiled as she entered. "Isis, I want you to keep an eye on Mark on this one. He might need some assistance, but stay back unless he gets in a jam."

"Sure thing, this is a big mission for the first one, don't you think?" Isis was concerned that it might be more then Mark was ready for and with the loss of his family still fresh in his mind, she thought it might be a good idea to work with him a little more first.

"I know, but I need to know if he can handle it. We are running out of time, and I need him to be fully operational as quickly as possible. He was the first, and we have never seen anyone respond as he did. I believe he will exceed our expectations."

"I'll keep him close." Isis left the room and opened her cell phone. "Hey, I need my gear ready by eleven, and get me a Taxi to Islamabad!"

KIRK MOANED AND ROLLED over, trying to get a few more minutes of sleep. His head pounded from lack of sleep and too much coffee the night before. Opening his eyes, he reached for the alarm clock radio that had gone off. The report on the morning news stopped him, with his hand frozen over the snooze button.

"In a shocking discovery this morning, a local CSI agent was found dead in his home, shot in the head. His wife was

also shot and killed. The NYPD and the FBI have not yet released a statement or any name, other than that it was one of them."

Kirk jumped up, ran into the next room, and flipped on the TV. "Geoff, get up, we have a problem!"

Geoff was just getting up when he saw the news report across the room on the TV where Kirk stood in his blue boxers. The hotel room was a one bedroom with a kitchenette and two king-sized beds, one in the main room, one in the bedroom, Kirk took the bedroom, and Geoff slept off the living room.

"Bugger!" Geoff pulled on a pair of cargo pants, wandered over to the couch and sat down.

"This is not good, man. First, we're being tailed by the Feds, and then the guy we interview is shot, and the creeps killed his wife too!" Kirk paced the room with both hands on his head, trying to think.

"Get your stuff. We're going down there!" Kirk shuffled back into his room and threw on some clothes, a pair of blue jeans, and a t-shirt that said Pink Floyd with a rainbow coming out of a prism on the front. When he was finished, Geoff was waiting with laptop and camera in hand. Grabbing his jacket, he put it on and glanced around one last time.

Just as Kirk was about to open the door, he heard a knock. "FBI—open up!" Someone shouted from the other side.

Kirk cursed and took out his .45 and slowly opened up the door. "What do you want?" Kirk was annoyed with the untimely visit and was in a hurry. He thought about slamming the door and jumping out the window and taking his chances running but knew that would only make things worse.

"We need to ask you a few questions," The suit had on a pair of dark sunglasses, and his partner looked like his twin. They stood with guns drawn as if they expected an army on the other side of the door instead of a sleepy reporter and an ugly Detroit cop.

"Come on in," Kirk holstered his weapon and opened the door wide to let the agents inside.

"We would like to see some identification, please." Geoff surprised Kirk when he spoke up. The two agents showed their badges and asked to see theirs. Kirk flashed his badge, and Geoff pulled out his press card and driver's license.

"We talked to your supervisor, and he informed us that you are on suspension. We also have two agents that informed us that you assaulted them and destroyed government property."

Kirk rolled his eyes and laughed in a guttural mocking tone that was laced with contempt. "Come on, guys, they were tailing me, and if you think that's assault, then you haven't ever been assaulted!"

"You are on thin ice, Detective. I suggest that you cooperate!"

"Fine, fine, but I have a few questions of my own."

The agents nodded, and the lead one pulled out a pad and a pen. "Okay, we have you two going into the house of one late Jefferson Jenkins last night at about Ten-Thirty."

"Yeah, he was a contact, we interviewed him about an investigation we are doing," Kirk thought hard and he had a bad feeling that things might get out of control if they followed the line of questions they seemed to be on.

"Investigation? You are on suspension! What could you

possibly have to talk about with a CSI agent, and what do you mean, "*was*"? You said he was you're contact how did you know so fast that he was killed?"

Geoff jumped in, holding up his hand trying to calm everyone down. "Hold on one minute, I'm doing a story about the prison poisoning last year for my magazine. Detective Weston was assisting me, and Mr. Jenkins was one of the agents that handled the case. We were just trying to find out if he knew or remembered anything about the case."

The agent in charge looked at Kirk, and then back to Geoff. "I see, so you wouldn't have any idea who could have shot him and his wife last night?"

"I have an idea…" Kirk muttered under his breath.

"You got something to say there, Detective?" The one in charge asked with a *go-ahead and try it*, tone in his voice.

"Yeah, I do! Why were we being tailed, and what business is it of yours who we go talk to?" Kirk stepped forward in a challenging stance toward agent in charge who had almost no distinguishing features and was average in every way down to his brown hair and his boring black tie.

"We have reason to believe that you are involved in an ongoing investigation. Every time we turn around, you and your sidekick are there. We've been going over your records and your file, and if you really want to know, you're a suspect!" A red flush crept up in the agent's neck and started to rise to his ears making Kirk smile with satisfaction.

"Suspect to what? You've got nothing on me!" Kirk yelled and paced the room like a caged animal. He envisioned pulling his .45 and shooting the pompous agent right between the eyes as his own anger rose and his neck started to get hot.

"For starters, you kill a key witness to the case a year ago; then you disappear for a year, only to come back and just about blow our case out of the water with your questioning!" The second agent did not say a word but hung back watching the situation evolve and waited to strike if things got out of hand.

"I was kidnapped and held for a year!" Kirk was furious! "But I bet my crabby old boss didn't tell you that now did he? I lived in a cell the size of your bathroom and saw things you wouldn't believe if I told you!"

The room went silent. The two agents looked at each other without saying a word.

"I was investigating the prison case when I think I got too close to whatever the heck is going on here!" Kirk slammed his fist down on the counter. "Then I get out, only finding that the case was closed and I've got the Feds behind me at every corner. You think I wanted to kill my only witness. He shot at me first and gave me no choice."

The agent in charge wrote on his notepad and took off his dark glasses. Looking at Kirk, he motioned for him to sit down. "I didn't know you had been taken, we assumed that you fled. Now, why didn't you report it?"

"I told my captain, and he approved me to look into it on my own, as long as he couldn't be tied to what I was doing."

"I see, well, if you will come with us, I would like to get you up to speed on what we've got going on here."

The two men walked to the door and went over to the elevator, and then they ushered Kirk and Geoff to a waiting car. It was the same model of sedan the last two FBI agents were driving but they were nowhere in site. The ride to the FBI

building was quiet, and Kirk went over and over in his mind everything he could remember about the evidence. He knew there was a mole in the FBI somewhere, and he had to be careful. These two men could be one of them or working for them, for all he knew.

Once they had parked and checked in, they were cleared, and the agent in charge led them to a small room with a table in the middle of it. He sat down in a metal chair and Kirk sat in the one across from the table sighing and rubbing his head. The second agent took Geoff and Kirk was sure they had him in another room very similar to this one. *Divide and conquer*, Kirk thought.

"Okay, this is one hundred percent top secret. What I'm about to tell you will not leave this room." He waited to get an answer from Kirk.

"I understand." The agent's eyes softened and he placed a large file on the table that was practically bursting at the seams filled with photos and papers.

"I'm placing you under my command. You will now be working with the FBI as a liaison. I cleared it with your supervisor and he gave me his sympathy." Kirk grinned.

"To begin with, we never shut the David's Island case down. We just renamed it 'Operation Justice'. As you know, this was no accident, but what you may not know is that a group calling themselves the World Justice Agency is behind this and many other crimes that are in that file."

"World Justice Agency! That's what that symbol means! I found their mark everywhere. They're the ones who kidnapped me." Kirk began to flip through the file that the agent had slid to him.

"What we know is this: They are highly-funded and very organized. We suspect that they have infiltrated every branch of the government and police force. They consider themselves the judge and jury as they see fit over wrongs that our justice system missed or will not deal with. In other words, they take the law in their own hands."

Kirk looked at photos of men and women at drop points and having coffee in local shops. The file was filled with unsolved cases involving rapists killed and corrupt politicians hung out to dry by leaking news of a scandal to the media. The cases went back some twenty years.

"As you can see, if they are not stopped, they will change the face of our justice system forever. We have an elite task force that has been on this for the last ten years. We believe that their leader is a multibillionaire and very well connected, the only problem is, they're invisible."

"What are you talking about? You have photos and cases with them near the scene of the crime!" Kirk looked up at the FBI agent as he held up photos and case files.

"Yeah, but every suspect and every person we have interviewed has an airtight alibi, some of them impossible to refute, credit card receipts and witnesses that place them somewhere else and not one matching fingerprint. It is perfect, but that's the problem, it's too perfect!" Kirk could sense the frustration in the agent's voice and knew then that this was personal to him; he could trust this man and he didn't even know his name.

Kirk looked at the overwhelming evidence that he had uncovered involving the prison he was right all along! "One thing that still confuses me, why they let me go. One day they

just up and let me go—who does that?"

"You see, that is one thing they believe, is not to kill anyone that they consider innocent. They will try to detour you from finding out who they are but will never kill an innocent! They believe in justice, not killing for revenge."

"Just like how the guards were left alive and only the guilty were punished." Kirk leaned back in his seat and sighed. "Well, the million dollar question is—why stop them? They're doing good and making sure that they don't hurt any innocent people. What's the big deal?"

"I know how you feel. Every one of us wants to see the bad guys get their day of judgment, but I believe in our legal system. If we let this go, then all over the country vigilantes will spring up, groups will begin to take the law into their own hands, and the country will tear itself apart. We must stop them before the public finds out that this is going on."

"So you have been covering it up to look like accidents to keep the public in the dark?"

"Yes, and hopefully make the WJA think that we have given up on trying finding them. We need them to think they've won."

Kirk rubbed his chin as he looked through the last of the file. "So what can I do?"

"You hit on something that they didn't like, enough so that they took you out of play for a whole year. We need your help tracking them down. You can continue your investigation with the full help of our task force."

"The first thing we need to find is this mole you've got. We find him, and then we find the WJA! Trying to track them the usual way won't work; they know every scheme, every

trail we will bark up. We need to get into their trust. We need to get close and take them down from the inside."

"So you'll join us?"

"Only if you let me do it my way, and stay out of my business!"

"Done, and by the way my name is Charles Goodwin, or Agent Goodwin."

Kirk stuck out his hand and shook his new boss's hand. It was going to be interesting working for the other side, but hey; maybe he could catch this mole and make him squirm a little, that would bring joy to his heart to see an FBI agent in the hot seat for a change.

Chapter Twenty

"YOU LOOK WONDERFUL, MARIA. AND YOUR HAIR is, as usual, well, uh—unusual!" Mark stood at the door to Maria's apartment. She wore a dark brown dress that showed off her complexion and olive skin. She had a messy bun off to one side of her head with two stick-like things crossing through it like swordsmen fighting to the death.

She smiled and grabbed her coat before taking Mark's arm. "Well, I like to mess around with it, and never mind about my hair. It is good to see you, and all in one piece!"

"Yeah, I'm here, sorry again for disappearing on you. I just couldn't get away."

"It's okay, you're here now, and that's all that matters." Maria held on to Mark's arm tightly. She tried not to show how much she cared for him; she knew it might be years before they could have a real relationship and she wanted to be prepared for that.

"I have something to show you." Mark said with a glimmer of youth in his eyes. Mark hit the button on his keychain, and a silver Ascari KZ1's lights flashed in the dark parking garage. The sleek sports car sat waiting for Mark to take the wheel like a racehorse waiting impatiently for the big race. Maria looked at the car, then back at Mark. Her jaw dropped, and she started to speak, but could not.

Mark laughed. "Well, get in before you fall down,"

Opening the passenger door, he helped Maria get in without falling over. The half million dollar car was everything that it was supposed to be, and worth every penny that Mark spent, or that his new boss spent!

Maria tried to ask him how he got the car, but Mark hushed her, telling her that one day he would tell her the whole story, but for now, to enjoy the ride.

The *Le Cirque* was an elegant restaurant in the heart of everything that New York had to offer. It had a fine selection of French food and a great view. As Mark drove, Maria looked around the car, playing with every button, and light she could find, she giggled when she found the flip-up monitor for the DVD player.

"You're having way too much fun with that," Mark joked.

"Well, it's not every day I get to ride in a high-priced sports car!"

Mark had on a dark black suit with silver pin striping that hid just under the top layer of woven fabric. His tie matched, with silver and black making a pattern that could make anyone look good, but between the car and the suit Mark looked like he was ready for the red carpet on Oscar night. He pulled up to the front door and was met by the valet, who took his keys

and smiled. The thin valet was glad he was working tonight and took the keys with greedy hands.

Mark escorted Maria up the stairs and into the restaurant. The waiter showed them to their table, which overlooked the city. Crystal and the sounds of glasses tinkling made an unmistakable ring in the air that almost made Mark shiver. The skyline lights sparkled in the evening air taking away the dirt and grime of the city and transforming it into a beautiful gem like Cinderella in her ball gown. Nevertheless, like the storybook story at the stroke of midnight, the spell would fall away and the ugly pumpkin would emerge, so New York in the morning would be back to its true self. Dark corners and dirty evils lurked waiting to kill and destroy.

"So tell me what you did for the last few days." Maria leaned on her elbows and looked at Mark with interest in her eyes.

"Well, to sum it up, I went out and finally dealt with my past and with the death of my family. It is something that I can now put behind me and move on with my life."

Maria seemed surprised and relieved. "Wow, with how you were the other night, I was wondering if you were going to go crazy or go off and do something stupid. I'm glad you could get away and think."

Mark smiled. "You're a great friend, Maria," Mark looked down at the table. "Well more then a friend, I don't think I could've gotten through this last year without you." Mark felt his face flush and wondered if he really was ready to move on and if he could really fall in love again.

Mark could tell he was making Maria all emotional and decided to lighten the mood. "So what do you think of the

car?"

"Well, it is a little small for my liking, but if you like it, I guess…"

"Whatever, you like it! Man, it is hard to impress you." Mark laughed.

"So do you have anything you need to tell me?" Maria questioned, trying to get Mark to open up and spill his news.

"Will you promise you won't get mad?"

"Promise."

"Okay, I got a new job," Mark could see the disappointment on Maria's face. "Don't worry; I think it's a good thing. If I'm going to be seeing you, then it will be better that we don't work in the same office."

"Seeing me, huh? Well, if you put it like that." Maria smiled, making her eyes glow green and yellow. "So tell me about this job, I see it has good perks." Nodding toward the front where the car was parked.

Mark was relieved to see the water coming. He wasn't sure how to break the news that he was going to be an assassin or a hit man. It was too much for anyone, even himself, to take in all at once. He did not even believe it himself. Maybe he wasn't cut out for this, and he was just kidding himself thinking he was stronger than he really was.

After they ordered, Mark sipped on his scotch and soda, hoping that Maria would forget about the question.

"Well, mister? Do tell, you've got me all curious over here."

Mark sighed. "This is the hard part, Maria, I don't want to lie to you; I want to always be open and honest with you."

"Yes, that is expected."

"That poses a problem with my new job. I—uh, you see..." Mark took Maria's hand and looked deep into her dark brown eyes. "Look, do you trust me?"

"Of course I do—why?" She sounded worried and her forehead wrinkled.

"I can't tell you what I do or will be doing, but trust me; I'm not doing anything unfaithful or evil. I just need to protect you."

