

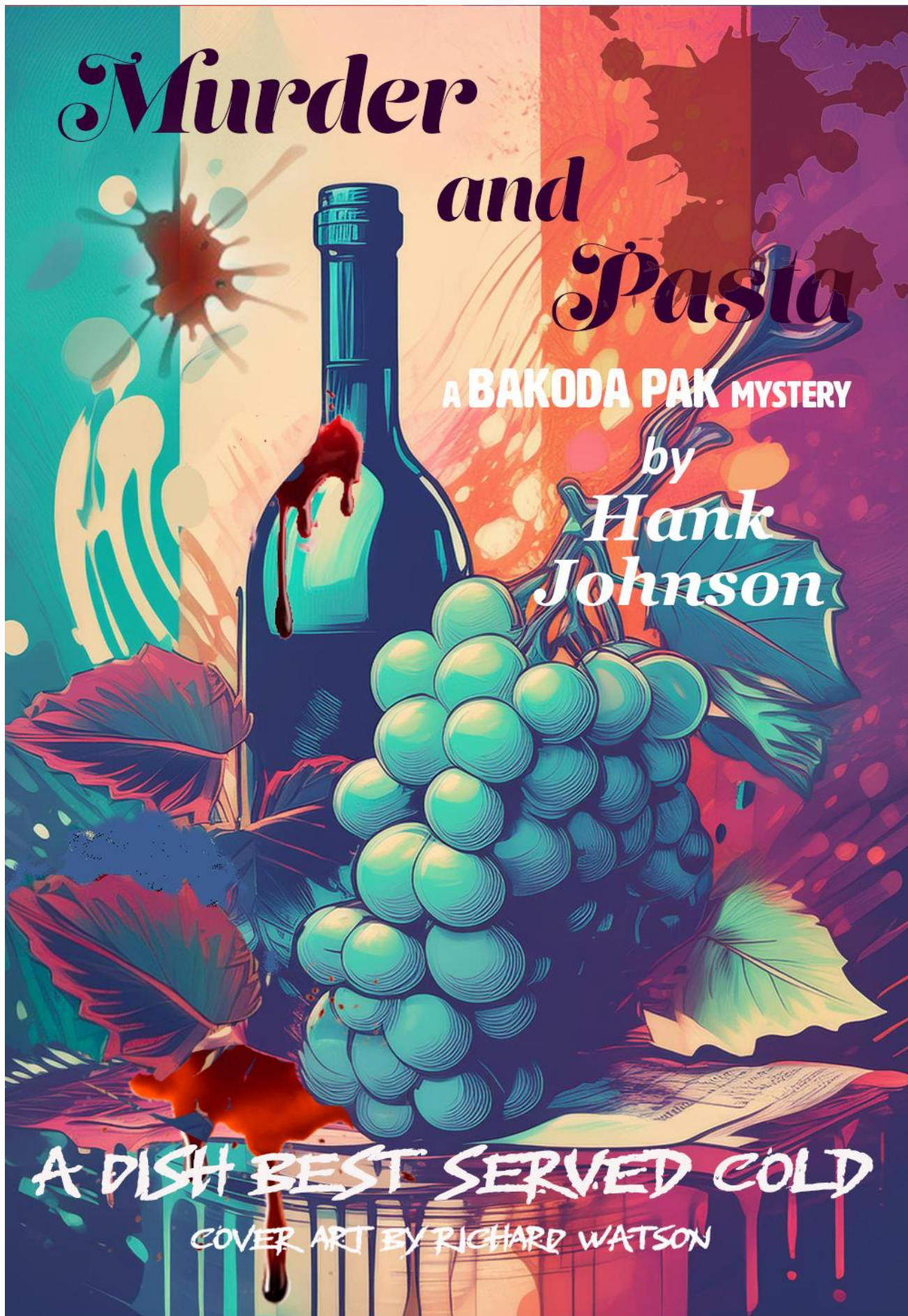
Murder and *Pasta*

A BAKODA PAK MYSTERY

by
*Hank
Johnson*

A DISH BEST SERVED COLD

COVER ART BY RICHARD WATSON



Murder and Pasta

A Bakoda Pak Mystery

By Hank Johnson

Copyright © by Hank Johnson 2024

All rights reserved. This publication, a work of fiction, in total, part or form may not be reproduced, stored in, or introduced into any retrieval system, or transmitted in any form, or by any means without the written permission of the copyright owner.

This is an authorized free edition from www.obooko.com

Although you do not have to pay for this book, the author's intellectual property rights remain fully protected by international Copyright laws. You are licensed to use this digital copy strictly for your personal enjoyment only. This edition must not be hosted or redistributed on other websites without the author's written permission nor offered for sale in any form. If you paid for this free edition, or to gain access to it, we suggest you demand a refund and report the transaction to the author and Obooko.

Dedication

To all the great restaurateurs and chefs that I have known and their dedication to their life's work that has given enrichment to our lives.

Credo

"You play close to the edge long enough and eventually you fall." Anon.

Prologue

Cucina Pazzo (Crazy Kitchen) Italian Restaurant in Scottsdale lulled between lunch rush and dinner prep at about two o'clock on every Wednesday afternoon, a slower day in a normally busy week.

That was the day when the owner Don Guido Conte met with the go-between. That was also the day that Don Guido gave the afternoon off to the staff between one-thirty and three when they would begin prepping for dinner. After they were gone, he locked the doors.

They, the Don and the go-between, met in the kitchen at either end of a prep table that had been moved in front of a six-burner commercial gas stove. Chairs were placed at either end of the table with a pen and blue lined legal pad placed on the table in front of the chairs where the respective parties for the meeting would sit. Before the scheduled meeting, the burners on the stove in the front at each side were turned on by Don Guido.

The meeting began. Other than a kiss on the cheek and a gesture for the go-between to take his seat on the opposite side of the table nothing was said. A glass of robust Italian red wine was awaiting both participants at their respective ends of the table. Half a bottle that was left after the pours was in the middle of the table to be enjoyed for the balance of the meeting,

Don Guido wrote on his legal pad, tore it off and passed the sheet across the table. The go-between read the message and nodded. He wrote a corresponding response on his legal pad, tore off the page and slipped it across the table. The go-between crumples his message from Don Guido and places it on the burner near him where it was diminished to ashes in moments. Don Guido read his message, nodded, and incinerated his message from the go-between before responding with a message of his own.

This goes on and on for the better part of an hour, messages back and forth, all the blueline correspondence reduced to ashes and two glasses of wine each for the go-between and Don Guido.

When the staff returns from their extended break, the go-between is gone and the table, cleared, is moved back to its normal place. The chairs have been put back in the supply room for fixtures for banquets in the meeting room. The bluelines and pens are back in Don Guido's top desk drawer.

On Thursday, the following day, an identical meeting is conducted at Cucina Fortuna (Fortunate Kitchen), an Italian Restaurant in an upscale neighborhood in east Phoenix. This time the go-between is present and meets with the owner, Don Angelo Conte, Don Guido's brother.

And so it has gone, for over ten years, weekly meetings between the brothers and the go-between. Occasionally the go-between would send a surrogate when he would be out of town for whatever reason; the brothers were not put off, hey, everyone is entitled to a vacation, a bit of a getaway, even though at times he was out of pocket for extended periods, but always the surrogates were bonafide stand up guys and most of all trustworthy and according to their bios that were verified had made their bones.