"But…"

"I know it doesn't make any sense, but this is who I am and what I will be. I just want you to know up front what kind of relationship you are getting into."

Maria looked into Mark's eyes, and he could tell that she was thinking about everything that he had just told her. His heart raced as he waited to hear her response.

"You know, you could've lied and made up some job that doesn't exist. If you are willing to risk losing me over the truth, then that is good enough for me. I only ask one thing,"

"What's that?"

"Please be careful."

"I promise!"

GEOFF SAT OUT IN the waiting area while Kirk talked with the agent in charge. He wasn't surprised that he was taken out of the loop, being a reporter and all. He took out his cell phone and opened it up. He could see he had a text message, so he opened it and read it. His pulse jumped as he read the massage. His boss wanted something, and he wasn't even close to being ready. He sent a message back and then closed

the phone.

He looked around at everything that was going on. The offices were busy, with some people on the phone and others running around like an anthill that had just been kicked. Geoff took out his laptop from his shoulder bag, and logged on to the FBI website. He wanted to look up the director and get any information he could.

The director was Shaun M. Nichols. He opened up a search on Captain Jacobson, trying to see what agency he worked for. He must have been in another department or something.

Geoff stopped a man who looked like he might know what was going on and asked if he knew Jacobson.

"Captain? Yeah, he is in charge of the Operation Justice Task force. No one knows what it involves, other than that; it has been running for a few years now. I don't even know any agents who are involved other than him—it is all very hush-hush."

"Thank you. Is he here somewhere?"

"Yeah, his office is on the fifth floor. Just ask for him at the front desk."

"Thanks."

Geoff put away his laptop and slid his bag over his head; he walked toward the elevator, where he hit the up arrow. He thought he should try to get an interview and do something useful.

The fifth floor was open, with closed-off offices around the outside of the building and a center area filled with cubicles. The woman at the front counter asked him what she could help him with and he held his voice firm in spite of his

nerves that were running scared like a turkey on the day before thanksgiving.

"My name is Geoff, and I'm with World Magazine International. I want to speak with Captain Jacobson, if I could."

The middle-aged woman wore her hair up and in a conservative bun. She looked up at him and pulled off her glasses, which hung on a small chain around her neck. "Do you have an appointment, son?" She didn't wait for him to answer. "No, I didn't think so, tell you what—you leave me your card, and I'll have him call you, okay?"

Geoff could tell he was not getting any farther, so he took out a business card and handed it to her.

"Can you tell him it is about his special task force?"

She nodded, put on her glasses, and went back to typing on her keyboard. Geoff took the elevator back down to the main floor and waited for Kirk to finish his meeting.

AFTER GOING OVER JUST about everything about the operation that they could, Kirk got up, shook agent Goodwin's hand and started to leave.

"Oh, what's the story with your reporter friend?"

"He's cool, he knows almost everything about the case involving the prison, and I left out some parts about my kidnapping, since they were a bit unbelievable."

"Just be careful, don't let him in on too much. The last thing we need is for this to get out to the media."

"No problem. He knows that I'll kill him if he tries to cross me."

The agent laughed, but Kirk looked at him with a—*I'm serious look on his face.* "Okay, then, uh, you need anything,

just ask."

"I got one question, what can you tell me about Captain Jacobson?"

"He is the lead man on this task force and handles all the sensitive matters as far as the cover-ups go. He is the one who started the operation ten years ago."

"I'm just curious why he was given the file from Jenkins, and then after we talked to Jenkins, he ends up dead."

"We are looking into it, but I can assure you that he had nothing to do with Jenkins' death. The file was doctored to try to preserve the operation and keep a low profile."

Kirk thanked him and walked out into the waiting area to find Geoff. He found him sitting just outside of the door half asleep with boredom. "Hey, how'd it go?" Geoff asked.

"Good, I got new information that changes everything, but first I want to go out to Jenkins' place and see what's up."

The second agent that had brought them in was walking by when he heard Kirk talking about going over to the crime seen. "I'm going out there now; you two can ride along if you like."

"Great, it will save us a taxi."

MARIA WAVED FROM HER two-story window as Mark drove away. He looked back for a brief moment and smiled. She was a wonderful person and friend. He just hoped he could keep her in his life. At this point, he wasn't sure of anything let alone what was going to happen next week or even tomorrow.

He made his way to the smoke shop and pulled up to the curb in front of the store. This side of town was dingy, and if

you didn't have your wits, then you would be a prime target for a mugging or worse.

As Mark opened the door and the tiny bell bumped against the glass. The place was dim, almost dark and filled with choking smoke.

One person was milling about looking at different cigars. The shop owner stood behind an old-style till and had a short, fat stogie hanging out of the side of his mouth.

"Can I help you?" he grunted, as if it he was a bit annoyed that Mark had come in to stink up the place.

"Yeah, I'm here to meet someone. Uh, I was told to be here at eleven." Mark looked at his watch and noticed it was eleven, right on the nose.

"You Mark?"

"Yeah."

"Take your car around the side, in the alley, and Mario will tell you where to go." He puffed a thick cloud of smoke and turned to look at a small TV that sat behind the counter. He breathed in deep as if trying to get more smoke because it would be a waste to let it go unattended.

Mark left the shop and got into his car, pulling it around and down a dark alley. A man came out from a doorway to his left and stopped Mark. He was short and heavy, with a beanie on his head. He wore a nice trench coat and scarf to keep the cold out.

"Hey, I'm Mario," Mark had rolled down his window, and Mario leaned in. "I see you got yourself a new ride. Nice, all the newbie's do something like this." He laughed.

"Yeah, thought I would see who I was dealing with, you know?"

"You'll take it back before you know it. You've got no idea, pal. You ready?" He looked at Mark with a smirk on his face. Mark nodded and looked as confident as he could, even though he was terrified.

"Hold on to your hat—here we go!"

Mario pulled out a remote from his coat pocket and hit a red button. The ground shook, and right in front of Mark's eyes, the ground opened up. A huge hole dropped right in front of him and made a ramp leading down to an underground garage. Mario waved him down, and Mark drove down the ramp leading to what looked like a parking garage with lights lining the walls.

"Just find a spot and meet me inside." He pointed to a door that led to a small office that sat off in the corner of the parking garage. The garage was concrete and even the office in which Mario went into was built out of solid concrete.

Mark drove to a stall and parked next to a red Porsche. He smiled and looked a few rows down to see an Aston Martin sitting sideways, filling up two spaces.

The office was simple, with a desk that had a few computers sitting on it and bright overhead lighting. Mario took off his coat and led Mark through another door, which opened to a room that had a familiar look to it. This was definitely a WJA operation. Between the gadgets and the wall with a large glass case, it looked like something in a Sci-Fi movie. Hanging in a row in the case were what looked like wet suits.

"You've been briefed, and now I'll go over some more details. First thing is, when you get to the safe house, you'll find your weapons and equipment. If you have any questions on how to use them, or what to do, you can access the main com-

puter in any safe house. They're all voice-activated, watch this,"

Mario put his hand on a wall sensor. After it scanned his fingerprints, a screen came down from the ceiling. Once it was in place, it turned on and a voice welcomed him, asking what it could do for him.

"I need information on suiting up for the Taxi." Mario said with his Italian accent.

"The suit is located inside the glass case and will mold to your exact dimension and density of your body." The computer went on to explain how to operate the Taxi and the importance of using it correctly. The voice that filled the room seemed to come from everywhere and yet nowhere. It was a female voice and had a calm constant drone to it that sounded very electronic.

"Cool, so the Taxi is how I'm getting to Pakistan?"

"Bingo, now I'll explain. The Taxi, as we call it, is a high tech device that is connected from safe house to safe house. It is a series of underground tubes that are sealed and are controlled from the main station you see in front of you."

He pointed to a control panel mounted to the wall. "It has settings for the place you want to go and the time you want it to take you. A list of cities and safe houses will come up, like so."

He punched in Pakistan, and five cities came up on a list. He highlighted Islamabad. It lit up and locked the location in place.

"Now, it's around ten in the morning there, so you'll need to get there as soon as you can. We will set it at top speed."

"How fast is that?"

"Uh, you really don't want to know, pal." He chuckled and went on. "Next, you punch in your weight and height. I'd say you are just under six feet tall and, what, a buck eighty-five?"

"One-Eighty, why do they need all this information?"

Mario looked at him and tried to explain without going into too much detail. Mark grabbed a chair and sat down, trying to take in everything he had just heard. He looked at Mario and laughed. "You can't be serious." From the look on Mario's face, he could tell that he wasn't joking. "Oh, you are! Wow, give me a minute."

Mark ran through it all again in his mind. It was like a bank with the tubes where you hit a button; the air sucks the capsule up and sends it to the bank teller. Like that, but much bigger and far more involved.

From the sound of it, the underground network was based in just about every country, all leading like an underground train to stations called safe houses. Mario hit a key on the keypad, and part of the wall opened up with a grinding sound, revealing a round, metal pill-looking machine.

Mark got up and looked at it a little closer. It had a small glass window on the top where you could see out as you were lying on your back. The lid opened up from the side, like a clam opening to show off a pearl. The interior was made of a soft gel and had a five-point harness to strap you in and keep you from moving.

"So I put on this suit, and then I get into this thing and strap in?"

"Yup, and then a nontoxic sleeping gas will fill the capsule and put you out. Believe me; you don't want to be awake for

the ride!"

"I see, and when I get there, it will send in the fresh oxygen to wake me up, and that's it?"

"Yup. You'll be fine. You might feel a little sick for an hour or so, but you'll get used to it." The little man giggled and his black slicked back hair bounced out of place and he pulled out a black comb, ran it through, and grinned.

"And the suit, what does it do again?"

"It stimulates your blood by pumping your whole body to keep the blood flowing evenly, as you will be experiencing a whole lot of Gs."

"So without the suit?"

"Well, let's just say—you'd make a mess!"

"Ah."

"When you get on the other side, you will be met by your spotter and he will get you lined up and ready to go. If you've got questions, he will get you straightened out. Okay?"

Mark nodded as he undressed and pulled on his suit. It was soft, besides the cables and lumps from the small pumps imbedded in the fabric. He zipped it up and pulled the last piece over his head. Now he knew what Spiderman must feel like. He could barely move as it suctioned tight around his body.

"You ready?"

"Ha! No time like the present."

Mario helped him into the small capsule and strapped him in; making sure that everything was tight. Before closing the lid, Mario wished him luck by giving him a thumbs-up. Mark looked out of the little window and saw the top of the round tube that fit tight all the way around his little projectile.

He heard a beep as the same mellow female voice filled his confined space, counting down from ten. The wall went back into place as Mario disappeared from view, and a final thump made it feel like it he was buried and might never come out the other side alive.

"Nine,"

The sound of rushing air could be felt as the seal sucked down against the lid making a snap as it locked into place, but as the force grew, so did the seal.

"Eight,"

Mark could feel his heart race as he imagined himself shooting underground and going under the ocean. He felt a brief regret fill his mind and a part of him wanted to scream for Mario to let him out, he didn't want to do this…

"Seven,"

He could feel the tiny pumps begin to massage his body. Now, this wasn't bad. He could use one of these at home, it felt like a Swedish massage, and he felt like a python was squeezing him to death.

"Six,"

The sound grew louder, he could feel the force compressing as it hit the tiny vessel. The air at the foot was pulling, and the air at the top was pushing; yet the machine stood still.

"Five,"

He heard the hiss of gas as it filled the cabin. It smelled like vanilla and strawberries. Mark thought how nice it smelled as he fell asleep hearing the last number ring through his ears.

"Four,"

The machine shot into the earth's crust, sending Mark fly-

ing toward the Middle East at un-imaginable speeds. He lay soundly asleep as his craft pushed itself under the ocean. Within half an hour, he was across the other side of the ocean. The whole trip took just under two hours, but to Mark it was only a second.

Chapter Twenty-One

THE SCENE WAS CALCULATED AND VERY PROFESSIONAL. Kirk looked at the two bodies that lay in a queen bed and nodded to the coroners, who didn't smile back as if they were all thinking the same thing: This *was a hit.*

The body of Jenkins lay on its stomach with a single gunshot to the back of the head. The pillow was soaked with blood, and bits of his skull lay imbedded in the pillowcase.

His wife was on her back, with her eyes wide open and a horrified look on her face staring up at the ceiling fan that spun in lazy circles with dead lifeless eyes. She must have woken up after they shot her husband, just in time to see the killer standing over her. She was dead before she could even let out a scream.

It all was so wrong, Kirk thought. This was not supposed to happen to a young couple. For goodness sake, they haven't even had any kids yet. He had a finger of fear creep its way up

his spine and felt the eyes of Mrs. Jenkins haunting him, blaming him for her death, and promising never to let him rest.

The CSI agents took pictures and dusted for fingerprints. They went over everything, even though they knew they wouldn't find anything such as a careless fingerprint or a shell casing. The place was just as it should be, other than the bodies lying in pools of tacky gelling blood; nothing was out of place or seemed to be broken into.

Kirk rummaged through the closet touching the suits and dresses that hung, waiting for someone to put them on, but the owners would never wear them again unless one was suitable for a funeral. His foot hit something hard, and he bent over to get a closer look. It was a small gun safe, like the ones they had in hotels to keep personal items in, nothing large, just a gold watch, or some extra cash.

He motioned for Geoff to come over and help him move it. It was heavy for a small safe, and locked.

"I think I can get in," Geoff said. Kirk didn't show any surprise at this bit of news, he was getting used to the idea that his friend had many hidden talents.

"So you were a locksmith in high school?" Kirk said with an underlying tone of sarcasm in his voice.

"No. Just was a bad kid, you know, cars and the occasional quickie mart, my dad put a stop to it right quick. But no worries; I'm retired now." He smiled with only half of his mouth and it made him look fifteen rather then his true age.

Kirk watched as he leaned down, put his ear to the safe, and slowly turned the dial. In a few minutes, the safe was open. Geoff tried to look innocent, even though he was embarrassed to have even known how to break into a safe. "It's a

standard safe. Almost anyone could break in." He tried to play off his feat as if anyone could do it.

Kirk nodded and smiled. "It came in handy this time. Just remind me not to leave my wallet around your sticky little fingers!" The case had a file and a few savings bonds in it and a clip of a service revolver, the gun was missing. Kirk looked through the file and quickly shoved it in his coat pocket before he called one of the investigators over to look at the safe.

He was shocked to see the David's Island file in Jenkins' safe, this is all wrong. *What was going on?* A thin woman with a blue CSI ball cap on came and stooped down to look at the open safe. She began dusting for prints and Kirk decided it would be a good time to leave rather then wait for the questions that were sure to come next.

"Let's get out of here," Kirk took a quick look around and walked out the front door. *This whole thing stinks. Something else was going on.* He knew from the file and the information the FBI gave him that the WJA would not kill an innocent man let alone his wife.

"What was in that file?" Geoff wondered aloud.

"You're not going to believe it—it's the David's Island file from Cassy's Meyers office, the only file left, outside of what the FBI has,"

Geoff looked surprised as he looked back at the house that was now crawling with FBI and the NYPD who were taping off the crime scene with bright yellow *caution tape*.

"What are you thinking?" Geoff asked.

Kirk looked at Geoff as he hailed a taxi. "I think we have a mastermind who is hiring hit men to do his dirty work, and he works for the FBI or worse, the CIA. He wants to make it

look like it is this WJA group but has other plans of his own."