The Dons, though not twins, could be mistaken for such a pair. They were only two years or so apart, in their early sixties, not tall, but trim and handsome for their ages with full heads of salt and pepper wavy hair and wardrobes to match the sophistication that they portrayed with the manners of gentlemen, especially to the patrons of their restaurants.

###

The white wine was cold and crisp, and the two women lounged by a blue pool in a terraced backyard in Paradise Valley on a sunny afternoon. The home was built by one of the women's husbands and had opulent written all over it and the grounds that surrounded the neo-Tuscan architecture.

As they sipped their wine from crystal glasses reclining on their respective chaise lounges with a small table between them that held two bottles of wine uncorked, they looked assured. Assured as only those who could be who wanted for nothing and could aspire to anything could be.

They were sunning themselves with their tops off and although both were well into their fourth decade or so, still had rather tight bodies and the inevitable sagging had not begun. Indeed, they had been trophies in their twenties but were still pretty blue-chip, a testimony to personal trainers, healthy diets, and the sunscreen that they had slathered on each other when they had reclined on the lounges an hour or so before. Maybe a discreet nip or tuck but done by gifted practitioners of the art that left no evidence behind. One a beautiful blonde and the other a sumptuous brunette, and given their vintage, perfect in every way. A younger man could only hope that they were cougars on the make, and many who saw them did.

They finished their respective glasses of wine and smiled at each other. The brunette got up from her chaise and stepped over to the blonde's recliner.

She leaned forward and kissed her passionately, then said, "Let's go upstairs and go to bed for a while."

The blonde gently pulled the brunette's head down toward her and kissed her back just as deeply. Then they both got up and walked toward the house. As a second thought the brunette stopped, turned, and came back to pick up the wine glasses to take with them to the bedroom. The blonde turned as well on the cue and retrieved both bottles.

Their husbands worked late every day, sometimes into the following morning and their tryst would not be interrupted or their secrets revealed, though they weren't especially concealed.

###

"Tennis anyone?" Marty called out jauntily to his cousin as he climbed out of his Maserati, racket in hand. Beautiful morning for a drive in an exotic open top car, and for a few sets with his first cousin Frank.

"Ok, Carey Grant," Frank quipped, "but I hope you are ready to get your ass whipped."

"Juti, Juti, Juti," Marty replied, as they walked to the court, "you are such a little bitch."

Frank just rolled his eyes as he served the first ball while his favorite cousin kept bantering on in character. It was an Ace. So much for his cousin.

The perfect serve did not tone down Marty's theatrics. Nothing new, but Frank still loved him. They were the same age, cousins, but had been and always would be as close as brothers. Both had just turned twenty-four.

###

"All's well on the Western Front," the go-between said as he walked into his handler's office for the brothers, an attorney with Hyatt, Ball, Freeman, and Lobe.

The attorney looked up and replied, "If you ever have watched the movie, it was a tragedy."

"Never saw it," the go-between replied with a smile.

Trenton Ball III, attorney and founding partner in the firm, just looked down at the blotter on top of his desk and shook his head slowly from side to side as the go-between took a seat in front of the desk and prepared to make his monthly report.

“Same as always, boring as hell. The old guys have the same issues and gripes about each other, but, hey, over the years I have to admit I get a kick out of being with both of them, kind of like hanging out with a cranky old uncle or in this case two cranky old uncles.”

Ball replied, “Remember, as novel as they might seem, they are enormously powerful men and deserve respect. The reason you were placed as a go-between was because they absolutely cannot get along together and, in our estimation, never will or never would. I think they really care for each other, maybe love each other, but the minute they get together to talk business let alone anything else, like recipes, fireworks go off. They almost jeopardized the entire operation before we mandated that an intermediary, you, would be a go-between and they would never have to be face to face again.”

“So, a couple of what they used to call ‘Mustache Pete’s’ back in the neighborhoods, probably past their prime.”

“But still producing, and don’t forget it. That is what counts for me, you, and the people that we work for. This is a time of cover, low key, and we, they, want to keep it that way. No two brothers with burrs on their butts going to war over a disagreement over a Fra Diavolo recipe.”

“Understood,” the agent replied. “I’ve had the Fra Diavolo sauce over pasta with seafood at both places and both were great.”

“Probably the same recipe.”

“That’s your point, I get it. Their personal differences will never be resolved because they are so much alike.”

“Exactly, and that’s why your role as boring as you say it is, is so important. Maintain the status quo.”

“Like I said, all’s quiet on the Western Front!”

Attorney Ball nodded but knew that his job description was to keep it that way. Nobody, even his partners in the firm, knew that Ball was giving legal advice and counsel to the mob. His affiliation had been coerced almost a decade ago as the result of overwhelming gambling debts and an unfortunate incident involving an escort in Reno

where he had gone ostensibly on a business trip for his firm, but ended up with a woman in his suite who had taken or was given a “hot shot” of heroine after they had indulged in virtually every sex act imaginable, and he had fallen asleep after drinking a glass of wine that had obviously been spiked. Of course, this was all recorded without his knowledge in living color and for the sake of his family, wife and three children, and probably most importantly to Trenton Ball III, his reputation as a partner in a prestigious law firm, he agreed, after the woman’s body was spirited away from his room, to act at the behest of the mob in everything up to and including setting up dummy corporations offshore for the purposes of laundering untold millions. He had grown numb to the threat of exposure after all these years and obviously had given up on finding a way out.

###

Wickenburg is a town about fifty miles northwest from Phoenix. It is very western, even has one of the premier western art museums in the country. Once the location of dude ranches back when they were a destination in the mid-twentieth century, now it has a population a shade over six thousand. It had a violent beginning and past, starting with its settlement in the early eighteen sixties, and a flurry of Yavapai Indian raids until General Crook brought that under control and ultimately relocated the tribe to the San Carlos Reservation. At one time it was even considered a possible capital of the Arizona Territorial government. The Vulture Mine, a result of the mineral rush in central Arizona, was a mainstay of Wickenburg in its early years.

Now it is basically a quiet place, and due to the expansion of Phoenix, almost a suburb of the northwest part of that metropolis. Indeed, many in Wickenburg commute to employment in the Valley of the Sun.

Wickenburg has a somewhat significantly higher population of women than men according to the census. One of them, somewhat over sixty years of age, lives in a trailer park on the edge of town and is on a telephone call to a close friend in similar circumstances living in Prescott.

“It’s almost time. He told me it was almost time for us to get our due.”

“The bastards have it coming; our time has come. We have leverage and it’s time we use it,” was the only reply.

“Right on, sister, right on.”

Chapter 1

I was summoned back to a corporate “front office” for The Outfit, one of those clandestine government organizations, on the east coast to meet with my boss for an assignment. I never look forward to these meetings, not because I am not up for the challenge that he would present, but because our relationship has always been, well, testy at best. To be honest I think we both like getting under each other’s skin, and this has been going on since we have worked together. He knows what buttons to push, and I usually know how to push back.

I live in North Phoenix in an area known as Sunnyslope in a bungalow, not large by any means, built in the nineteen fifties, but very comfortable for a single guy. It’s on North Central Avenue at the base of North Mountain which is part of an extensive park system in Phoenix with hiking trails and visitor centers. The area has become somewhat gentrified over the years, mostly because of the views but has never really managed to get all that polished up, lots of patina or rough edges to those who would describe it with a less sophisticated vocabulary. I find it very comfortable in a funky sort of way.

To my neighbors who see me come and go, they are led to believe that I work in international construction, which would account for my extended absences and sometimes my returning a bit worse for wear. In reality, I work for a court of last resort, an off-the-books Federal organization whose only mandate is to take care of the business that can’t be handled through regular channels, and obviously in a discreet manner. I’ve been doing this for a long time, am pretty good at it since I am still alive and though approaching, or let’s face it, actually in middle age, can’t fathom doing anything else. I’ve had to dispatch to take care of business, but frankly it doesn’t keep me up at night; it was simply what had to be done. I got over being concerned about that a long time ago. Perhaps I would be a perfect subject for a graduate thesis in deviant psychology but I’ve long since resolved that concern. I’m simply good at what I do, am compensated well, and feel that I am providing a service when nothing else can rectify a situation.

I have a woman in my life, well, most of the time. Bright, beautiful, and as independent as I am. We tried living together for a while, but it didn’t work out; she is North Scottsdale and into designer everything and I am Sunnyslope and jeans and a tee shirt or sweatshirt depending on the season with sneakers or hiking boots to complete the look. I kind of gravitate to brew pubs, even a biker bar or two if the food is good but do

enjoy good healthy food as I cook for myself, and she to haute cuisine and will only resort to a microwave to heat something up that she brought home from a five star whatever the night before. I love her but we are currently on the outs. That condition comes and goes. We both are pretty stubborn. She goes her way for a while and I go mine, but we ultimately end up together again, but not right now. I have to admit though that I wonder from time to time who will give up first.

Besides her I have few friends, except for a shrink who helped me get my head straight after a disastrous assignment that resulted in innocents being killed brutally, and a detective on the Phoenix PD who I have enlisted from time to time to pull a few strings that needed pulling. Beyond them, I don't look for companionship, buddies, or the like. It's too hard to continue a charade about what I do and frankly compared to my world we really don't have much in common. I'd rather just use my free time to read a good book, do some research on a subject that interests me, do some investing with a nest egg that I've accumulated over the years and grown quite successfully, or watch a really good vintage movie. Never got hooked on sports; can't see why you would spend time watching people do things that you can't do, and I don't gamble so betting on games or whatever is of no interest. I'm content with that lifestyle, when I'm not on assignment, but since I was summoned all of that was about to be changed.

###

I was seated in front of my boss's desk, waiting for him to honor me with his presence. Part of the game, he would let me sit as long as he could. I had shifted, crossed legs from one position to another at least a dozen times.

After about thirty minutes he finally came in the door.

"Sorry I had to make you wait."

"Not a surprise, I've been to this rodeo before."

"You cowboys from out west always using metaphors like that."

"Been to a lot of rodeos, mostly here and with you." I guess this wasn't starting off as smoothly as I had planned it, but he just knew how to push the button.

"Well climb down off that bronco, pard', and let's get down to business."

"That's what I came here for."

"Well, Bakoda—I assume that is the name you are still going by. Never could figure that one out."

I must admit in my business aliases over time are part of the game and Bakoda Pak has been my legal name for a long time, but it is so odd that it drove my boss's curiosity to the extreme as to where it came from and why I took it. I enjoyed that and knew the story behind it but would never tell him.

He shook his head slowly giving in a bit, and maybe to save time said, "Okay, I know you were a boxer back when so let's stop sparring and talk about your assignment."

I nodded. Game over, until next time.

"This one is right in your backyard, Phoenix, Paradise Valley, Scottsdale and the Valley in general."

I wondered why I had to travel all the way back here to find that out. We both had secured phones and . . . anyway, I kept my mouth shut.

"There has been an organized crime family in Phoenix and the Valley for a couple of generations."

I interrupted, "You must be talking about the Contes."

"Exactly," he replied. "Then you must know that we leave them alone."

"Yes, even though the two brothers at the head of the family or families as it evolved can't stand each other they maintain peace. They regulate the conflicts between the Latino gangs, indulge in some drug trafficking out of Mexico, loan sharking and prostitution mostly through strip clubs, etc., etc."

"Correct. Have to wonder, how do you know so much about them?"

"I live in the neighborhood; I have my sources there too." I was referring to my friend Mark Grant a detective on the Phoenix PD who told me once, "If you finally think the city is squeaky clean, it's gone underground. It will always be there and better to maintain it isolated unless it becomes unmanageable. Sometimes your enemy is your ally in keeping order." Made pragmatic sense.

"All right, Bakoda, so you get it." He sat back in his chair behind his desk which was always jacked up, the chair that is, over the height of mine and steepled his forefingers after he clasped his hands. The desk had a modesty panel on the front between the two rows of drawers and I was sure his feet weren't touching the floor. Power positioning, oh my god!

I nodded, he continued.

"Looks like someone is planning to upset the apple cart."

“How so?” I asked.

“Well, we have a guy on the inside, the go-between who moderates communication between the two brothers. His name is Marco Baker, did some time so they trust him. He believes something is going on to topple both of them and take over the businesses.”

“Does he know who might be plotting this coup?”

“His guess is the two sons, one of each of the Dons. They are very close, and he believes that they are conspiring to generate a gang war between their fathers and after the carnage take over the operations and consolidate them into one family.”

“Sounds like an internal shake up. Why would we care? These are businesses, CEOs come and go for Christ’s sake.”

“But we don’t have a relationship with the sons like we do the fathers. This is about stability.”

“So, what do you want me to do about it?”

“Take them both out if necessary. We’ll insert you and then you prevent the potential outcome after you take a close look.”

That was that, meeting over.

Chapter 2

I was back in Phoenix, after what I considered a rather pointless trip. This could have been handled more expeditiously, no waiting in his office, no quips and barbs, on and on, but that was the way our relationship was. I had to wonder, if he ever lived in my real world out in the field on assignment if he would survive. My guess is, not for long, but then again, these guys in senior positions, as unassuming as they may seem, have backgrounds that literally set one back. It brought to mind the advisor when I was at ASU who recruited me when I was in pre-law. Ex-CIA and specialized in infiltrating the Iron Curtain and bringing agents and operatives out. Looking at him you would never have taken him for any more than a be specked college professor. Even though he was in academia when he was my advisor, he told me in his office one day, “You never are out.” He wasn’t and that’s how I got into this business over two decades ago, and I’ve never been out of a clandestine court of last resort in the government that has an

official name but is called The Outfit among the few who know that it exists or work in and for it.

Anyway, my next move was to meet with the mediator, the guy who was liaison or go-between between the two brothers but actually worked for us. I understood that he wasn't particularly happy about the arrangement, me taking his place for a while, but that was about turf, I thought. He had a franchise and wasn't interested in having someone coming into his territory, but then again, he had no choice. I figured our meeting would be touchy at best.

I had been given an alias and a background to fit the position. My new name was Tony Frontera, half Mexican and German. Did a little time for aggravated assault as I had been a closer in loan sharking and collections. I look a little beat up after doing my real job for The Outfit for a while with the battle scars to prove it, so I pretty much fit the part, although the busted nose came from my boxing days.

I was to meet with the liaison at Durant's on Central Avenue in Phoenix, a haunt for the movers and shakers and those who ran under the radar since the mid-Twentieth Century. Very appropriate. It's a steak and chop house and I was buying dinner. Looked forward to the chicken liver appetizers that my girlfriend literally gags over, but hey, she was in Scottsdale and we're on the outs and this meeting was on expenses, so I was going to eat what I wanted to.