A yellow taxi stopped and they got in before their FBI ride or anyone else inside knew that they had gone. Kirk told the driver to take them to the hotel. It was getting late, and he wanted to try to get a hold of Mooch for some more *unconventional* computer work. This mole the FBI had was getting on Kirk's nerves, and he aimed to find out who it was.

Even if it killed him.

MARK BOLTED UP OUT of a deep sleep with sweat dripping from his forehead and back. His heart was racing and felt like it was going to burst right out of his chest. He looked around, trying to see in the dark where he was. He had a bad feeling in the back of his mind that something was wrong, *did the Taxi crash, and kill him? Was he still asleep and just dreaming?*

And then he smelled the faint, sweet sent of K's perfume. His heart leaped into his throat and for a moment, he thought he was going to cry. It was so real, just like he remembered it.

Where am I?

His thoughts spun around in his head like a top as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes, saw the nightstand to his right, and had to look again. It had an old black alarm clock and a black touch lamp with a book hanging lopsided over the clock; it was Ted Dekker's, *Kiss.*

Then he realized where he was—He was in his bedroom back home, in his room! *How did I get back here?*

He reached out his hand, sliding it along the sheets to his left hoping, praying that he would find what he so desperately

wanted to find, and he did! His fingers touched the warm skin of a sleeping woman. He could feel the slow rise and fall of her soft breathing and he closed his eyes again praying again that this dream would not end.

What? Maria?

He could not remember where he was or even what day it was. Confused and shaking, he reached up to the lamp on the nightstand and clicked it on. His head felt light and his heart began to beat even faster, making him feel like vomiting. Lying next to him was K!

The room was just as he left it, with everything frozen in time, as if he never left. Rushing to his feet, he ran to the bathroom, and threw up in the toilet and began to shake uncontrollably.

What is going on? Is this a dream?

His whole body ached from the top of his head to the bottom of his feet. Every muscle tensed as he stumbled back into his bedroom. He just about made it back to his bed when he stumbled and fell to the floor twisting his wrist as he hit the ground.

It can't be, K is dead. Get a hold of yourself, this is not real and the more you hold on to it the worse off you will be! He tried to tell himself that this was a dream, a *very* vivid dream.

Pulling himself to his feet, he could see the outline of K as she slept. Her blond hair lay softly on her shoulder, with a little curl hanging over one cheek. His brain tried to jumpstart fighting to pull him back into reality. Stumbling and shaking his way toward the bed Mark could feel hot tears stream down his face as he watched his beautiful wife sleep, she was so per-

fect and now he felt his heart tear open, the old wound ripping apart and blood gushing out anew.

He tried to wake up. *I have to wake up.* He slapped himself.

Nothing.

Then again, *slap*!

His nose began to bleed from the blow, dripping down his bare chest. Wiping the blood away with the back of his hand, he tried to focus. *What is going on?*

He tried to stop his mind from bombarding him with questions. He needed to go with this—this dream was more real than he had ever thought a dream could be. There must be a reason for this, something I must see and learn from. Now he was thinking clearly, all eight cylinders firing and wide-awake, or as awake as you can be in a dream.

His bare chest was wet from sweating, and his hair clung to his scalp soaked and matted. Walking over to the bed, he got back in. As K rolled over, she reached out and felt for him. She moaned peacefully and put her arm around him as she dreamed.

Mark slid down into the covers and rolled over, turning off the lamp. He reached out, wrapped his arms around K and pulled her close. Tears ran down his face as he sobbed quietly, knowing that in the morning she would be gone. The feel of her next to him was the only thing he wanted, had ever wanted. To have her, the blasted thing about it was just how unfair it was! He wanted to cry out and curse God and demand to have his life back, to take his old wise face in his and make him see what kind of pain he had coursing through his veins because of him!

Then he quieted and thanked that same God for this brief moment, this space in time where for one night no matter how small, he had her back in his arms. He knew that tomorrow she would be gone again.

His world was perfect right now, at this moment. His beautiful wife lay in his arms, and his daughter slept soundly down the hall.

THE MORNING LIGHT BROUGHT Mark back to reality. He could tell that it was the next day from the soft sunlight that streamed through the window and danced on his closed eyelids. He kept his eyes closed, trying not to open them, knowing that when he did, he would be alone.

He could feel the damp sheets under him from the long, intense dream the night before. Every day that he thought he was beginning to get over his wife, he would have a dream or a feeling that he could not shake. He missed her.

He loved her more then ever and after the dream, he felt like he was back to square one. *What am I going to do without her?* Slipping his hand across the bed, he longed for the warm body of his beloved K.

Nothing.

Alone, his fears were confirmed—it *was* just a dream.

"Honey, you better get up, or you'll be late for work,"

The simple sound of that familiar voice sent Mark into a panic, heart racing, mind whirring like an old machine that had been dead for a thousand years, Mark could not think or feel past the ringing in his ears and if it went on, he thought he might die!

It was K!

He opened his eyes and looked down at his toes and past them into the bathroom. He could see K pulling on a blue shirt. Her blond hair was trying to resist being put into a pony-tail, but she managed to make it to obey.

Think, Mark. He tried to calm down.

"Honey, you okay? You must have had a bad dream. You were soaked last night."

Mark tried to speak without sounding crazy. "Uh, yeah, I had a really bad dream."

"I'm sorry, baby." K leaned out from the bathroom and smiled at him with a sympathetic and caring look on her face. "You better get ready before Sam gets up."

"Okay, Mark, you are not crazy. This is just something that you will have to deal with. You were dreaming, I mean really dreaming!" He muttered to himself as he dragged himself out of bed.

Walking over to the bathroom door, he stared at his beautiful wife; he could not believe it. She was alive!

"Honey! You look terrible!" K wiped his hair back with her hand. "Are you feeling okay?" Her hand! Her wonderful hands and they were touching him.

"I feel a little sick to my stomach." He *was* feeling a little sick.

"Why are you looking at me like that? You look shocked to see me." K scrunched her eyebrows as she looked at him with concern.

Mark reached out and grabbed her, pulling her close. He hugged her, kissed her neck, and began to sob; he started to cry uncontrollably and his whole body shook.

"Baby? What's wrong? You're scaring me,"

Mark tried to answer, but couldn't. He just held on to K and cried, until he finally managed to pull himself together.

"Tell me, what is it, Hon?"

"My dream… it was so awful, and it was so real. I thought…thought you and Sam were dead!"

K kissed him and whispered in his ear. "I'm right here, forever!"

Mark couldn't believe how he felt. His whole body was filled with unbelievable joy. *K's alive.*

"Daddy!" Sam came bounding into the room. Her hair looked like it was gelled straight up.

"Baby Girl!" Mark took her up in his arms and kissed her all over, making her squeal with delight. Her laughter filled his heart with happiness as he tickled his little girl. He didn't know why he had dreamed such a vivid and real dream, but he knew that he had found that he loved his family so much more than he ever showed before.

After K had fixed breakfast and was busy trying to get Samantha to finish her eggs, Mark called in to work and took the day off. He needed to recoup from his dream, or whatever it was, he could not put it all together. It was as if he lived a year in a different world, or was it real and really in a different world?

K was overjoyed that he took the day off. She had to take Sam to a play date, and then they were going to take her out to her parents' place to spend the night.

Mark looked at the calendar, and then turned on the news. It was the day before his anniversary! Friday!

Mark sat down in his recliner and watched the news an-

chor talk about the weather. K and Sam die on Saturday! *It was a dream, Mark. It wasn't real!* He shook his head, trying to talk some sense into himself.

What if it was real, but just had not happened yet? That's impossible—you can't see into the future. Mark did not believe in that sort of thing. You could pay some crazy woman at the fair and have your fortune read, but this…this was something completely different.

He tried to remember his dream, but he could only remember parts of it. He hated having a dream and when you woke up you can't remember a thing about it other than if it was good or bad. All he could remember was that his wife and child had died, and that was enough for him to know that it *wasn't* a good one.

Mark remembered that he was going to take K to 'The Leaf' tonight for their anniversary and that he had gotten a hotel room as well, he wondered if the reservations were still there—they must be because as far as everyone else was concerned nothing had happened.

"K, I'm going to run into the City for a few hours today. I need to run some errands before we take Sam to Grandma's."

K answered from the kitchen. "Okay, I'll be a few hours at the park, and then we'll need a nap. I'll call and see if they can come over here to pick her up."

"Sounds great, are you excited about your hot date tonight?"

"You know it, baby!" K giggled as Sam mocked her and cried from her chair.

"Hot date!" Her little voice was muffled by the huge bite of scrambled eggs. "I hot, me, hot date!"

"Yes, you are kiddo. You have a hot date with Grandma and Grandpa tonight."

Sam giggled with glee and hollered for her grandparents. She loved to be with them, but who could blame her. They always had candy and lots of chocolate.

Chapter Twenty-Two

MOOCH WAS WAY TOO PERKY FOR HOW LATE IT was. Kirk was not a night owl, it was just past midnight, and Mooch chatted and munched on corn nuts in Kirks ear furthering his down-spiraling mood. Kirk grumbled and scowled at the phone in his hand as if that would transfer his feelings to the annoying geek on the other end. Kirk filled him in on their little FBI party and the code name *Operation Justice*, he wanted to see if there was something the FBI was not telling him.

"What is it, some FBI thing?" Mooch said.

"Yeah, I need to know everything about who might be involved, and also look up anything on the World Justice Agency."

Mooch laughed in Kirk's ear. "The WJA?"

"Yeah, why? Do you know who they are?"

"Yeah, they're the thing of myths, man. You know, they hunt down the bad guys and then disappear into the woodwork, kind of like Xmen but for real and no mutants, but pretty cool, if they were real that is."

"So do you know who runs it?"

"No, man, it was an idea, just a bedtime story, if you think they are a real group then you might check out what is in your coffee."

"It's real, and they're a real organization. I need to know who is in charge and where they are located; if the FBI thinks they exist then I will take their word for it over yours. Besides I have it on a good source that they do in-fact exist."

"I'll do my best, but you better cover my butt on this. If I get caught hacking the Feds, I'm in deep doo-doo."

"Just get me the information, according to what you say; you're the best, so here's your chance to prove it."

Kirk hung up the phone, set it on the breakfast bar, and stared off into space. He needed to find out who was pulling the strings on this whole thing.

Kirk looked over at where Geoff had been sitting and watching TV. He was passed out on the couch, with his mouth wide open and a guttural snore vibrating through his chest. It had been a long day, and Kirk was getting tired himself. Tomorrow they had to try to get an interview with Captain Jacobson, one way or another.

GEOFF WOKE UP WITH a start and yawned, stretching his arms above his head. The TV was on, but the rest of the apartment was dark. His watch read Two-Thirty a.m. and he

wondered what it was that made him wake up. He felt good and his mind kicked into gear reminding him why his internal clock had brought him back into the land of the living.

Getting up, he leaned back, popped his back, and let out a sigh and then went over to the fridge to grab a Pepsi. Nothing was as good as an ice-cold Pepsi, of course at this hour it might keep him up, but he wasn't planning on going to bed anytime soon anyway.

He looked at the door to Kirk's bedroom. It was half-open, and he could see Kirk's leg sticking out from under the covers like a dead branch on a very old tree.

It's time, he told himself.

Walking over to his shoulder bag, he pulled out a 9mm and screwed on the silencer. It was a beautiful weapon; the stainless steel caught the white light from the moon and bounced it back like a mirror. Geoff looked at Kirk as he slept. *This is not much of a challenge,* he thought, but he considered Kirk to be a simple job anyway. Besides, he was a professional and he had a job to do.

Slipping to Kirk's bedroom, he stood over Kirk with an evil smile on his face. Pointing his gun at Kirk's chest, he fired.

MARK DROVE INTO THE City and tried to clear his head. This dream or vision had shaken him up to his very core. Maybe he was dreaming now and what he thought was his dream the night before was reality?

He laughed.

Stop over thinking this. You're here, and your family is

alive. Then again he was not sure what was real anymore, maybe his mind was so broken that he imagined his family and now he was asleep somewhere and lost in this dream world of his own making.

The radio played in the background, filling the car with the distinctive voice of Glenn Beck, rattling on about gas prices and other related topics. Mark drove into a small coffee shop and found a spot in the front along the street, which was a rare if not unheard of experience, maybe this was a dream. The *Coffee Hut* was a local joint with young college students working behind the counter. He ordered a coconut mocha, sat down and looked through the morning paper.

"Cindy, are you there?" The sound of the morning news sounded from the TV that hung in the corner just above a rounded counter filled with straws, creamer, sugar and everything else you might want to add to your cup of Joe.

"Yes, Tom—I'm here at the New York City maximum security prison on David's Island. We don't know what is going on at this point, but we have been told that some inmates have food poisoning and the CDC is on scene to investigate,"

Mark looked up in horror, his face went white as a sheet as he heard the report and somehow remembered the same report a year ago as he drove home caught in traffic.

This can't be. It was a dream.

He looked down at the paper he held in his hand and saw an ad for buy one, get one free on Campbell's new chunky soup…at the Super Mart.

Mark jumped to his feet and ran out to his car leaving his coffee on the table and an old man reading the business section looked up at him with a look of confusion and disregard on his

face. He tried to remember all the details of that day. He worked, came home, took K out to dinner, and then went to the hotel.

Think, Mark! What happened?

I got up late and went over to pick up Samantha, then… then went to the Super Mart. Starting up the engine, he put it into gear and pulled onto the street.

"Pat. I have to find Pat!"

KIRK'S HEAD FELT LIKE it was twice its normal size and throbbed as if a thunderstorm was brewing in-between his ears. The tranquilizer was wearing off, but he still felt groggy and sleepy. Rubbing his head, he tried to sit up, but his side sent out a bolt of pain. Feeling under his shirt, he could tell that he had a few broken ribs.

Where am I?

All he could remember was going to bed, and then waking up here, wherever here was. Looking around, he could see light coming from under a door in front of him.

I must be the worst cop on Planet Earth. Kidnapped for the second time, these WJA people were beginning to get on his nerves.

He could tell from the small cell that he was in some sort of old prison or holding area. The floor was concrete with brick walls and he could see that the old door was made of solid wood with metal inlaid around the edges.

Sitting up, he tried to ignore the pain in his side. *Is this the WJA?* He thought, *couldn't be.* This was not their style, too rugged and out-of-date.

The lock on the old door groaned as a key was inserted into it. Light blinded Kirk as it hit his eyes like a thousand needles. He covered his eyes with his hand and tried to see who was standing in front of him, but all he saw was a dark shadow filling the void where the door once was.

The masked men grabbed Kirk and pulled him to his feet. He almost passed out from the pain, as he was drug out of his cell and down a hallway. He kicked his feet and tried to find his footing but slipped and slid without much success.

The hall had many more doors that led to other cells and most of them were shut. Who knew how many more victims were hidden away, waiting for their fate in a cold dark cell, wondering if they would ever see the blue sky again.

Kirk was thrown down onto a cold metal chair, and tied with his hands behind his back with a thin cord. His feet were tied to the legs of the chair as well, to keep him from kicking or trying to run away.

"You might be wondering why you are here, Detective Weston." The thick voice had a hint of Russian to it as he spoke in a deep tone, filled with hate and contempt.

"You have information that we need, and you are going to tell us everything you know. Understand?"

Kirk looked up at his attacker and into his dark eyes, instinctively memorizing them. He could see that this tall, well-built man could tear him apart without even breaking a sweat if he wanted to.

He didn't know if it was just a part of being Kirk Weston or if he was insane, but he spit in the Russian's face and glared unflinchingly at him as a slight smile rose to his face.

The general slapped Kirk with an open palm and sent him

toppling backward to the hard floor with a crash. He hit his head, a new sensation skipped through his brain, and he saw blue and yellow stars float across his vision.

Ow—that hurt.

Two masked men pulled him upright again, as the general looked at him as if he was examining a piece of fruit. "So, you think yourself tough. We will see, Mr. Weston."

With that, he turned, and the two other men followed him without a word. The door shut with a clink of the lock and once again, Kirk was alone in what looked to be a washroom. The floor drain was rusted and clogged with hair and who knows what else. The walls were tiled from the floor to the ceiling in light blue and white, the grout in-between was brown and black in some places from grime and dirt ground in after many years of neglect, with a hanging light bulb in the center of the room.

This isn't good. I have a feeling these guys are not planning on letting me go alive.

He could hear someone talking just outside of his door. He needed to find a way out or he had a feeling that this was going to be the end of the line for him. The door flew open, and one of the masked men marched in. Pulling out a knife, he cut away the rope, freeing Kirk's hands.

It's now or never!

Jumping to his feet, Kirk gritted his teeth and spun around, sending his legs and the chair crashing into the masked man's face. He fell to the floor with his legs on top of the now-unconscious man. His arms freed, he looked around franticly for the knife. He spotted it on the floor a few feet away. He did not know how he managed the maneuver but he didn't

have time to wonder or pat himself on the back.

Kirk dragged his body, which was screaming at him to stop and be reasonable, toward the knife. Reaching out to grab it, he could hear the attacker begin to stir.

One more foot.

With one last lunge, he took hold of the knife and spun onto his back, pulling his legs to his chest. He cut his feet loose from the chair and rolled to his feet, ignoring his screaming ribs.

Kirk jumped on the man, who was on his knees spitting out blood onto the cold tile floor. Kirk reached around the man's neck and slit his throat, pulling the blade from one end of his neck to the other. It felt like slicing through gritty butter and blood spilled out as the man made gasping gurgling sounds. Kirk dropped the man to the floor, stepped over the blood pooling up under the masked man, and walked toward the door.

The door was half-open, and dim light streamed into the room casting a dingy light over the cooling corpse. He could hear voices coming from down the hall and Kirk held his side with one hand, and clutched the knife in the other hand.

What do they think I know? And what do they think I am going to do, just lay down and take it?

He tried to forget about all the questions that ran through his mind, but he was a detective and it came naturally. However, he was getting mad and he could feel his primal instincts kicking in as he leaned out to get a clear view of the hall.

Just get out of here alive. The hall was clear, but he could tell that there was someone in the next room to his right. Down the hall about ten feet was a door with a small window

in it. He looked for a place to hide, but all he could see was a large crate that sat next to the door where the voices were coming from.

Come on, Kirk. Think. He looked back to the room he had just come from.

That's it!

He was hunched over, with all his senses taking over making him look like a big monkey on the hunt for food. Even his side wasn't hurting as much—*It must be from all the adrenaline pumping through my body.* Picking up the metal chair he was tied to, he pulled the masked man into it. Taking off his mask, he pulled it over his own head and tied the attacker's hands behind his back.

He looked to be Kirk's height and weight. *What luck. This might just work after all.* Reaching up, he loosened the light bulb that hung from its wires in the ceiling. He searched through the dead man's pockets, looking for any other weapons. He wanted to make a trap for the man who in time would wonder where his friend was and come looking for him.

Nothing, no knife, and not so much as a wallet. Kirk had his back to the door when he heard a voice behind him, it scared him to death, but somehow he managed to keep from jumping into the air with a scream.

"Hey, man, get him back to his cell—what are you doing?" The man had a thick accent and it was Russian as well. What had he gotten himself into now!

Kirk froze with his back to the door and stood facing the dead man who sat tied to the metal chair, and waited for his target to get within striking distance. He knew he would only have one shot at this.

"Yo! Hurry up!" The man sounded angry as he stepped into the room. Kirk could feel the light from the doorway disappear as the man came in—this was his moment.

Spinning around, he lurched forward and slid the sharp blade into his target's abdomen. The man gasped in pain, but before he could do anything about it, Kirk pulled out the knife, and in one sweeping motion, slashed it across his throat, spraying a stream of blood into Kirks face, the mask took most of it, and Kirk didn't seem to notice.

The man stared at Kirk with a confused look on his face; then he fell to his knees as blood spewed from his neck. He was dead before his head hit the floor.

Kirk took off his mask and searched the second man for weapons. He smiled when he found a Glock .45. Checking to see if the clip was full, he made his way out to the hallway. Kirk could hear his heart in his ears as it pounded. He once again was reminded of his broken ribs as he crouched and made his way down the hall. Everything was silent, as he got closer to the door with the window in it.

This time it was open and no one appeared to be inside.

He has to be talking to someone. The man he just killed was not talking to himself so Kirk was on edge searching every corner and possible hiding place.

Kirk looked around; it seemed the only way out was through that door! Hiding behind the crate, he leaned out to get a better look. The door led to a long hallway that went back to the cell where he had been held.

It looked empty.

Kirk took one last look and jumped out from his hiding place. Almost running but still crouched down as low as he

could, he made his way to the end of the hall.

A door at the end of the hall was closed, and without any cover he crouched out in the open, Kirk had no way of knowing what was on the other side. He sat thinking before he realized that there were other voices coming from the other cells, whispers, and moans. He could only make out two other people, but there may have been more.

Great, this is all I need. I'll be lucky to make it on my own, let alone with anyone else.

Kirk tried to open the cell door right behind him. *It was locked.*

The next one opened, and Kirk slipped inside. It was dark and empty, but it made a good place to hide and to think.

Okay. I'll try to go get help and come back for them. He was satisfied with this answer and looked out into the hall, wondering what to do next. He needed to draw whoever was on the other side of that door to him. He needed the element of surprise if he was going to come out of this alive.

Chapter Twenty-Three

PAT WAS SHOCKED AS HE WAS PULLED FROM BEHIND and slammed against the side of his apartment building. His face scraped against the rough brick and rubbed the first layer of skin off making a red mark, and Pat Rotter squealed like a girl in fright and surprise.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" Pat groaned as if he was being dragged to the principal's office.

Mark had his hand in his coat pocket and tried to make it look like he had a gun and he held Pat with his forearm placed firmly in the back of his neck.

"You're coming with me, or you are going to die!" Mark was angry, confused, and not himself—it was a bad combo for a confrontation, but he was not going to lose K and Sam again even if it meant killing this poor sop before he actually did anything.

"Easy, man! I don't have any money…"

"I don't want money," Mark growled. "Now come with me." Mark pushed the scared college student toward his waiting car. He squirmed as Mark pushed him into the passenger seat, and shut the door still pointing the fake gun through his coat pocket. Pat got his first look at his attacker and something in what he saw made him stay in the car as Mark walked around the other side and got in.

Mark thought fast; he knew that this kid would figure out that he didn't have a gun and he needed to keep the edge no matter what. His mind was spinning with different options and scenarios.

"Now, you listen up, Pat. I know who you are and what you are planning to do. I'm with the FBI, and we have reason to believe that you are involved with a terrorist origination that is going to blow up a building tomorrow morning,"

Pat's eyes got big as he stuttered and looked away avoiding Marks rock hard gaze. "Uh, how did you—what are you talking about?"

"I will give you two choices, you can cooperate with me and tell me everything you know, or you can spend the rest of your life behind bars, and then who will take care of your grandmother?"

Pat looked up when he heard his grandmother mentioned. He shook his head from side to side and his face turned bright red from anger or shame Mark didn't care either way. The kid did not know how far he was willing to go and with a sigh Pat nodded in agreement. "I didn't do anything—I just sold them the C-4, I stole it from my work and they promised me like fifty grand, I swear—that's all I did, man." Pat put his head in his hands and the faint smell of urine filled the car. He had

soiled himself in all the excitement, Mark pushed on like a shark smelling blood in the water.

"We have good Intel that you are the one who is going to plant the bomb. What is this crap about you only sold them the C-4?" Mark's temperature began to rise.

"I swear—that's all I did! They were going to pay me for the C-4. I was supposed to meet them today to get my money. I wasn't going to plant the bomb and besides I don't know anything about a bomb, I just gave them the C-4, oh man, this is all wrong, I didn't want this to happen, and I just needed the money!"

Mark could tell from their last meeting that he was telling the truth. They must have been planning to hold the cash until he promised to plant the bomb, and then try to blow him up along with everyone else.

"Get out of my car!" Marked looked at the steering wheel and barked at Pat with a voice that shot icy fingers through Pat's spine. "Now, if you ever contact them or I ever catch you getting into any trouble again, so help me!"

Pat's face relaxed and he glanced out the window and then back at Mark. "No, sir, I swear—I'll be good! It was stupid, and I'll stay out of trouble."

Mark reached over him and opened his door. "Get out of my sight—I'll be watching you!"

Pat ran from Mark's car and up to his apartment without looking back. Mark hoped that he was scared enough to stay out of any more situations that would end up killing him. Starting his car, Mark pulled out of the apartment complex parking lot. It was time to pay a little visit to a few bomb makers.

Mark took out his cell phone and called directory assistance. He needed to get a gun if he hoped to make his point at the cabin. He was calm and completely in control and he felt like he was a trained killer as his instincts took over. He could feel it all coming back to him, just like in his dream.

He did not know how much of his dream was true or going to come true, but he wasn't going to sit around as hundreds of innocent people were killed.

The operator came on the line, and he asked for the gun club Bert had taken him too. She connected him and thanked him for using their service in a monotone even voice.

"American Gun Club,"

"Yeah, is Fred there?"

"Uh, Fred? No one by that name works here."

"No, he's the fat man smoking a stogie over by the fireplace,"

The voice on the other end went silent. It was a long shot, but Fred was the only person he knew in the whole city that had weapons on short notice.

"Hold on, one second,"

Mark could hear the phone as he set it down on the counter. After a few minutes, he could hear Fred wheeze and cough as he picked up the receiver. "Yeah, who is this?"

"Hey Fred, I've got eight hundred dollars, cash, and I need a gun—today!"

"Uh…I don't know what you are talking about,"

"Fred, I know all about you and what you don't know, now, meet me in half an hour at the old train depot out in Brooklyn, you know the one?"

"Yeah, you got cash?"

"Yes, see you in half an hour,"

Mark hung up the phone and did not even think about how crazy this was. He would only be about an hour out from where the cabin was located. He was going to change his own future and the future of hundreds of families, and ask forgiveness later.

HUNCHED IN A DARK empty cell, Kirk waited. He could hear the sound of a little girl crying softly in a cell down the hall from him. *Come on, you need to help her!* Who knows what they have done to her and who else they have trapped here.

Kirk argued with himself and finally made up his mind. He slipped out of his hiding place and went to the door where he could hear a little girl. It was the same heavy wooden door lined with old rusty metal, just like the one he was trapped in ten minutes ago.

He shot a glance up and down the empty open hallway nervously hoping that no one came out of any of the many doors. If someone did, he would be totally exposed and would lose the element of surprise. "Hey, is anyone in there?" he whispered and tapped on the door as soft as he could.

"Yes, we are here, me and my daughter—please help us!" It was a woman, and her voice shook a little as she spoke.

"Okay, hold on, I'm a cop. You two just sit tight, I need to find a key so I can get you out,"

"Be careful, there are a bunch of them out there, you will come back for us won't you?"

Great! He thought. "Yeah, just hang in there, I'll be right

back."

Kirk quietly made his way to the door at the end of the hall even though it was over thirty feet of pure out in the open hell. He breathed in deep and opened the door, peeking in. It was a room with a desk, monitors, and a guard sitting with his back to the door.

Kirk could tell that he was asleep, but couldn't tell if anyone else was around the corner or not. Pushing the door open just enough to crawl through, he snuck up behind the sleeping guard.

The guard was a heavyset man with thick, brown hair and a fat nose that looked like it was smacked with a frying pan. He snored as a football game played on the small TV to his right. Getting to his knees, Kirk popped up with his gun drawn, adrenaline flowing, ribs screaming!

Empty.

The wide-open area in front of the desk was empty. He thought he saw a guard walk past the glass windows on the outside of the building, but no one saw him. Kirk noticed the marble floors and the fake plants that stood in pots every ten or so feet along the rounded curve of the front lobby windows. The lobby had to be fifty feet deep and two hundred feet long with a ceiling at twenty feet and the whole front of the building had windows from floor to ceiling.

Patrols, maybe with dogs. He spotted at least two separate patrols casting shadows into the dimly lit entryway.

Kirk looked down at the sleeping guard, raised his gun over his head, and swiftly brought it down smashing the guard on the left temple. The guard grunted, and then passed out.

Kirk sat him up so he looked like he was watching the TV and took the keys that hung from his belt. *What is this place?*

He looked around, trying to see if anything looked familiar. It might be an old prison, or even an office building that was converted into a holding facility.

Kirk made his way back to the woman's cell and was happy to see that the hallway was still empty.

"Hold on, I got the keys,"

He could hear them moving inside as he shoved the keys into the lock. The keys were old and rusted, and made a creaking sound as they turned and finally clicked open. "Got it,"

The large wooden door swung open with a loud unnerving popping sound. A woman and a little girl stood squinting as bright light streamed in from the hallway. She was in her late twenties with wheat blond hair and was beat up and dirty from the conditions. The little girl looked up at him with a look of fear in her eyes. She hugged her mother's leg and smothered her face in her pants as if to hide. Her face was smudged with black grime and a small cut had dried blood above her right eye.

"You okay?" Kirk asked.

"Yeah, we're sure glad to see you, thank you so much for helping us. We heard you come in last night, and it sounded like they were going to kill you."

"Yeah, they might have, too,"

"Oh, you're bleeding." The woman gasped, and put a hand out as if her touch could heal him.

"It's okay. Just a few broken ribs, nothing I can't handle, now we've got to get you out of here. Just do as I say and follow me, okay?"

She nodded and the little girl peered out from behind her mother's leg and studied him with big round eyes. Kirk was

not sure how he was going to get out of here with a woman and a child in tow, but he knew he had to try. He led them to the door at the end of the hall and had them wait just inside so he could check to see if the coast was clear.

The main lobby looked empty, and Kirk noticed three elevators off to the left standing side by side like three magical doors offering them freedom or death depending on which one they chose. *Door number one, oh sorry you don't get the trip to Hawaii, instead you get a one way ticket to hell, no refunds!* He had to hide them until he could find a way past the guards outside. The expanse between the desk and the waiting elevators was a vast open lobby with windows offering no hiding place. The guards who were making their rounds on the other side of the glass would see them fore sure.

Kirk looked around the desk, hoping to find something—anything that would help.

Ah, a radio! He took the radio from the fat guard's belt. *Here we go!* Kirk hit the talk button, "Intruder! Intruder at the rear of the building. Every available man go to the southeast end of the building!" Kirk ducked down behind the desk as he saw guards running past the windows, heading toward the back of the building.