###

I showed up early and was eating chicken livers, a double order, when he showed up. I know that he was supposed to be my guest, but then again, I was supposed to be a tough guy, rough around the edges, and being a bit crude in the social graces went with the persona. Besides, I was hungry when I got there. Also, he had no idea who I really was or why I had been inserted but did know that I worked, as did he, for The Outfit. All he knew was that he was being paid by organized crime to be a go-between and by us to be an informant and do what we told him.

I picked up a chicken liver with a fork, pointed it at him and said, "Want a chicken liver, Marco?" when he arrived at the table. I didn't get up to greet him, just stuck out that fork with a chicken liver on it.

"Can't stand the damned things, make me gag."

"Sound just like my old lady," I replied. "Have a seat. I hope you aren't as much of a bitch as she is."

He sat down and looked a bit disgusted as I enjoyed chewing the morsel on my fork.

I figured I'd give him the first move, so I just kept eating. Finally, he said after a few minutes of silence and looking furtively from side to side his hands clasped in front of him resting on the table, "What in the hell is going on? Why am I being pulled out and you in?"

"Got me," I said, "just a job. Somebody thought you needed some time off, I guess."

I didn't think he would buy that, but it seemed like a good place to start.

"There has to be more to it than that," he said.

"Hey, I'm a rat just like you. All I know is that I am to meet with you, get a grip on the situation and take your place for a little while. For all I know, they might not think they're getting their money's worth and sending me in as kind of an auditor, let's say to be sure they're paying for valid information. But I'm sure you're a straight up guy." I looked him square on and held up another chicken liver on a fork while I smiled, winked, and stuffed it into my mouth.

"How do they know that you would tell them the truth? That is if I'm not dealing on the level or even if I am."

"They pay me more than they pay you, buddy, and they're sitting on an outstanding warrant that they can exercise if I fuck up, so I'm highly motivated to do exactly what they tell me. Did time, don't want more of that medicine." I decided to change the subject after a pause after the last liver. I slid the plates aside, dabbed my mouth with my napkin and said, "Hey, why don't you order a drink, and we'll order some food. I was told I could turn in the tab on this so let's spend some of The Outfit's money. Just settle down and let's be friends, buddy."

If I had any doubts before I met him, I knew that this guy would kill me given the chance. Maybe down the way I would give it to him if somebody didn't first.

After the chicken liver goon was over, he ordered a drink and we ordered dinner and he settled down a bit. After a few Jacks and water over ice he mellowed a lot, and I in character did too. After all, I needed this guy but had done the setup to give him the impression that he didn't mean a thing to me other than a vehicle to avoid that warrant and make some money. So, it was time to switch the approach and make him believe that we were going to be buddies.

Over the next hour or so I empathized and cajoled a bit and tried to impress on him that we both were on the same page; just a couple of guys under the thumbs of an

oblique mercenary agency that paid us well, didn't tell us too much, but expected us to do what we were told and held a hammer over our heads if we didn't.

By the time I picked up the tab he had agreed to set up a meet and a hand-off to the two brothers, telling them that he was going back home to bury his mother who had died suddenly and help his brother settle her affairs and would be gone for at least a month. He had explained to the brothers that we had both known each other in prison and I was a straight guy and could be trusted.

He played his part as if he were reading off a script.

I kept my mouth shut and stood off to the side.

Both meetings went well. The Dons basically nodded and burned the legal pad sheets that all of this had been communicated on.

I was in!

Chapter 3

To stay in character, particularly since this assignment was in my own city, I had to relocate for the duration. My little place in Sunnyslope could be traced down rather easily to determine that I wasn't really Tony Frontera, and I wasn't naïve enough to believe that the Dons or even Marco Baker wouldn't have me checked out.

I rented a single bedroom apartment on East Camelback Road a mile or so from the Scottsdale city limits. Went to one of those rental places and secured a basic setup of furnishings for the entire place, a TV, and a microwave. Bought a toss-away phone that couldn't be traced, and a mattress, pillow and sheets and pillowcases for my rent-a-bed that would be left behind or donated to charity when I finished my assignment. A few bath towels and wash cloths and a basic kitchen setup with pots, pans, food and beverage and I was all set. I did this all before meeting with Marco or the Dons.

The place wasn't flashy but not run down since the address was on the trendy East Side, well maintained and freshly updated, granite counter tops no less. More than presentable would best describe it and it was pretty comfortable. My apartment was on the second floor overlooking the pool and as a lot of the residents were young and just coming up, I enjoyed some of the nubile eye candy that lounged around the pool. At my age, they could be my daughters, but I still looked out the window or from my terrace as

I moved in and set up. Not a time for distractions I had to remind myself and got back to business.

Besides the apartment, The Outfit, had set me up with a ride, titled to a Tony Frontera. Not new, but kind of cool for an up and comer in the Dons' organization, a black Mustang convertible a few years old with a red interior.

After meeting with the Dons, such as it was, I had to develop a game plan to get to the sons, my ultimate objective.

###

“So, what’s with the beard?” Mark Grant, my detective friend on the Phoenix PD asked.

“It’s not like I look like Rip Van Winkle for Christ’s sake. It’s just a well-kempt and tastefully trimmed alteration of my regular appearance,” I replied, smiling as I told him and took a bite of my carne asada taco.

He didn’t buy it. “Which means that you are on a local assignment and the reason why you wanted to get together with me wasn’t just to buy me lunch and catch up on old times. My first hint of course was that you suggested this way out of the way place on the West Side, almost to Palm Springs for Christ’s sake. You know I could . . .”

“Lose my job for helping you out.” I finished his sentence. “Got that, good buddy.”

He sighed, cocked his head back and blinked as he looked up at the ceiling, exhaled and finally looked back at me, “So what do you need to know?”

I had him for the price of a green corn tamale with black beans on the side. He would continue to protest, but as usual he was hooked.

“Tell me what you know about the Conte sons, Frank and Marty.”

“Why do you want to know?” He paused, and then added, “As if I couldn’t guess.”

“Can’t tell you, best buddy, or I’d have to kill ya,” I quipped.

“Or somebody or somebodies. You know, knowing you can be dangerous.”

I gave him my most innocent expression, cocked my head and spread my palms in front of him across the table.

“And put your job in jeopardy, I know, but you know that won’t happen, your cooperation has been covered before,” I reassured him.

“But it’s like having your debit or credit card stolen—it takes forever to straighten it out.”

“All right, but you know that the inconvenience has always been in the interest of facilitating a practical solution to a community problem.”

“Christ, Bakoda, or whoever you are going by now, that usually results in a person or persons disappearing off the face of the planet, or more probably, I assume, buried somewhere in it.”

“No comment, but you’ll agree I’m sure that anyone who ended up in that position was not a productive contributor to a peaceful and just society.”

Mark simply gave up. “Shut the fuck up. No more rationale and platitudes. I know you can be a cold-hearted son of a bitch, but somewhere in that black heart is a soft spot for setting things straight, so what in the hell do you need to know about the Conte kids?”

I told him what I needed to know.

###

I had played the game for a couple of weeks. A meeting with each of the Dons once each week, so that amounted to four meetings passing blue-line and burning inquiries and responses on the stoves. Nothing really of interest that I could gather as far as what one would expect in a major criminal enterprise. It all revolved around running a business much like legitimate businesspeople might. The territories of the brothers had been dictated by their overlords in the regional national organizations when it was determined that they couldn’t work together on a face-to-face basis and the intermediary go-between solution seemed to work. They, in combination, ran a rather successful and peaceful enterprise and I had to assume a profitable one for each of them and their parent organization. The only thing that distinguished them from legitimate businesses was that they dealt in drugs, prostitution, loan sharking, extortion, etc.