"Okay," He leaned his head back into the hallway, and motioned for the two frightened captives to follow him. "Time to go,"

He hurried across the lobby and out the main door thinking that the elevators would only be needed if they needed to retreat. It was dark, and Kirk didn't know if it was early morning or late in the evening. The woman and her daughter followed right behind him without a word. The air was cool and

sharp as they made their way across the lawn in the front of the building, and Kirk could see his breath puff out in front of him as he ran hunched over.

He found a large bush and had them hide behind it. They could see bouncing beams of light from flashlights as their captors searched for the intruders.

"Okay, you two stay here; I'll be right back,"

Kirk looked around and saw that they were in the middle of the woods somewhere. He saw a dirt road to the left, and it led to a gate that had two towers with snipers standing guard. The glow of a cigarette stood out like a tiny spark against the dark sky and one of the snipers took a drag. They didn't seem too concerned by the alert and didn't even act as if they were worried in the least.

Now what?

The fence was a double fence with a dog run in-between that held pit bulls and maybe something worse sniffing around and some were even sleeping. He saw a Jeep coming toward them with a gunner sitting on top holding a machine gun and a spotlight.

Kirk ducked down, he looked over to where the woman was hiding, and a sick feeling came over him. The Jeep stopped a few feet from them, and a guard stepped out and began to look around.

He pulled out a cigarette and lit up, the light from the cigarette made his face look sinister in the dark and reminded Kirk of a movie he saw where, the Devil possessed a man, and this man had that same lost dead look in his eye.

Don't move! Just stay still!

He could just barely make out the woman and her blond

hair in the dark as they hid ten yards from where Kirk was. He cursed himself for not making sure they were closer to him as they ran. She had her hand over the little girl's mouth, and Kirk's heart jumped into his throat as he heard the girl cry out.

No!

Kirk jumped up, yelled, and started running toward the Jeep waving his arms as he ran. The guard dropped his cigarette and leveled his automatic machine gun at Kirk. He dropped the Glock on the ground behind him hoping that maybe the girl and her mother would find it and at least have something to defend themselves with.

"Stop—or I'll shoot!"

Kirk raised his hands in the air; he looked at the two hiding in the bushes. They backed away and crawled under some broken pallets that sat nearby in a twisted heap. He breathed a sigh of relief as the guards, in the confusion, forgot about the first scream.

Kirk was shoved into the Jeep and taken around back to a loading dock, where he was dumped on the hard concrete floor. After a few men beat him and spit on him, he was dragged back to his cell. The door slammed with a loud thud, and, once again, Kirk was alone in the dark.

THE WOMAN HID UNDER a wooden pallet and held her hand over her daughter's mouth. She had never been as scared as she was now. If they found her, they would kill her, and her daughter for trying to escape.

She tried not to cry; she needed to be strong for her little girl. The whole complex was swarming with guards now and

they all had flashlights and guns.

They will find us, for sure! Just stay hidden until morning. This is better than the cell. She and her child hid out all night with guards and searchlights passing within inches from them at times, and she thought of her brave rescuer and shuddered at the thought of what they planned to do to him.

He helped them. Why would he help them? She held her little girl, who had silently sobbed herself to sleep. It would be morning soon, and she would have a completely new situation to get out of. With light their hiding place would not be enough to escape detection. Looking around, she saw a small outbuilding about one hundred feet away. Maybe it was an electric building or a pump house of some kind; she knew they had to go there.

She woke up her daughter, and they planned how they were going to play a game of hide and seek. However, this time it would be for their lives.

Chapter Twenty-Four

THE RIOT SHOTGUN WAS JUST LIKE THE ONE MARK remembered in his dream down to the black stock and the way the cold metal felt in his hands. He thanked the confused Fred and sent him on his way. He didn't want to know what Mark was going to do with it and Mark was in no mood to have a long dull conversation with the fat drunk.

The road was paved with graying blacktop, and the fall leaves shone in bright colors making the world and the hills come alive with bright reds, orange and yellows. Mark liked it a lot better than the snow—then again, was it really snow or what? He wasn't sure what to think, the dream or whatever he had gone through took him through a year of life which, he had no desire to repeat. He was in uncharted territory now; his future was in his own hands now and for better or worse he believed what he dreamed or saw was real or would be real if

he didn't act.

He glanced in his rearview mirror, looking for something…. or someone, he couldn't remember why, but he had this feeling that he was supposed to see someone.

A car, maybe, or a woman. Yeah, a woman. He remembered bits and pieces of what he saw but it was coming back to him as he went along this dangerous path.

A KOA Campground sign loomed up ahead, and he soon saw the dirt road turning off to the left calling to him like some spirit pulling him to his fate. He looked at himself in the mirror one last time and turned his Honda down the dirt road. The face he saw was hard and he almost did not recognize it. The look in the face that stared back at him had dark blue eyes that held every terror and fear ever thought or imagined. It scared him and he looked away before he lost his nerve.

He found the wide spot in the road just before a hill that rose and fell opening up to the valley beyond. He could see the cabin in his mind standing there like a lonely gunslinger, hand on his hip, waiting for the showdown. The shotgun was loaded and ready and Mark locked the doors to his Honda and started down the road with it cradled in his left arm.

The cabin looked the same, but without a pile of wood stacked on the porch. He saw three trucks parked in front of the cabin, the same three that he remembered and a chill ran its way up his spine making him shiver. The men inside were going to see someone other than Pat today, and he didn't want money.

Mark crouched behind an old Gray Chevy truck and could hear the three men in an intense argument inside. Peering around the front bumper, he could see one of the men standing

with his back to the front window. He was waving his arms and yelling in a dramatic fashion, which looked a lot like a crazy person screaming about the end of the world.

Time to make history, Mark! He could feel his heartbeat in his ears pounding like a jackhammer, it thumped and pulsed and then, like a machine, he seemed to drop a gear and he could physically feel his heart slow and a feeling of control and knowing moved through him.

Mark jumped up from his hiding place and bull-rushed the door with his shoulder down and gripped the shotgun. The door splintered in a cracking, groaning sound and gave way under the force of Mark's body as he crashed through the weakened door.

The three men were shocked, to say the least. The leader jumped in horror and pulled out a .45 from his hip holster with a twisted jerky movement that told Mark instantly that he was not used to drawing his weapon.

Mark rolled up to his feet and pumped a shell into the leader's chest, causing him to fly back with his arms and legs out in front of him. He hit the back wall and his gun clattered to the ground sliding away spinning as it went. The big man landed in a bloody heap with a huge red stain covering his chest and running down his legs and onto the floor.

The other two men froze in horror as they watched their leader fall to the floor so fast that they hesitated wondering if what they just saw was real or imagined. Mark was on his feet and had the business end of the shotgun pointed at them before they could even react.

"Anyone else?" Mark asked in a calm almost conversational voice. The two men did not hesitate this time and

dropped their weapons like obedient children.

"Sit down at the table with your hands up—you drop your hands, you die!" He waved the shotgun toward the table and the two men did as they were told.

Mark saw the shell of a phone sitting on the table and a black remote detonator next to it. Picking it up, he looked at it and smiled. The smile was not a pleasant one; the blond scruffy haired man twitched in his seat and shot a nervous glance at his dead friend.

"So you've been up to no good, I see. What will happen if I push this button?" He moved his hand over the red button hovering like a rattlesnake, and the two men grunted and started to rise in protest.

"Sit down!" Mark pumped another round into the chamber and pointed it at them. His mind was racing and each bit of information processed so fast that he did not even know what it all meant until he had time to think about it later. The cabin layout, windows and doors locked or open, possible hiding places and as all this filtered through his mind he moved and acted based on what he saw and somehow knew.

The bomb was wired and about to be placed into the phone when an argument ensued about who was going to detonate the bomb. Mark remembered Pat had hit the light on the top of the phone to activate the bomb and now saw that they did not trust each other and for good reason. The poor sap that activated the bomb would be expendable and they all knew it.

Walking over to the scarred wooden table, he leaned over and found a button that looked to be the right one on the top of the phone casing. He pushed it and the two men flinched as the red light came on.

"It's ironic that you should have this bomb here at this very moment," Walking around behind the men, Mark pushed the end of his shotgun against the hairy one's head. They did not pay much attention to Mark; they were staring at the bomb that was now activated and sitting a few feet from them.

Mark was silent and calm as he for a brief moment thought about what he was going to do, but then he knew that he had already made up his mind how this story was going to end.

Pulling out four zip ties, he tied the men's hands together; then their free hands were tied to the table legs so they had to sit with their heads on the table. The shorter man with a red flannel shirt pulled up, spit at Mark, and cursed in a run of sailor like profanity.

Without any reaction, Mark wiped it off. He took the phone bomb and strapped it to his back with some duct tape that was sitting on the table. He taped their mouths and as he taped the bomb to the spitter, he kicked and squirmed as the blond mouthed something under the tape over his mouth. Mark didn't look at him and worked without saying a word, he was blind, deaf, and would not come out of, whatever was now running through his blood until the killing was done.

Walking out the front door, he looked around at the trees and the beautiful fall colors wondering how something so ugly could be in the mist of something so beautiful.

Mark walked back to his car and turned to look at the little cabin that sat in the valley below like a painting you might find in an expensive hotel lobby.

It is a great day for a…

Then he pressed the red button.

A mushroom cloud rose to the sky and the screeching

squeal of ripping metal and wood filled the little valley as if the very hand of God had reached down and crushed the entire valley under his mighty hand. A rush of wind came up the valley and blew past Mark's face lifting red and yellow leaves into the air.

Better here than in a crowded supermarket. The simple thought did not justify what he had just done—but somehow he felt no guilt for it and when he went home and kissed K, and held Sam in his arms, he had a feeling he would not only never feel guilty, he might even think of this day in the future, as the day he saved his family.

Getting back into his Honda Accord, he turned around and drove back toward the expressway. He had just enough time to make it home and get ready for dinner.

KIRK COULD FEEL BLOOD caked to his eyelids and it made opening them more difficult. He opened them with care and looked around to see how bad it was. He was in a different cell, but they were all the same to him—dark and cold.

His body shrieked in pain with every movement, even breathing hurt but he didn't have a way of not doing that. Sitting up, he could see light coming from under the door.

Is it morning, or is it still night?

He could not tell, all he knew was he had to get out of here because this time they would kill him and not be so stupid around him knowing that he had killed a few of their men already. Then he shivered as he remembered the woman and the little girl. He hoped that they were all right.

A plan—he needed a plan to escape this place. He didn't

even know where he was, or what country, for that matter. However, one thing he knew without any doubt, if he stayed here much longer, he was going to die.

Pulling himself to his feet, Kirk dragged himself to the old thick wooden door and began pounding and yelling for a guard. He threw in a few remarks about their mothers and the stench that surrounded them—not entirely sure what he was going to do if one of the Russians came.

The yelling worked and the loud footfalls announced his arrival so Kirk backed away from the door. A masked guard carrying a fully automatic machine gun came bursting into the room like a bull in a china shop.

"I want to talk to the person in charge, your boss, the main pig leading this pack of swine! You understand tough guy?"

The guard whipped the butt of his gun around, hitting Kirk across the jaw and sending him flying to the ground.

Spitting blood out onto the concrete floor, Kirk looked up from his knees at his attacker. He just stood there looking back at him through his black ski mask.

Stepping aside, another guard came in with a chair. Kirk was tied to it and blindfolded like before and he clenched his jaw as each broken rib cursed his name with each breath in and rough movement.

Okay, this might be good; at least I could die in peace.

The sound of a third set of footsteps could be heard as someone else entered the room. Kirk could hear the sound of another chair as it scraped on the concrete making a *nail on the chalkboard sound.*

"Detective Weston, you have been trouble for me. You killed some of my men, and you took two of my very impor-

tant prisoners," The voice came with an accent but Kirk couldn't place it, it was very familiar but something was not right with it, as if he was faking it to try to disguise his voice.

Kirk was glad. That meant they were still out there, hiding somewhere.

"What do you want from me?" Kirk's voice sounded cracked and weak even though he tried to make it sound like he was in no pain at all. But some things you can't fake.

Kirk's simple question was met with a chuckle. "You should have figured it out by now, detective, unless you are dumber than I thought."

"You're the mole!"

"Ah, yes. Then you have been paying attention!"

Kirk thought as fast as he could. This had to be an FBI or CIA agent. "So what made you turn against your own kind? You some sort of religious wacko or something?"

"No, no," He chuckled. "Religion is for people who need God and are weak. I want God's power! And soon I will have it!"

Kirk tried not to laugh right in the guy's face. He needed more information before he was executed and the guy seemed ready and willing to talk to his dying prisoner. "Let me guess, you are one of these World Justice Agency freaks that think they can decide who lives and who dies, and it all went to your head—am I close?"

By the silence in the room, he figured he hit on something. He could feel the anger rising in the room. "The WJA is a drop in the bucket compared to what I am capable of. They betrayed me! They left me and now are trying to kill me!" His voice rose as he stood up and walked over to where Kirk

was tied up.

"You are one of them aren't you, Detective? You are here to kill me?"

This time Kirk laughed. "No, I'm trying to catch the WJA and the mole that is working with them. I'm not a big fan of the vigilantes myself."

Kirk was beginning to put the pieces together. This guy used to be in the WJA and worked with the FBI, he was their inside guy. Now he is rogue and out killing and doing whatever else on his own. The WJA must have dropped him when he went psycho, and now he is trying to bring down the WJA himself.

"I set up and gave top-secret information to them, and then they tied everything back to me and tried to set me up. No one sets me up!" He leaned down and yelled in Kirk's ear. "Then you come along and mess everything up with your *investigation*, you start putting your nose into places where it doesn't belong!"

"You killed a cop and his wife!"

"He was a liability, it had to be done. You see, I am going to take down the WJA by bombing supermarkets and schools in *their* name. The FBI, CIA and every other government organization will hunt them down without mercy. Then I will take over as the leader and I'll be the hero!"

"You won't get away with it!" Kirk growled.

Kirk felt the man's harsh breath on his face as he screamed at him. "Who's going to stop me?"

The door slammed with a loud bang, and Kirk was once again left alone. He was still tied up and blindfolded and he could taste blood as he licked his lips. He had to stop this lu-

natic before he killed any more innocent people.

THE SMALL OUTBUILDING WAS more like a shed than a building. The scared woman and her child finally made it to the door, which was unlocked. She breathed a sigh of relief and she as her daughter snuck inside without drawing any attention to themselves.

The pump house had some electric boxes on one wall and two pumps that ran with a loud droning sound sitting on the floor like two sleeping monsters. She hugged her daughter, who didn't seem worried at the moment. The night had been long and hard on both of them. They found a spot behind the larger of the two pumps and cuddled up together. After a few minutes, they were soon asleep.

The silence woke the sleeping woman as the pumps turned off making the silence almost louder than the noise. They had only been sleeping for a few hours, but it felt like it was all day. She stretched and rubbed her eyes with a yawn. Looking around, she noticed that the floor was made of dirt and the pumps were sitting on concrete pads, and the room was warm with a muggy heat coming off the machines.

She ran through different situations, trying to think of a way to escape. The gate was the only way; she did not think that they could get through two sets of fences and guard dogs and the chance of them doing anything in daylight would be stupid.