One thing seemed rather curious to me but made logical sense once you thought about it. Marco had given me the name of the regional organization contact and said that from time to time they would want to know what was going on between the brothers and the operation. I knew I had only been inside for a couple of weeks, but I had never gotten a call for an update. That seemed strange but then I determined, rightly I felt, that the organization was a well-oiled and profitable enterprise and was buzzing right along with little oversight. A testimony to the business acumen of the brothers.

I wasn’t sure if I was making much progress toward my objective but understood the rationale for my organization wanting to be sure nothing happened to the brothers to cause disruption. Outside of the illegal and moral aspects, the practical fact was that the

operation in Phoenix was peaceful, and it was determined best to maintain it that way. So, my job was to eliminate any threat that would upset the applecart.

It was at the end of the second week that my toss-away cell rang. The brothers and their organizations were the only ones who had that number as well as Marco Baker who worked for them, and us.

“Hello, this is Tony,” I answered.

“Mr. Frontera?”

“Yes,” I replied to a very female voice.

“The reason I’m calling is to invite you to get together with myself and my best friend one afternoon this weekend.”

“I’m not sure that I understand. Just who are you?”

“I’m Julia Conte, Don Guido’s wife. Margo, Angelo’s wife, and I would like to get to know you.”

Chapter 4

In my briefings taking on this assignment I got a background on the Dons and their respective families and of course key members of their organizations. The Dons were both married, actually to their second wives, Julia, Guido’s wife, and Margo, Angelo’s. The Dons’ two sons, my primary interests, were the result of marriages that had ended nearly twenty years ago while the Dons were coming up in the organization and both women had basically retreated into obscurity after getting a settlement in “coming up” dollars, leaving their sons to be raised by the Dons. From what I understood they were not heartless, they simply were given no choice regarding the abandonment of their sons, and in the world of organized crime, no choice means that you have only one choice if you want to stay alive.

Julia and Margo though, the second wives, were evidently the product of mutual mid-life crises on the part of the Dons. Both were considered prizes, only available to the wealthy and powerful, and by the time the Dons’ snagged them both about a dozen years ago both Dons were indeed wealthy and powerful. By all appearances everyone got what they wanted: the Dons, stunning women to be on their arm and occasionally to

grace their restaurants, and the women enjoyed all the luxuries that the wives of the wealthy and powerful felt entitled to.

It was of interest to me that all of this happened to the Dons on parallel tracks even after they ceased to see each other. They divorced at about the same time, both began successful restaurants that also conveniently could launder questionable income paying bills for expenses to companies that were shells that they or the organization owned, remarried about the same time to women who were two peas in an exclusive pod. Interesting.

So, what did they, the current wives, want with me? I pondered that for a millisecond before accepting the invitation. I had to explore every avenue, and this could be one. Besides, I admit, I was curious, but at the same time something in my primitive survival brain reminded me that curiosity killed the cat.

###

I was to meet Julia and her “best friend” at the poolside bar at the Valley Ho hotel in Scottsdale on Saturday afternoon about two. It was late October in Arizona and the summer heat had tempered, by our standards being in the low nineties, high eighties, so given the dry climate it would be perfectly comfortable.

“How will I know you?” I asked to the beautiful and to be honest seductive voice on the phone.

“Just come to the outdoor table with the most attractive blonde and brunette there. You won’t miss us.”

“I’ll trust you on that, but I have to ask, what’s this all about?”

“Just routine,” she replied, “just routine, and we’ll explain on Saturday at two. Don’t be late. It’s not nice to keep two stunning ladies waiting, especially us.”

Since these were apparently the bosses’ wives, it didn’t take a rocket scientist to get that this was a command performance of one kind or another.

For what purpose I didn’t have a clue.

Julia ended the call with everything but a kiss.

I no more than got off the call with Julia than I got a call from Don Angelo.

“Come into the kitchen for a new recipe. It’s important.”

I told him that I would be there in an hour, that would be at two on Friday. He said that would be ok and it would only take a few minutes and he would give the staff an extended break.

I showed up. Same routine in front of the stove. He passed me a blue line. I read it. *Tell my brother that we have a rat. Rats need to be exterminated. They are bad for business.*

I nodded and burned the paper.

He turned the burners off, and I left.

Chapter 5

The Valley Ho is a Scottsdale resort hotel dating back to the nineteen fifties and was recently revamped and expanded. Within walking distance of the Old Town and its shops and galleries, it attracts an upscale audience who want to indulge in the beautiful weather in season and enjoy the convenience of a resort hotel in a world-class destination town. Scottsdale and adjacent Paradise Valley attract a lot of people to The Valley and its share of folks who just want to live in their zip codes. They are nice enough places, but Scottsdale has its share of pretenders and pretense.

From my briefing, the two Conte wives had plenty of pretense but were not pretenders. Thanks be to the Dons; they had the financial backing to be more than credible in a sometimes less than credible town. Both Dons' domiciles were within Paradise Valley, but all the good upscale shopping, spas and restaurants were in Scottsdale so that was where you usually could find their wives.

Don Angelo's message via me to his brother regarding "a rat" was troubling and I had passed it along to Don Guido as advised. They had a rather large organization collectively and it could have referred to any number of individuals in their employ, or of course, Marco, who was indeed a rat since he was working for my organization and apparently spilling his guts out at our expense.

Not that I particularly cared what happened to Marco except that he was an asset and was directly tied to me by virtue of his referral of me to fill his slot while he "handled his mother's affairs after her passing."

But, I wondered, if Marco were "the rat" why would they give that information or speculation to me since Marco had to cover his slot while he was out of pocket? Didn't make sense.

This was rattling around in my brain as I parked my car and made my way to the pool bar at the Valley Ho.

###

“So, you’re the new guy. I hope that you are as much fun as Marco.”

I was looking Margo in the eye as she winked, and yes it was a beautiful eye and everything that surrounded it down to her perfectly pedicured toenails. She raised her glass, Julia and I did as well. We all toasted and sipped a glass of sangria that was freshly poured from a pitcher on the table. Mine had been poured as I had taken my seat after arriving.

“I guess I am, the new guy. As far as being as much fun as Marco, well he never seemed to me very much fun, but then, I only know him in a professional sense.”

“Well, time will tell. You so look like you might be fun, if not a little up tight,” Julia said. “Thanks for coming, by the way. Some guys might indeed feel a little up tight meeting with the bosses’ wives, so hope you get over that soon.” I nodded and raised my glass of sangria toward her before taking a second sip. She was as indeed as beautiful as Margo. Which was more attractive? A toss-up.

“So, what’s this all about?” I asked.

“You mean us asking to meet with us?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, way back when you were a kid,” Julia said, “no offense, but way back. When someone came into the neighborhood, they got a visit from The Welcome Wagon. Well, we’re kind of our version of it.”

Margo added, “We interview all of the new guys, anyway the ones that our invitations don’t scare off.”

I nodded, then asked, “Why?”

There was silence for about a minute before Julia offered, “Well, we have always been attracted to bad boys, I mean, or rather we I mean, that’s why we married the Dons. All the new guys are, well, might be bad boys, or maybe just want people to think that they are.”