The door rattled, and her heart went into her throat. She froze as a short guard with a submachine gun slung over his shoulder came into the little shed. He took out a cigarette and

lit it up, taking a long drag in and then blowing out a puff of smoke.

He doesn't even know we're here. She thought.

He mumbled something, and then sat down against the wall and pulled his hat over his eyes. He looked like he was going to take a nap. Within a few minutes, she saw that she was right. His snoring was erratic and choppy, but he was definitely out.

She looked down at her daughter, who slept with her head on the floor; then she looked back at this guard, this guard with a gun leaning against the wall next to him and a dirty baseball cap pulled low over his face.

This could be our ticket out of here, she thought.

She waited a few more minutes before standing up and slipping off her shoes. She needed to be as quiet as a church mouse…and get that gun.

The sleeping guard looked very comfortable. From the look of the small pile of cigarette butts that were on the floor next to where he sat, he did this on a regular basis. She could feel her stomach turn as he moved his arm in his sleep.

I can't do this! What if he wakes up? Then what? Come on get it together. You need to live, nothing more, just do whatever you have to! Tiptoeing closer, she bent down and reached out her hand for the weapon.

Got it!

She pulled it to her chest and froze as the guard stared at her with his dark, blazing eyes. She tried to bring the gun around, but couldn't. All she could do was just stand there, frozen. He didn't move either, he just looked at her as if trying to plan his next move.

Then it hit her…he was asleep. His eyes were open, but they were unresponsive and empty. She slowly backed away and made her way back to her daughter, who smiled in her sleep.

"Sweet dreams, honey. *Sweet dreams.*"

Chapter Twenty-Five

MARK LOOKED AT HIS WIFE.

She's so beautiful!

He couldn't believe what was happening to him, whether he was in a dream world or in the real world. His mind refused to let it alone and even in the middle of the night he woke himself up just to see if she was still there next to him sleeping. She was, and Mark touched her soft shoulder and felt the rise and fall of her breathing.

Time had a way of working out the details and now he knew that this gift or curse he did not know yet, had given him something—He lived life full throttle and had this lust for living that he never had before. It was as if he had been given a second chance and he was not going to waste it. A year came and went. Life changed for Mark in ways that would make most men shake in fear, and others turn green with envy. He was now working with the World Justice Agency full time and

filling in the missing parts of his memory.

He smiled as he thought about when he walked into the main WJA office and shocked Solomon and everyone else who was working on his case. It had been a week or so after the cabin bombing, and Mark had seen Isis tailing him and he remembered who she was and who she worked for. On any given day in his old life, he would not have noticed her black Lexus, but now he noticed everything.

It was as if he had a new instinct, a second instinct. He could see and feel what was going to happen in a situation and could react with incredible speed. Not psychic or anything like that, but just an overwhelming sense of knowing. If a good thing was about to happen it was as if he would feel it and feel the emotion before anything ever even happened.

Isis was shocked when he pulled over to the side of the road and then back in behind her when she passed him. Mark followed her downtown and when she pulled into the Merc buildings underground parking garage, she had Mark in tow.

"Hello, Isis," Mark smiled as he walked up to her and followed her into the elevator. "Going down?"

Isis tried to act innocent, but knew something was up when Mark punched in the three so-called secret numbers sending them down into the heart of the WJA's main office.

"Nine, five, two huh? Clever, spells WJA on the keypad on a cell phone,"

"I take it your memory has returned," She said with a small smile appearing in the corner of her mouth.

"Most of it, and maybe more than was supposed too, at least this time you don't have to come through my window to convince me."

She looked confused, but didn't say anything. The rest of the group was happy to see him and they got him going on some training and had him help Isis on a few easy assignments.

Mark liked Isis instantly and loved her attention to detail; she was a cool and in control of her self, kind of woman. She planned every detail with precise direction and never missed anything. He enjoyed learning from her, and she was willing to help him in any way she could.

Solomon could not explain his dreams, or how he could see into the future, it didn't happen all the time and after the first time, they came in short bursts like a bad headache or daydream. If you have ever driven somewhere and after you arrived, could not remember how you got there—like that, only different.

Solomon just smiled in his fatherly way and said, "You've been granted a gift, do not waste it. If it was not for your dream, your family would be dead right now."

K was supportive of his new job and never asked him to explain what he was doing or where he was when his work took him late into the nights on a few occasions. She knew him well enough that, if he needed to keep it from her, then she could trust him.

"I don't deserve you, babe,"

"I know," K said, "but you've got me—now run along and go be the hero."

Mark knew that she was scared and hoped he would be careful. He wondered how much she knew or what she thought he might be doing with the odd hours he worked. He doubted that she bought the working for the government thing

and he did not expect her too. It was a nice story to tell the neighbors at backyard Bar-B-Q's. It meant a lot to him to know that she loved him and supported him.

They paid off the house… or, rather, Solomon paid it off that Christmas. He had become part of the family and loved Sam as if she was his own granddaughter. K couldn't believe it and cried as she hugged Solomon. He came over for dinner often and would play dress-up with Samantha. The bracelets and lipstick on the older man was a sight, but Sam loved it, and that was enough for him.

Today he had to take the *Taxi* over to Vermont, where two brothers had been on a killing spree. They had kidnapped over ten girls from a local high school hangout. It took the authorities ten months to find six of the girls. They were all high school age and almost unrecognizable.

Mark cringed when he saw the file. The brothers would team up and do horrible things, as if it was a sport to them or a competition. They had sent in one of their undercover women. It was easy to make her look like a teenager. She was in the school only two weeks before she was taken. They had a tracking device on her, and Mark was going in to get her out.

He was going to be gone for two days between the rescue and the hit. He hoped to be back in time for the weekend. He did not get a normal weekend like a traditional job. His work was set up on a case-by-case basis, and he would get time off in between cases. The more time he was gone for a case, the longer his so-called weekend was.

Zipping up his suit, he crawled into the *Taxi* and hit the start button. It was hard to believe, but he rather enjoyed using this thing. It still made him a little sick afterward, but it sure

saved time.

"MARK, WE NEED YOU, come in as soon as you can. We have a case you need to see." Isis sounded urgent as she talked to Mark on his cell phone. He promised to be there as fast as traffic would allow.

Mark wondered what would make Isis sound so nervous on the phone, which was not normal for her. Mark was willing to do whatever needed to be done, and he thought maybe the case might involve an important person, maybe even a celebrity. The streets were jammed with cars, bumper-to-bumper and the sound of horns, and cursing made the air have an almost pleasant ring to it. It took thirty minutes to go five blocks; but then again, it was New York.

Mark smiled at Mr. Able, who was reading the morning paper. "You ready for the new year?"

"You bet—I got all the grandkids a bucket of candy and noisemakers." He chuckled and waved Mark in.

"Oh, I bet you'll make their parents happy with that one."

"Ha! It's good for 'em. Sides, they did it to me," he said laughing with a shaky voice that only the very old can pull off.

Mark laughed and went through the door. It took a few minutes to get through all the checkpoints, but he sat down in his chair in a conference room only forty-five minutes from when Isis had called him.

The room had Big B, Isis and a man named Johnny Jamison. He was a *Class C* sniper and had been active for over ten years. He had a mustache that looked like a caterpillar had roosted under his nose, and was in good shape for a fifty-

something.

"Okay, we all here?" He looked around the room with brown flat eyes. "Solomon wanted me to get started with the briefing; he'll be down in a few minutes,"

The room was silent as everyone looked up at Johnny. Isis was taking notes on an electronic device that seemed to float in the air in front of her, and Big B was fidgeting with a toothpick he had in his mouth. Mark also noticed that no one was looking at him and almost seemed to be trying not to on purpose.

"This is Tripp Maddock, he goes by the name of Geoff Martin and has been underground until just recently."

A picture popped up on the screen of a tall man with a scruffy blonde beard and curly hair. "These are pictures we took of him here in New York. He has been running with Detective Weston, Detroit P.D. We don't know the nature of their relationship, but we have reason to believe that he is involved with our FBI contact." The pictures and state were projected to a hovering screen in the middle of the large wooden conference table. Mark had never seen technology like this outside of in the movies but the WJA seemed to make them come alive, and this was no movie.

Mark remembered talking with Isis about a case that she was working on. They took out a prison filled with rapists and murderers. This detective Weston was investigating it, and they had to take him out of play for a bit to get him off the case.

It didn't work; it only made him angrier and more determined. In the meantime, their contact went rogue and hooked up with the leading crime boss out of Russia. They were trying to expose the WJA and would do anything to make that

happen.

"Now, this trail gets twisted here real quick. We all know Detective Weston; he was kidnapped one hour ago. We have reason to believe that Tripp Maddock had something to do with it. We know he has close dealings with a Russian general named Taras Karjanski, and we believe he has teamed up with our FBI contact."

A picture of a rough-looking man with a thick, black beard came up on the see-thru screen. "This is General Karjanski, he's our main target. He is what you would call the *Don* of the Russian Mafia. We know that he has Weston, and he may have others."

Mark studied the Russian's face as he listened. It seemed that their FBI informant had switched sides, and to top it off, was working with the Russian Mafia. *This isn't good. Why would he go against the WJA and turn against his own country?*

Mark's thoughts were interrupted by Johnny's stern voice; he was going over the details of their mission.

"We need two teams to go in and take out General Karjanski and Tripp Maddock. Mark, you and Isis will take care of the hit on the General; myself and Big B here will take care of Mr. Maddock. We will then rescue Detective Weston."

Then Jamison went over the blueprints and layouts of the building where they were hiding out. It was on the coast of Puerto Rico in an old, abandoned asylum. From the satellite images, it looked like it was heavily guarded and would be very hard to penetrate undetected.

"We are only here to take out our two targets; any guards will be shot with non-lethal weapons. Our FBI informant has

already been tagged and will be brought in alive for questioning, any questions?"

Everyone shook their heads.

Just as Johnny was wrapping up, Solomon walked in and took the floor. He looked concerned and avoided eye contact with the group. "I have some new information I think you all should know before you go on this mission," He looked up and took off his glasses.

"We just learned that General Karjanski has kidnapped two others. We learned this information from Agent Seloent, who we picked up thirty minutes ago,"

Mark could feel his stomach tighten; it was never a good thing when Solomon was acting nervous. He tried to clear his head as Solomon went on.

"The two that were taken are very close to me and Mark," He looked up and into Mark's eyes. "It's K and Sam, Mark,"

The world went white and for a second or maybe more Mark felt like he was losing his mind and might never come back from it. He stood up with a look of fear and anger in his eyes. *No, it can't be them, this has to be a mistake. I saw them only a week ago.* Marks mind flooded with a million thoughts of what could be happening to his family and tried to see if he could see them, maybe force a dream so he could see if they were okay.

"I'm so sorry, Mark, we'll get them back." Isis put her hand on Mark's shoulder.

Mark sat down and looked up at Solomon. His training took over as his heart slowed down to a normal beat. He knew he had to be strong for them…for his family.

Mark nodded for Solomon to go on.

"Okay, we think they were grabbed last week sometime and are being held in the same building as Detective Weston. Our mission is now one thing, and only one: Top priority is K and Samantha. We are to ensure their safety at any and all cost. Second is Weston, he is someone we need on our side. We are on the clock now people, this is a rescue operation. If we come in contact with either of the two targets, take them out, but don't go looking for them."

They were dismissed, and everyone headed down to the main *Taxi* room. You could access around ten different locations from the New York headquarters and fifteen more throughout the City at different safe houses.

Mark was scared but tried not to show it. He could not understand why his family was taken. *How do they know who I am?* He wasn't connected to this Russian or anyone involved. *Is it a random thing?* Mark didn't think so. He thought this had to be a direct hit against him.

Isis smiled at him and tried to show her support as she suited up for the hour ride on the *Taxi of death*. She called it that due to the fact that, if anything went wrong, you would be dead before you knew what hit you.

Mark was soon suited up, and the four looked at each other without saying anything. They all knew their parts, and what was at stake. With a nod, Mark climbed inside one of the tubes and soon was on his way to the most important mission he would ever go on.

He had lost his family once and was not about to lose them a second time.

BLOOD RAN DOWN KIRK'S face from a large cut above his left eye. The beating was severe, but he still cursed and spit at his attackers. They wouldn't know how much he was hurting; they wouldn't break him!

All he could think about the last few days was the woman and little girl he had helped. *Are they okay? Did they make it out?* He hoped they had. The only thing that kept him alive was the possibility of escape and making sure they were okay.

He hadn't been looked at as a hero in a long time, and the look on her face when he opened their cell door was worth every beating he had endured.

Looking up from his empty cell, he stared at the open door and the light in the hall beyond. It seemed so easy…just walk out the door. He knew it wasn't so simple. The cell floor was littered with broken glass and sharp metal shavings, and the hallway had the same thing for a hundred feet in all directions, the hundred feet to freedom. It was a cruel joke and the two masked men who scattered the glass and metal laughed and seemed to be having a grand old time, as if this was their only entertainment.

His feet were bare and had been cut open with razorblades so even without going anywhere his feet were bloody and swollen. Every step would be enough to make a strong man pass out from the pain. They mocked him and left the door open, just to see if he had it in him to try to escape, he was sure that they were waiting for him just down the hall.

As Kirk sat in the middle of his cold cell, he tried to work himself up to make another try for it. He had been stripped down, was naked and bleeding from his hands and feet.

Come on, man! You never give up, NEVER!

K SAT WITH HER new automatic weapon lying across her lap and a bad feeling in her gut. She went over in her mind what she was going to do when the guard woke up. She had never killed anyone before and supposed that it would be hard for anyone.

How did I get into this? She thought as Sam turned over and began to wake up with a little yawn. This was the last place she had ever thought she could end up.

I won't die here, not now…

Sam opened her eyes, and K put her finger over her lips and smiled. Sam knew that she was supposed to be quiet. She was such a brave little girl. K was proud of her and how she still smiled up at her, even though they were trapped with a lunatic sleeping just a few feet away.

Rising to her feet, she picked up Sam and moved to the back of the little shed. She wanted to hide her, just in case something went wrong.

"Now, you stay hidden until Mommy calls for you, okay?" she whispered as she set Sam down. Sam nodded, leaned back against the wall, and hugged her knees.

"Good girl,"

K stepped around one of the grinding clunking pumps and looked at the gun in her hand. It had a silencer clipped to the side of the barrel. She figured that was what it was from watching CSI Miami with Mark every Thursday night.

I should be able to screw it on the end.

Pulling it free, she threaded it onto the end of the barrel. It was easer than she thought it would be and this made her feel a

little better. Sliding the action back, she loaded a round in the chamber with a click that she was sure had awakened the guard.

Peering around the corner, she tried to see if he was still sleeping.

The spot where he had been was *empty*.

Looking around wildly, she stepped out around the second pump just as one turned back on with a loud whirring sound. The noise made her jump, but not as much as the hand, that came around her mouth and pulled her down to the ground.

The shock of the fall made her lose her grip on the gun. It went flying into the corner and a puff of dirt rose around it like a small tornado. Before she could turn over, she felt a kick to her side, which sent a shot of pain up her spine as she lost all the breath in her lungs.

Flipping over onto her back, she kicked with both legs and felt contact. Her attacker fell back, hitting his head on a metal pipe, which sent him to the ground with a thud and a grunt.

K looked franticly for the gun, which was three feet away, but felt like one hundred miles. Leaping for the weapon, she grabbed it and spun around just in time to see the raging guard jumping for her. She pulled the trigger and closed her eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Six

THE BLANK HOLLOW EYES OF THE GUARD STARED up at K as she pushed him off her. She was breathing heavy and leaned over to throw up. She had never killed anyone or even dreamed that it would ever be something she would have to do.

Samantha came around the corner and looked down at the dead man lying on the floor. K ran and covered her eyes, but Sam looked up at her and pointed at the body.

"Bad man,"

K couldn't help a chuckle. "Yeah, honey, he is a bad man, but he won't hurt us anymore."

That seemed to make sense in Sam's little mind as she looked up to K for the next task of the day. K tried to think. It would be dark in a few hours, and then they could make a run for the gate or maybe try to get on one of the delivery trucks

that came in through the gates in the evenings.

"I'm hungry." Sam announced.

"I know hon, I'm hungry, too." K couldn't remember the last time they had anything to eat.

I wonder if this guy has anything on him. After going through his pockets, she smiled at Sam and held up a packet of trail mix and a canteen of water. They shared the trail mix until every piece was gone. It wasn't much, but it would have to do.

K jumped up when the small hand-held radio squawked on the dead guard's belt. It was in German or Russian; she couldn't tell. They sounded urgent, and K knew what that meant.

They would be coming after their missing guard.

MARK OPENED HIS EYES and tried to see the broken landscape out the window but all he saw was K's face. His watch said it was early evening. Yawning and looking out the window, he couldn't help but worry. They had made it to Puerto Rico early that morning. After a long ride in a beat-up old Jeep Cherokee and then switching to a station wagon for the final trip through the interior of the island, they were almost to their checkpoint.

The Taxi had put them on a part of the island farthest from where they wanted to be, but it was still faster than taking a plane and a lot less headache. Guns were frowned upon on airplanes, anyway.

Isis hit him on the arm and smiled. "How you holding up?"

"Okay, considering—any news?"

"No, just that our FBI informant cracked and told us who else he had working for him."

"That's good news. Anyone I know?"

"Nope, just a CSI agent, and he ended up dead along with his wife, and that Geoff character who is a hired hit man connected with the Russian Mafia as well as the FBI."

Mark remembered the picture of the man. He must have been good to have fooled Detective Weston. From his file, he was a sharp guy and had solved more cases in the DPD than any other detective on the force. No one knew of his success rate though, due to his colorful personality.

"One thing that I don't get," Mark said, "why would they want my family? I'm not connected with them in any way. Do you think they know about my involvement in the WJA?"

"Not sure. That's one thing that confuses me, too," Isis looked up from her Palm Pilot. "At this point, I don't think it matters, we just need to get them back, and we will sort through the *why's* later."

Mark nodded and watched as they passed run-down houses and fields filled with workers picking coffee beans. It looked like a tedious job, and from the looks on the natives' faces, they didn't seem to be enjoying it.

An hour later, they reached a small building made from old lumber and tin roofing material. A big, dark-skinned Puerto Rican man smiled and waved as they drove up. He looked like he could be Big B's brother.

"Welcome to the island, my friends. You have good ride, yes?"

They all nodded as they stretched, trying to work out their

cramped muscles. The inside of the shack wasn't much better than the outside. The floor was dirt, and the walls were uninsulated. A large wooden crate sat on the floor in the center of the room. Mark walked over to it and read the label on the top.

"*Bananas*,"

"Yes. It's our equipment. And it's the good stuff!" Big B smiled and tore into the crate. The "*bananas*" were, in fact, submachine guns and sniper rifles. The folded up sniper rifle was tossed to Mark along with a scope and a few clips of ammo.

After the contents of the box were emptied, Big B was loaded up with mines, hand grenades and a few biological bombs. Isis had a machine gun and a belt loaded with throwing darts laced with a tranquilizer.

Jamison smiled when he looked through his thermal glasses and tossed everyone a small earpiece that linked them all together. Jamison was the *lookout*; he was in charge of clearing the way and being their eyes and ears.

Big B was the *groundkeeper*; he made sure that they had any diversion they needed and that their butts were covered in case of a problem.

Isis and Mark would go in hot. Mark had a long-range rifle, and Isis had short-range charges and the knockout power. Mark looked over his weapon, making sure everything was in place. His rifle could fold in two parts. In the full lockout position, it was loaded with a plastic bullet that was filled with a chemical. They called it *Liquid Metal*.

It was like mixing concrete powder with water, but in the body. The chemical would hit the blood stream and mix with

incredible speed. In a matter of seconds, the victim would lose all motor skills and vision. The blood would carry it through the body and harden in less than ten seconds, leaving the victim stiff as a board.

The best part was that the victim could not scream out or cry for help, making it the perfect weapon for this type of mission.

Mark also carried a side arm, a fifty-round air gun that could shoot semiautomatic or full auto. The tiny darts had liquid explosives in them that would penetrate the skin and then explode within half a second. The only sounds that could be heard were the puff of air, and then a faint pop as the mini bomb scrambled the victim's insides.

Johnny Jamison went over the plan one more time as they all got ready to move in. They had to wait one more hour, until it was dark; then it was time. Mark was trying to hide his fear from the rest of the group. He wasn't afraid for himself, but for K and Sam. He couldn't bear to lose them again.

KIRK COULD FEEL HIS head swim as he collapsed on the floor. He had made it halfway down the hallway before he gave up, he couldn't take another step. The glass dug deeper into his feet and hands as he crawled down the hall, trying to make it to an empty cell.

All he hoped was that the other cells weren't covered with deadly glass, too. He made it to the last door, reached up, and turned the doorknob.

It was open!

He rolled inside and gritted his teeth as bits of sharp metal

and glass imbedded deeper into his back. Then he felt around to discover that this room was clean and free of any traps. He lay on his back, trying to get a second wind. He was sure he would be found from the blood trail he had made on his way there.

Let them come!

He felt in the mood to tangle with a guard or two. Pain will break you or tick you off, and Kirk was getting madder by the minute.

After he worked the glass from his hands and feet, he found an old pillowcase in the corner. He tore it into pieces and wrapped his feet to stop the bleeding. He could tell that he had a broken nose, and most of his ribs were broken as well. He limped toward the door and looked out into the hall.

He needed a weapon, something…anything. He scanned the floor. Most of the glass was broken into little pieces, but some of the metal chunks were just the right size for a make-shift knife.

Taking two pieces that were about four inches long and very sharp, he wrapped them on one end with the last bits of the pillowcase.

Now I'm armed and dangerous!

He made his way through the door at the end of the hall. Cell doors lined both sides, and most of the doors were open. He could hear voices coming from a door off to the left and down about three back over the glass lined floor. Finding the same crate he had used before to hide, Kirk shook his head. It's like deja-vu all over again.

Looking up, he spotted an air duct cover in the ceiling. It looked like a return, which meant it would be open to the ceil-

ing above. Crawling up on the crate, he reached the grill and pushed it up. He could barely reach, but with some effort, he pulled himself up into the open hole and then replaced the grill.

Just then, he saw two bearded men walk into the hall and stop to talk just a few feet from him. They were talking in Russian or some variation of that. They made small talk as one lit up a cigar and puffed away as if it was his last meal.

They moved on. One headed back to his cell, where he was supposed to be somehow not noticing all the blood on the floor, and the other one sat down on the crate, pulled a flask out, and unscrewed the top. This was Kirk's chance. He saw the man had on boots and a gun hanging from a strap on his shoulder. The shoes looked better than the gun at this point.

Quickly taking off the grill and placing it to one side, Kirk looked down at the guard. The big, hairy man outweighed him by a good twenty pounds, but with the element of surprise, *this is going to hurt!*

Jumping from his hiding place, Kirk landed on top of the unsuspecting guard naked and bloody. The guard flopped to the ground without a sound. Kirk rolled to his knees and looked at the shard of glass that stuck out of his victim's neck.

He was dead. It seemed from the amount of blood that was spilling from the wound that he had hit his artery.

Grabbing him by the collar, he dragged him into an open cell where he found the pillowcase and undressed him, taking his clothes and shoes. He pulled the black ski mask over his head and shut the door. Checking his machine gun to make sure it was loaded, he walked down the hall toward the exit.

A CROSSHAIR LINED UP with the head of an unknowing Russian guard who was making his rounds on the main site. Mark looked at him for a second; then when he walked behind a small outbuilding, Mark fired.

The man hit the ground and stiffened up as his blood and everything else in his body that was liquid turned into a substance hard as steel. Mark smiled and scoped out his next target. He was patient, he had to be; it had to be done with utmost care, not to alert the others.

Isis lay next to him under a heavy camouflaged netting. They blended in to the brush and even if you were right on top of them, you would not see them. She whispered in his earpiece that another guard was off taking a leak in the bushes. With a quick swing of his rifle, Mark took him out.

Big B was making his way down to the main yard and was soon under the fence and into the main area. He placed charges under a Jeep and on the side of a fuel tank that sat in the yard on stilts. Mark made sure that he was covered. They were all linked with their earpieces and could talk as they moved in on the camp.

Jamison sounded that he had spotted someone just kill a guard and take his clothes. The computer screen from inside the small hut was linked to a thermal imaging camera that could see through almost any material. It was like a big X-ray device, but live and very nice to have on an operation like this.

"He is on the main floor and making his way toward us. Be careful, I think its Detective Weston." Jamison laughed. "It looks like he's wounded but still fiery as ever!"

"Any sign of K and Sam?" Mark tried to sound professional.

"Not yet, but I'm looking. Only one other prisoner that I can see and he looks male."

Mark sighed and motioned for Isis to follow him. "Okay, we're going in."

K WAITED FOR NIGHTFALL and had decided that they were going to make a dash for a truck or some kind of vehicle. She figured that one of them had to leave this place at one point. They would try to hide and maybe, just maybe, get out of there.

Cracking the door open just enough to look out, she jumped when she saw a guard standing a few feet away. Past him were nothing but open grass, dirt and a big truck sitting in the corner.

"Ok, hun, you do just as I say. Okay? We're going to play a game of hide and seek. We are hiding from the bad, bad men. You just follow mommy and be very quiet, okay?"

She nodded but looked like she didn't believe that this was a simple game. K tried to sound brave and confident, but she knew that her daughter saw right through it.

Opening the door, she saw a large bush right behind where the guard was standing. They had to make a run for it. With a smile, she grabbed Sam and pulled her along as they dashed for the bush.

As soon as they made it to open ground, someone cried out in another language. *They saw us!*

"Stop or I shoot… Stop!"

K froze as the guard that must have been standing behind the small pump house shone a flashlight on them. Before she

could even think, there were a half dozen guards pointing guns at them. K dropped her weapon and covered Sam up in her arms.

They were grabbed, and Sam was ripped from K's arms as she screamed out in fear. "Mommy! No!"

K tried to fight but was knocked unconscious by the butt of a rifle. She could still see the face of her daughter screaming with big tears falling down her face as she fell asleep.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

THE COLD WATER JOLTED K AWAKE. SHE LOOKED wildly around, trying to find Sam. “Sam? Where are you baby, Sam, come to mommy! Where is my daughter? Sam!” She yelled and cried making her voice sound like an old smoker who was on her last cigarette.

“Shut-up. You’re lucky that we keep you alive after killing Gustavo,” A short middle-aged man with a scruffy black and silver speckled beard glared at K with thick eyebrows and dark hate-filled eyes. “You think you’re so smart. You will die here, I will see to that.” He backhanded K, knocking her back in her chair.

Iron and a rust taste filled her mouth and her front tooth felt like it was loose but all she could think about was Sam. She shook her head as they pulled her upright again. “You come with us to see the boss, you behave, or Sam will get it.

You hear?" The man's accent sounded childish to K but she suppressed her smile. What she really wanted to do was mock him and call him—well never mind what she wanted to call him, it wasn't good in any case.

They cut her wrists free, which were bound in duct tape, and pulled her to her feet. Half dragging her to a cell right across from hers, they opened a door that led to a stairway. The basement was even more frightening than the rest of the building.

The lights overhead flickered and the smell of sweat and blood filled the room. She would have never known that the place had a basement; the doorway leading to it was in the back of one of the cells and must have been that way on purpose.

The stairs were carved from the earth itself and in some places had broken off leaving a tripping hazard. K stepped carefully and her captors did the same, they knew that dropping her could end badly for them if she were to break her neck in the fall.

K could see the bottom up ahead and realized that they had gone over fifty feet underground. It looked like it was all hand dug and very unstable. Old wooden beams were stretched across the top and sides making it look like a mine of some kind. Once they reached the bottom of the stairs, they came to an open room with boxes and crates full of explosives and guns. K only knew this by the printed lettering on the side of one that said "*Explosive*," she saw a small office with a wooden door off to the right of the room. They led her to it and knocked.

She waited, and they waited. The one to her left shifted

his feet as if he was the one being marched to his death instead of her. Who was *this* guy they were all so afraid of? She thought that she herself should be just as scared but her mother's righteous anger overpowered it.

"Come in," The male voice sounded English or Scottish, she couldn't tell at first but in the end she decided that it was English. The tall guard that was nervously shifting his feet to her left pushed her into the small room and shut the door, leaving her standing alone with a madman or maybe worse.

"What do you want from me? You don't even know me—what did I do to you?" K tried to reason with her captor and hoped to find out who she was dealing with.

The small office had a desk made up of pallets and a bank of drawers torn from some old doctor's office. K could see that he had the internet and a laptop sitting among the other clutter that filled the desk.

"You have a problem, Mrs. Appleton. Your husband has been a thorn in my side, and for that, you must suffer," He turned in his chair and looked at K with his dark eyes glowing. "Allow me to introduce myself, my name is Tripp Maddock, but you may call me Geoff."

KIRK HELD HIS BREATH as a thick man came down the hall toward them. He pulled out a cigarette and lit up; trying to fit in and keep the other masked man from discovering that he was not a friend. A second, much shorter hairy man with huge eyebrows, came out of a cell and shut the door behind him. It must lead somewhere else, maybe an exit.

The two looked at him as he sat on the counter that held

two computers. A large window looked out into the main lobby and the guard station. Kirk grunted and puffed a cloud of smoke.

"You not hot in that thing?" The tall guard asked. "I only wear it if I have to,"

They didn't wait for a response and moved on, as if his opinion didn't matter in the least. Kirk was glad the guy he killed was one at the bottom of the food chain. He could do bottom of the food chain. The office led out into the main lobby through a side door and was covered with guards at every exit. He had to find another way out.

The two guards that didn't seem to care that he was alive walked through the side door and out into the main lobby, they not even noticing the *sleeping* man behind the counter watching a football game. He looked back down the hall and walked toward the cell door where the short scruffy guard had been. It looked just like all of the other doors in this place, but when he turned the handle and looked down the rough-cut stairway that led down to another floor, he saw that this was not at all like the other cells.

Hmmm, this looks promising.

He had heard a commotion a few minutes earlier down in the darkness at the bottom of the stairway, but couldn't tell what was going on. Maybe they brought a prisoner down here…maybe it was the woman and her daughter.