“Yes, go on,” I replied encouragingly, meanwhile stifling a smirk. This pair were indeed a piece of work. Way too much time on their collective perfectly manicured hands and inside their well coifed heads, or maybe they are feeling me out for some ulterior motive. I wouldn’t be doing this job if I weren’t trying to figure out all the

players in the potential palace coup. I had to remind myself as I watched this potential farce play out. Or maybe it wasn't.

“Well, we like to find out who is or isn't. You probably have passed the first test, or you wouldn't be anywhere near here, let alone in the state or the West Coast, maybe the country in general,” Julia explained.

“The test,” I asked, “what is the first test?”

Julia looked at Margo and asked her, “Do you want to tell him or shall I?”

“Go ahead,” Margo replied.

Julia nodded, then explained, “By now one of the brothers has asked you to pass along a message to the other that there is ‘a rat’ in the organization and the rat needed to be exterminated. Yes?”

I nodded.

“And what did you do?” Margo asked.

“I did what I was told and passed the communication to the other brother.”

She answered, “And that is why you are here with two beyond beautiful women and not somewhere passing through Rollo, Missouri cruising east to get the hell out of The Valley and reconsider your life choices.”

“I don't get it,” I confessed.

“Let me explain,” Julia said, then continued. “Our husbands, the Dons, seem like an older generation organization pretty well set in Phoenix and the surrounding area, smooth running, under control, no drama. Working for a couple of old guys like them is just a piece of cake. No risk, and you are on the inside, a go-between from one brother to another. You get to play gangster, but in your hands are clean.”

I nodded and she continued.

“Then they lay ‘the rat’ story on you and you realize that by passing along this information you could literally be an accessory to murder and if you really don't have the cajones to be in this organization, for moral scruples or simply self-preservation, you split. So, you obviously passed their, and our, first bad boy test.”

“More?” I asked.

“Oh, every once in a while, they will come up with something just to be sure,” Margo answered. “They have survived in this world for more than four decades and have it running like a Swiss watch, and they only want the most dedicated people working for them and no pretenders. And we'll guarantee you, if it has to come down to

it, those two old guys can and will be as tough as they have to be to maintain order and their organization. They never get their hands dirty directly but always get the job done.”

I nodded in understanding, took another sip of sangria, and wondered what their next move would be, so I asked.

Julia answered, “We’re trying to figure out if you would be interested in a threesome with us, that is, if you are worthy.”

“Am I?”

“We’re still deciding,” she replied after the two of them shared glances.

I had to admit that left me speechless. I thought that I was irresistible.

Well, things seemed to be going along swimmingly, and since I had no information about my potential targets, the sons, except that Mark Grant had said they were squeaky clean, I decided to change the subject with my quite literally new bosom buddies. “The Dons both have sons,” I ventured.

“So,” Julia replied. “Lots of people do. What’s it to you?”

The mood had abruptly changed.

“Just curious. I like to know everything about the organization that I work for.”

“Off limits!” Margo said and raised a warning index finger wagging it from side to side. “They have nothing to do with their fathers’ business interests, and best you keep your nose out of anything to do with them.”

“Okay, sorry,” I replied, looking appropriately chastised.

“You know, you ask a lot of questions for a go-between,” Julia said. “Just remember, curiosity killed the cat.”

I almost said “meow,” but thought better of it.

Chapter 6

I left the Valley Ho about three or so and drove back to my place. Rather than mull over the meeting I decided to let it percolate in my brain for a while and wait for an “ah hah” moment.

Five o’clock came and no “ah hah” as I watched a rerun of *Magnum PI*. I wondered if he was ever considered for a menage a trois including two beautiful women.

Seven o'clock, still no "ah hah" as I poured a glass of a decent Chard and decided to whip up some linguine with clam sauce for dinner about eight. I like to eat late.

I make a pretty good clam sauce with capers and chopped spinach, good olive oil and a little white wine. I enjoyed my repast as I watched a third episode of Magnum and still wondered if he was ever tentatively propositioned by two beautiful women. Still no "ah hah." Magnum was indeed very virile and handsome and a lot taller than me, but I was willing to bet he was never tentatively propositioned like I was this afternoon. That consideration gave me some solace as I enjoyed my dinner.

When I finally went to bed about one in the morning still no "ah hah" and the Magnum episodes were over, and reruns of *Walker, Texas Ranger* were on. Nothing against Chuck Norris, but in my mind, he ain't no Tom Selleck, and I was sure that Chuck never got tentatively propositioned by two beautiful women as I had today. Satisfied in that conclusion I fell asleep on my rent-a-bed.

It was about four in the morning and in the middle of a rather erotic dream including two beautiful women when the "ah hah" finally came. I sat up in bed and reviewed my conclusion in my head. The "ah hah" was that I had been indulging in mental masturbation all day long and had been going nowhere fast. Maybe Mark Grant was right when he kept calling me an absolute idiot.

Chapter 7

I had to figure out what course to take next. I have a pretty savvy gut and I've found over time that it is usually correct, or at least puts me on the right track. All I had now in my gut was some indigestion about all of this.

Lots of possibilities. Could the sons be plotting a takeover of their fathers' operations as we were led to believe, or perhaps could the current wives be in collusion with the sons to the same purpose? Then you have to ask, what's in it for them? The women have a life of privilege and luxury and apparently the sons do as well while the old guys do all the work and keep the clock ticking and the money coming in and are protected by us, our organization, for practical reasons. What are they to gain except a lot of work for hardly more in return? Then again, schemes like that don't always make logical sense. Sometimes it is just a lust for power. But still, there had to be more to it.

I was sitting in my apartment on Sunday mulling this over when I got a call from Mark Grant.

“Hello, Mark, what’s going on?”

“As usual, it was a pain in the ass, but I got an address on one of the first wives. She’s up the road in Wickenburg. Not sure if it will help much but I will text you her number and address.”

“Mark, anything is helpful at this time. I keep running into logical walls, nothing seems to make sense, so a little more input might. Tomorrow is Monday, I can drive up there and see if she is willing to give me a little time. I’ll keep you out of it.”

“You know I could . . .”

“Lose my job,” I completed his sentence.

“Right,” he replied. “And you owe me big time, a decent dinner and not at one of those beer joints on Cave Creek Road that you like to frequent.”

“Ok, Mark, you pick the place; we’ll spiff up after this is all over and dinner in a place of your choice is on me.”

“I’m counting on it. I think this will make about three that you owe me for past favors.”

“We’ll catch up,” I assured him.

I would drive to Wickenburg on Monday and come back for my meeting with Don Guido on Wednesday. I had no idea what to expect.

###

I tossed around how I was going to approach this. Finally, I decided that I would be as honest as I could be under the circumstances.

The woman in Wickenburg was named Gloria De Cici. She had been married to Don Guido Conte and took her maiden name back after the divorce.

Having done some selling during my lifetime when I would take a stab at doing something outside The Outfit, I thought I would take a chance and tell her that Don Guido knew that she had concerns; well, doesn’t everyone? I would tell her that I work with the Dons and meet with them on a weekly basis and would pass along any concerns that Gloria might have.

A shot in the dark, but what the hell!

I knocked on the door of a rather dated but well-maintained double wide house trailer in a presentable complex. Inside a picket fence that surrounded the side with a

large, covered porch was an array of flowers and rose bushes, very nicely pruned and maintained.

Gloria De Cici answered the door, a sixty plus woman but well-coiffed in a rather understated way.

“Yes,” she said, “what can I do for you?”

I told her that I worked for her ex-husband and was a go-between for conducting business between the brothers and Don Guido had inquired about how she was doing.”