Taking out his newly acquired gun, he crept down the long, dark stairway. When he reached the bottom, he noticed an open room filled with large wooden crates. He quickly hid himself behind one of the crates and waited. The voices coming from the small office in the corner were from a woman and

someone else, a man, it sounded like…

Kirk shook his head and muttered under his breath. He recognized the English accent right away. *Geoff?* His mind raced with the events of the past few days and the chance meeting with the ever-so-helpful gentleman. His face flushed in anger as he discovered that he had been played. Kirk leaned over and looked inside of the crate in front of him. They were filled with detonators and C-4. He grabbed a few blocks of C-4 and shoved some detonators in his pocket. He put one down on the floor next to where he sat and hit the timer.

Twenty minutes—that should give me enough time to get out of here. If not, then I will go out with a bang, as they say.

ISIS STAYED CLOSE TO Mark as they made their way around the back of the building. The guard dogs feasted on a poison-laced bone and were soon wandering around like they were drunk.

The South end of the building had a loading dock and a few roll-up doors. The grounds were long since kept up, the natural undergrowth had taken its land back over, and this offered plenty of cover as they made their way across the open expanse toward the building. Two guards sat at a makeshift table playing cards and drinking vodka right out of the bottle. Mark held out his hand and halted Isis. She crouched down behind some old pallets and a huge tumbleweed that sat in the broken parking lot.

Isis reached down to her leg and pulled out two throwing knives. With silent speed, she threw one and then the second one before the first reached its target. The first one buried it-

self into the neck of a thin lanky man and blood gurgled from his mouth as he fell face first into the stack of poker chips in front of him. The second guard's eyes widened when he saw the blood and then before he could scream, Isis's blade caught him in his open mouth slicing into the back of his neck and wedging into the top of his spine.

She smiled and crept up to the two bodies. They pulled them upright and shoved some sticks in their jackets to keep them in a sitting position.

Isis retrieved her knives, wiping them clean on the shirt of one of the dead men and pulled her ball cap low over her forehead. Mark looked down at the man who sat holding a full house. He thought it was his lucky day, too bad, his luck just changed. Grabbing a radio from off of the table, he shoved it in his pocket. *We might need this later.*

"I think we have a basement," Jamison sounded in their earpiece. "Weston just went into a room and disappeared. I think they made a basement, it isn't on any of my blueprints though,"

"Where is it?" Mark asked, he didn't have to push any buttons because the ear pieces picked up their voices as well as transmitted sound to them after it filtered out the background noise.

"Southwest of you and down the hall, I'll send it on your *Palms*."

Mark opened up his watch cover and looked at the map readout that lit up in blue. It had a red dot where Jamison thought the basement was and a map of their current location.

"Okay. We're on our way,"

Mark took out a pair of sunglasses and slipped them on his

head. He could see thermal or night vision through them, and through wood and most metals. He looked over at Isis, who had hers on already.

The door looked clear, and in a silent motion, they were inside. The place went dark as Big B cut the main power, and you could hear voices coming from everywhere as the place came alive.

Mark and Isis hunched down and moved through the building unnoticed in the dark. Guards and gunmen ran past them as they hugged the wall and made their way through the main level.

Holding cells lined the walls with large wooden and metal doors. Coming to the only one that was closed, Mark looked through his glasses and zoomed in on the door. He could barely make out a prisoner inside, it looked like a green and red glow that moved and shimmered like heat off a hot roadway.

"Jamison, can you see in this cell?" Mark whispered.

"No, too much in the way, you're on your own."

Mark signaled for Isis to cover him. She gave a thumbs-up, and then they crashed through the door. A startled guard jumped up and open fired on them. Mark shot him with his air pistol, then heard a popping sound as the guard's heart turned into mush from the inside. He fell to the ground and twitched for a moment, and then was still.

Sam screamed and started crying running into the corner of the room where she crouched like a beaten dog. Mark took off his glasses and took her in his arms. "Its okay, baby, it's daddy, I'm here, it's okay hun…" She looked up at him in the dark, and as soon as she saw his eyes, she hugged him and

sobbed into his chest.

"I'm here, baby, it's all okay." Mark tried to hold himself together as his little girl shook in his arms. He hugged her tight, and whispered in her ear, "We're going home after I go get mommy, okay? This nice lady will take you to a safe place. Okay?"

Mark handed her to Isis, who nodded and took off going out the same way they had come in. "We got Samantha, and I'm coming out." Isis said.

Mark could hear Isis in his earpiece as she made her way out the back door and across the loading docks. Then an explosion rocked the building from one of Big B's bombs. Mark could hear his radio go off with cursing and yelling in Russian.

"Sam's okay. Now go get your wife." Big B said in a deep voice with not a hint of humor in it.

Then, before Mark knew what was going on, he blacked out. After a brief moment of darkness, he could see K standing in a small office with a man holding a gun to her head. He stood, yelling at the man to put the gun down, and then he fired and hit the man in the hand, sending the gun flying. Then, before he could react, the scruffy-bearded man pulled out a knife with his other hand and stuck it into the side of K's neck.

She fell to the floor as Mark screamed and he shot the attacker in the head shattering the man's right eye socket. The light above the office came on as the generators kicked in, and Mark saw K lying on the floor with a pool of blood, it drained from her neck like a garden hose that had been left on.

Mark held his head in his hands and tried to focus. These visions had come to him before, and now it came at him like a

dream that he could not control. He was still in the cell where Sam had been held. His blackout was over but his head felt like it was in a vice. He stood up, put on his glasses, and turned them to *thermal* mode.

He had tried to control his visions, and with help from Solomon, he could at least tell when it was a dream and when it was real. "Use it; don't let it use you!" he would say. Mark knew that the vision would be his wife's future if he did not step in and change it. Looking at his watch, he could see that the door to the basement was down the next hallway parallel to where he now stood.

"Sam's out and safe, Mark, you go on ahead. I'm going to secure the General." Isis's voice was like a breath of fresh air, and Mark sighed with relief when he knew Sam was safe.

A second explosion shook the building as it tore through the outer wall, causing havoc as the guards rushed out into the courtyard. The plan was working; everyone was running around in panic, confusion and terror, not knowing who or what was going on.

Mark rounded the corner and took off in a dead run toward the stairwell. A big, dark man jumped him as he passed an empty room. Mark hit the ground, and his rifle went flying down the hallway, across glass and metal that was strewn all over the floor.

He rolled over just in time to see the big, dark-skinned Russian stomping down with his heel. Grabbing his boot, Mark twisted it and kicked his other leg, tripping the man. He fell with a thunderous crash and jumped to his feet with unbelievable speed for a man of his size.

Mark met him and jumped up with fury filling his mind

and eyes. He hit the man square in the jaw, which did not seem to faze him at all. Then, with a swift blow, Mark hit him in the throat with everything he had. He felt the big man's windpipe crush. The giant of a man fell to his knees gasping for breath. Mark reached down, pulled the .45 from his holster, and fired point blank at the big Russian's head. As he fired, he could hear a woman's screams…

"YOU SEE, K…MAY I call you K?" Geoff chuckled at himself. "I find that you have no idea who your husband is or what he does,"

K looked at him with distain, and said nothing.

"He had to be the hero; he just had to put his nose where it didn't belong, and now he must pay."

"You're crazy; my husband didn't do anything to you."

The tall man who called himself Geoff jumped to his feet in a rage. "You have no idea what he has done to me. He killed my brothers; my three brothers are dead because of him!" His face turned red, and with a quick swing of his hand, he smacked K across the room. "He killed my only family, and now I will kill his!"

Just then, the lights flickered and went out. K could hear yelling and gun shots from the floors above them. She tried to crawl to the doorway, but Geoff grabbed her foot and dragged her toward him. He breathed heavy on her neck, as he sniffed her hair hungrily. K hit him with her hands, but it only made him laugh.

"You know," Geoff whispered, "Sam will scream and cry when I carve her up; then I will tell her that her mommy is

dead!"

K screamed and kicked up with her knee as hard as she could. She could tell by his reaction that she'd hit her target.

She pushed with all her strength and scrambled for the door. Everything was dark; she could only see shadows and a little light coming from the top of the stairs. She squirmed as she felt a hand grab hers.

"It's okay. It's me, the cop," she heard a voice whisper near her. She could feel a strong arm come around her and pull her around a crate. "Stay here no matter what."

Before she could say anything or do anything, he was gone. She could hear Geoff yelling and cursing as her rescuer struggled with her attacker. Glass broke, and, as a fist hit someone in the chest, she could hear grunting; then a single gunshot rang out in the dark.

K shook in fear, hoping that the cop had fired and not Geoff. *"God, please help me. I need a miracle. I don't want to die, please…please!"*

"Get up, you fat cow! You have *no worries* now; I won't hurt you…much!" Geoff had found her and loomed in the dark like the devil filled with hate and rage that billowed from his eyes and mouth like a thick fog.

Then a gunshot sounded just a few yards up the stairs, and K screamed out. Her hair was pulled almost out of her head as Geoff dragged her back into his office. He pulled her to her feet just as the lights flickered and came back on.

"Put the gun down, Tripp!"

Mark…it couldn't be. Nevertheless, here he stood, looking better than any Rambo movie she'd ever been forced to watch. His dark suit and body armor made him look like a

ninja on steroids. For a brief moment, K felt relief wash over her. *He came for me…He came for me!*

No more words passed between them as Geoff pointed the gun at Mark and squeezed the trigger. His hand flew back in a jerking motion as Mark fired, sending a bullet into Tripp's hand, taking two fingers off as the gun went flipping through the air and landed on the floor. The sound filled the underground room and was much louder then K ever thought it would be. Like thunder, shaking her body to the core, she could feel it in her chest and the twitch as Geoff's hand flew back.

A second shot rang out, hitting Geoff in the other shoulder. As he fell back, K dropped to her knees, just as the third bullet pierced Geoff between the eyes. His head fell in like a watermelon and the back of it exploded into a mess of hair and bone. His body fell back and landed on Kirk's body, which was lying on the floor facedown in a pool of blood.

K sobbed as Mark rushed to her side. He held her in his arms, kissing her on the back of her neck and whispered in her ear, "I'm here, everything is okay,—I'm here!"

MARK'S EARPIECE SOUNDED AS Jamison asked if everything was okay. "Yes, K is secure, and we're on our way out."

"Any news on Detective Weston?"

"He's dead," Mark said.

"Copy that, get out of there, and report back to base. We've got your back."

"On my way,"

Mark helped K up and started to kiss her all over her face.

She smiled and laughed through her tears. "What took you so long?"

"Traffic,"

He held her hand and led her through the smoke-filled building and out the back door. He told her that Sam was okay and waiting back at the hut a mile or so away. She looked up at him and hugged him with tears in her eyes.

Just as they cleared the hill above the parking lot, there was an explosion behind them that made both of them jump. The whole building went up in a fiery mass of concrete and metal. After a few smaller explosions that filled the night sky with thick, black smoke, it subsided and burned. The back half of the building was gone, and only part of the front was still left standing.

Everyone checked in, and Isis informed them that the general had escaped. He took off in a helicopter that was hidden in the woods south of the building. No one seemed to care at the time; Mark and his family were hugging each other. Sam looked up at Big B, went over to him, and touched his hand. She climbed in his lap and hugged him. "Did you help save me?"

"You bet I did, sweetie, but your Dad did most of the work."

"Oh… you like horseees?"

Big B laughed and smiled. "I sure do,"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

JUST AS MARK AND K RAN DOW THE DARK TUNNEL, Kirk opened his eyes and felt the dead weight of a body on top of him. Rolling over, he grabbed his chest in pain and felt something warm…blood. Just an inch higher, and the bullet would have gone through his heart.

He was lightheaded but coherent enough to know that he had to get out of there. The bomb he had set would be going off at any moment.

The woman was gone, and he hoped she was okay. He could tell Geoff was dead and not coming back any time soon.

Getting to his feet, he staggered down the hall and into the main lobby. The guards and a few men in business suits were all scrambling for cover. He could see flames coming from the outside of the building from a tank of fuel that had exploded.

Finding a side door, he rushed outside and ran into the trees just as the building burst into flames. He smiled and grit-

ted his teeth as a series of explosions went off. He always liked blowing stuff up.

"Well, Geoff, you sure turned out to be a piece of work. Oh, well. *No worries."*

A FEW WEEKS WENT by, and everything began to get back to normal. Well, normal was different for the Appleton family now. K was involved in a self-defense class and learning how to shoot under Mark's careful eye.

Samantha went on as if nothing ever happened. That made K happy, knowing that her child wouldn't be scarred for life. Mark sat in the main conference room and thought about everything that had happened.

Tripp Maddock, or Geoff, had three brothers who worked for him and the general. They had planned to blow up three supermarkets and two schools. The plan was to blame it on the WJA. Mark threw a wrench in their plans when he killed Geoff's brothers in the cabin a year earlier.

The general had escaped, and no one knew where he was. The consensus was that he was likely in Russia or the Czech Republic, but no one knew for sure. The agent who had double-crossed them was in prison for selling secrets to Russia, which was provided by an anonymous tip to the director of the FBI.

"You with us, Mark, or are you dreaming again?" Jamison smiled as he pointed to the screen behind him.

"I'm here,"

"Good, this man is connected with the General Karjanski and is involved in smuggling nuclear weapons into Iran. His name is Hokamend Mahmud-e-Raq. He is also part of the ter-

rorist organization involved in the bus bombings last year in Oakland and the one in Los Angeles.

"Mark, you have a contact and a safe house waiting. You are to leave in twelve hours. This, mind you, could be a year or so mission. We need you to, first, get any information from his personal computer and locate his nuclear weapons warehouse, and then, take him out."

Mark nodded. The briefing had gone for on over an hour now, and he had been studying Hokamend the past few weeks. His twisted web of terror was beginning to un-ravel.

As Jamison finished up, he looked at Mark and wished him luck. If it went as Mark dreamed it would, then it would end with Hokamend dead on the floor of his beautiful palace in Iran.

KIRK READ HIS OBITUARY and laughed. He couldn't believe all the lies that his friends wrote about him. There was even a blip from his ex-wife: *"Was a kind and caring man."*

"Bah, what does she know?" He sipped on a peach margarita and closed his eyes. Bali was warm and smelled like the ocean. Kirk found himself sitting in a wooden chair that folded back so he could lie back and soak up the sun's rays. The soft sand felt good on his feet, and the soft breeze filled his mind with happy thoughts.

It felt good to be free of his past. Here there was no one to bother him, other than the local women and the occasional parrot that flew into his hut every now and then. He smiled as he thought about the million dollars he found in the rubble of what was left of the old asylum. He had almost missed it, but when a dead man is handcuffed to a suitcase, it usually means

one thing.

He couldn't believe how cheap Bali was. The villa he bought was only Two Hundred Thousand Dollars, and it came fully furnished and with hired servants, maids and gardeners. To Kirk, they were peasants, and he was the king.

His drink was replaced by a fresh one by a little, brown local girl. She smiled at him and wandered off to do whatever she did when she was not waiting on him. Kirk liked it here. One day he was going to pick up his gun again…but not yet.

Besides, he knew that General Karjanski lived just two villas down. Kirk smiled, he wasn't finished yet, not by a long shot.

SOLOMON'S BLOG

Check out Solomon's blog and catch up on what Mark and Kirk are doing at:
www.thewja.blogspot.com

About the Author

Aaron Patterson resides in Boise, Idaho with his beautiful wife Karissa and daughter Soleil, son Kale and baby Klayton. He was Home Schooled and graduated Bible School in 2002 with a Bachelor of Divinity degree.

www.borderlinepublishing.com