She didn’t pull any punches as she opened the screen door and pointed to the couch. I sat down she said, “I’d be doing a lot better if I had that million bucks that he was going to pay me had been transferred into my account like promised and Teresa, Angelo’s ex. would too, so I could move into a decent real house without wheels.”

A stern woman who spoke her mind and, I would guess, not a pushover.

I responded, trying to probe deftly. “There must be a delay for a legitimate reason. I’m sure your ex-husband wants you to be comfortable.”

“That dick waddle,” she replied, “the only time I get anything out of him is when I tell him that unless he ponies up, I’ll tell anyone who cares where all the bodies are buried. Of course, the ones that care are the local cops, the state police, and the Feds. Teresa hasn’t seen her deposit either,” she said again. Then she added, “I have to wonder, don’t you go-betweens talk to each other when you take over for each other?”

“Oh, we do but I have to confess unless I write down notes, I tend to forget details. I actually thought that Teresa was in Flagstaff. I was a boxer back in my early career and maybe got a few gray cells scrambled.”

“Well don’t take it personally, you are a nice guy and all, maybe a little mixed up, but the guy we were dealing with setting this up was on top of everything and sharp as a tack.”

“He’s pretty good, old...”

“Marco, Marco Baker,” she completed my sentence. Then she said, “Maybe you really took too many punches and should get your head checked out.”

I agreed and told her I would get a status on the payments and get back to her and Teresa. I didn’t have to go to the trouble—they were both dead within a week.

###

“Cigarettes, both women smoked,” Mark Grant told me over dinner at the Phoenix City Grill. “Both in the same trailer, fell asleep watching TV, couch started first then the

whole place lit up. Cheap couches burn, the fabric, you know, and the foam stuffing, and trailer homes, they go up easy and burn hot. Both old gals got completely toasted.” He smiled and resumed eating his Caesar Salad before his entrée was to be delivered.

“You believe this was an accident?”

He finished chewing and wiped his lips with his napkin. “No more than you do. They were set up to be in the same place at the same time. Whoever did it, knew how to use fire to obliterate evidence.” He resumed eating his salad.

“Accelerant, any indication of arson?”

“Still investigating, but nothing apparent. The couch caught fire, they were both on it and the place turned into an oven in literally minutes. Smoke probably got them first. Basically, a metal building, contained area and kind of like those stories about people being immolated in their lounge chairs. Quirky, but it happens.”

“So, given that, you really don’t believe it was an accident?”

“Do you believe in the Easter Bunny?”

Mark continued to consume his salad.

Chapter 8

I was a month into this. At our direction Marco had communicated to the Dons that taking care of his mother’s affairs was taking longer than originally anticipated and he wouldn’t be back for at least three or four weeks. Giving me more time.

I had to admit I hadn’t made a lot of progress. I still had not made any connection with the sons. All I knew was that Mark had told me that they had no apparent connections with the activities of their fathers’ operations and the Dons’ current wives had warned me off regarding even bringing up the subject.

Don’t get me wrong, my briefing packet had given me plenty of information about the two cousins including their addresses, but I had no idea if they had anything to do with the potential of disrupting the operations of the Dons and taking over. And at every turn, a name kept turning up, our own personal rat, Marco Baker. Curious, the guy really got around.

###

My phone rang. It was Margo, three weeks or so after our meeting.

“Surprised to hear from you,” I said. “What’s up?”

“Well, we made a decision.”

“Really?”

“Yes, you are worthy.”

I blushed.

###

As flattered as I was with their decision and as tempting as their proposition was, there was no way I could accommodate them. It didn’t have anything to do with morality, god knows I’ve crossed over sexual moral lines in the past. Getting involved with those two could foul up the job, especially if the Dons found out. Assuming Marco was messing around, I was surprised he was getting away with it, but that was immaterial for the moment.

So, I had developed a strategy since our first meeting just to deal with this in case it did happen. After all what woman or pair of women could resist me? But in this situation my male animal charm would not be an asset, even though the proposition was inevitable.

I let her continue.

“We thought you might like to come over to the house, maybe take a swim, enjoy some libation, then enjoy us. How does that sound?”

“Sounds interesting but I am interested in some other things that would be in your house.”

There was a pause, then, “What exactly?”

“Your closet. You are a very smart dresser. I’ll bet there are a few things in there that would fit me perfectly.”

Silence for a moment again, then, “Are you telling me that you are qu...?”

I finished it for her, “as a three-dollar bill, honey.”

###

While this was all going on Marco was ensconced in our “Hideaway Hilton,” as we called it, in Sedona. One of the many safe houses that we have around hither and yon. Not bad digs. Full time cook and maid who works for The Outfit and is a semi-retired lifer who can beat the snot out of any of her guests who get a little bored and decide to

leave the reservation. Great food, beautiful views. Why would anyone get the yen to leave?

Human nature, they all try eventually. After all, you can only look at the red rocks so long and not start longing for something else. Besides there isn't anything on TV that you haven't seen before let alone the movie channels.

Marco made his break somewhat over a week ago and took the cook's Jeep. He was only gone overnight and came back the next morning. He apologized and said he just had to get out, had gone down to Prescott and hung out at the bars on Whiskey Row, then rented a room at a Quality Inn. The cook checked the odometer—he had put a couple of hundred miles on it.

###

Don Guido passed me a note on blueline across the table. He was expressionless, giving nothing away regarding the content of what he had written.

It slid across the table making a bit of a scuffing sound. I read it. *Find out who killed Gloria and Theresa and take them out. Make it bad and take your time. We want it that way.*

So much for the harmless old men.

I nodded and jotted a note on my blueline, passed it over. *Will be done.*

The gas burners consumed the evidence as they always had.

###

Enter "Tagger," also known occasionally by his given name, Devin Freehold Johnson, but rarely.

He was included as a byline in my briefing folio. Basically, a gofer and driver for the wives on their excursions to spas, shopping, and whatever. He piloted a big Mercedes appropriate for the circumstances.

Minor scuffs with the legal system. Defacing public property as a juvenile, nothing much after that but his juvenile records beyond petty stuff were sealed. He was twenty-four years old. In my estimation, hardly worth a notice, except that the wives seemed awfully attached to him, but then again, they seemed to be attached to any male with an ego and the proper appendage. I'd seen him tending their car during our meeting at Valley Ho, wiping it down a bit, leaning on the fender, looking like a driver, a proper one, dressed in black with that cap with the little black brim. After our meeting they had

offered me a ride back to my place and told me how “wonderful” Tagger was, but I declined as I had driven my own vehicle. I got the impression that they had made the gesture just so they could laud Tagger; after all, I had to get to the meeting somehow in the first place and I must have driven. I don’t Uber.

I didn’t have any opinion about Tagger, only wondered why they did.

Since I seemed to be spinning my wheels, Tagger might be worth getting to know.

Chapter 9

Of course, my boss had gotten in touch with me to see what was going on and I didn’t have a lot to report, at least regarding progress on my original assignment.

“What in the Billy Hell have you been doing?” he asked. “It was simple, eliminate a threat to the brothers. Our intelligence indicated that was the sons.”

“I think that we might be on the wrong track,” I replied, “but I’m not sure what the right track is.”

“Bakoda, it seemed like a simple assignment, one that you can handle or should be able to based on your past performance; your mission was to make the sons disappear, you know in your usual, unobtrusive way.”

I know, but you aren’t the only one who wants to know if I’ve taken out the sons.”

A pause, then, “Who?”

“Your guest at the Hideaway Hilton.”

“Marco?”

“One and the same. I figured he was your source who put you and me on to the sons as a potential threat to the stability of the Dons’ organization. He called me a few days ago on the secure phone and wanted to know when I was going to whack the sons.”

“Seems kind of anxious.”

“This whole deal is whacky, in fact, from what I have been able to determine the only members of the cast who are squeaky clean are the sons.”

My boss, usually critiquing me to no end, took a turn that I hadn’t expected, saying, “Forget your original orders and figure it out. But protect the Dons. They are an asset.”

“No matter what they might have done?”

“No matter what they have done.”

That was the day before my car blew up.

###

I was fifty feet away when the black Mustang with the red interior turned into a fireball worthy of FX in an action movie.

Even from that far away the conclusion knocked me on my ass, set my ears ringing and the fireball rolled over the parking lot because of a breeze wafting in my direction, singeing my eyebrows and beard.

What saved my bacon was The Outfit and the fact that the Mustang was equipped with a remote starter that I had been thoroughly briefed on and instructed to start the car well before I got into it and let it run for at least a minute, specifically to escape a situation like this. Letting it run as instructed was because some explosive devices are set on a delay to be sure that the driver is comfortably situated, probably backing out of their parking spot before being blown to smithereens.

“You really pissed someone off,” Mark Grant told me the next day.

“Tell me about it.”

He looked at me, almost incredulous. “You’ve got to be kidding. You ever hear about playing with fire and getting burned?”

“Got a point,” I agreed, rubbing my forehead where my eyebrows used to be. “Any ideas?”

He acted like he was considering for a minute, rubbing his chin and turning his head a bit, which was only art and positioning. “Only thing I have an idea about is the same idea I’ve had since I’ve known you, that you are an absolute idiot. I keep my black suit dry cleaned and pressed for your funeral, that is if there is anything left of you to bury.”

“Will you deliver the eulogy?”

“No, because I couldn’t think of anything nice to say about you other than, as I said, you are, or were, an absolute idiot.”

“I’ll write the speech, highlighting my contributions to society, sense of fair play and of course, virility.”

“Shut up and buy me one of those lunches that you owe me.”

I did. We talked about football, not my favorite subject but “real guys” talk about it, and I am a “real guy.”

Over lunch, other than talking football, Mark said that the parking lot where my car was parked had a few video cameras and they were being checked. Turns out each of

the cameras only recorded a virtually identical photo of a right hand with a can of black spray paint spraying a coat of matte black on each of the three cameras' lenses. At least we knew that whoever was involved was right-handed. Big lead.

He wrapped up lunch by suggesting that I do something cosmetically about my eyebrows. "You look like Uncle Fester on *The Addams Family*."

I blew off his comment but did stop by a Walgreens on the way home and bought an eyebrow pencil.

###

One might wonder why I would agree with Don Guido to eliminate the murderer or murderers of the Dons' first wives.

I thought that the more interesting question was why the brothers would ask me to do the deed. As far as I knew and what Marco had told me, they saw me as a low-level agent, go-between, mediator, whatever, but hardly an assassin. Probably trustworthy, had a bit of a record, but probably someone less than capable of capping whoever was responsible for killing the wives, let alone figuring it out.

I agreed because it was the expedient thing to do. This whole thing was like a Gordian Knot. Very complex when considering all the players and seemingly impossible to untangle, but the answer was to think beyond the obvious problem and the solution would be simple. In the myth, rather than try to untangle the knot to get to what was inside, our hero, Alexander the Great, just took out his sword and cut through it.

Nice myth and story, but I wasn't sure how to cut through this particular knot.

And finally, maybe the brothers made the directive as a test, a test for me, which brought something in high probability to light. After all the weekly meetings, the gas stoves, burning of the bluelines, etc., something became obvious: the brothers were indeed communicating, probably talking or how would they have decided to suggest what they did to me without the usual communication protocol? After all, Don Guido had said, "We want it that way."

If they were indeed talking, why all this other bullshit?

Another several feet of twine had been wrapped and tied around the knot.

Chapter 10

So, back at my apartment I checked out the pool from my terrace, poured a decent red, and sat on the couch. I reflected on the pool in my thoughts, and I must confess got up and looked again, very satisfying but hardly moving me forward toward the objective or objectives of my assignment. Other than protecting the Dons' turf, I wasn't quite sure what they were.

I finally settled down on the couch, slipped off my shoes and put my feet on the coffee table, took another sip of wine and reviewed mentally. Been doing a lot of that lately.

Being innately selfish, first on my list was a certain amount of curiosity about why someone tried to kill me and would have under normal circumstances.

Then there were the Dons and their apparent ruse regarding their acerbic relationship and everything that went with it.

Then there were the two current trophy wives who were obviously over sexed, over-indulgent and quite blatant about it and had all the physical equipment to exploit it and the resources to live the lifestyle of the rich and famous, to borrow a late twentieth century TV theme.

Then there were the two previous wives who had threatened to hold up their former old men for a very sizable couple of checks in exchange for keeping their traps shut who were obviously murdered shortly after making the declaration. The Dons seemed like the logical suspects but then why would they send me on a mission to find the killer and eliminate him or her?

Then there were the two sons who we were led to believe were planning to overthrow the Dons but who seemed more interested in their tennis game and tanning than any nefarious plans other than living off the fat of the land, in short, their fathers' illegal enterprises and apparently messing around with their fathers' wives along with everyone else.

And finally, there was Marco. He put us, The Outfit, on to this in the first place, focusing on the sons. I hate to be trite, but he is a rat and nobody trusts a rat. Unless he really had concerns, why did he get this whole apple cart rolling, and why were the current wives so interested in him because he "was fun?" And he managed to disappear

from the safe house swiping a Jeep but returning the next day after spending the night in Prescott according to him.

Finally, there was Tagger. Apparently, a low-level gofer, but the current wives loved him, but then again, they loved everyone but me I assume because I told them I was gay. What a pity, but the job comes first.

I had been briefed on other players, but they seemed pretty much out of this loop. There were other people in the organization, some bag men, enforcers, a banker who we were sure was helping to launder money, an attorney who made sure the brothers appeared squeaky clean from a legal standpoint, but there didn't seem to be any motives there. All were well paid and didn't appear to harbor any grudges or were motivated to upset the gravy train.

I got up and poured another glass of wine, checked out the pool and plopped down on the couch. I knew the answer was staring me in the face, but I just couldn't see it.

And knowing someone had tried to kill me didn't make me feel any better. The Outfit had another car delivered, not as sexy as the Mustang, a Chevy Cruze sedan, but outfitted the same way. I hadn't been packing until the blow up happened, but now I was carrying a Smith and Wesson Model 386 snub nosed 357 Magnum wheel gun between my jeans and my torso in the small of my back. Plenty of fire power and I knew how to use it. Only six shots but one was more than adequate to do the job. I finished the bottle of red and fell asleep on the couch. The 356 was within arm's reach and would be until this was over. I had locked the sliding door to the terrace and drew all the blinds and double checked the dead bolt on the front door.

I dreamed of the girls down by the pool. They knew I wasn't gay, even though they called me "Pops." Reality dreams suck!

###

So, when everything was beyond confusing, I got a call from Margo, Angelo's wife.

"Look," she said, "we have to meet, and this isn't about sex or anything like that."

"I know I told you that I was gay, but I'm still disappointed. I like to be flattered."

"Get over that," she replied, "you aren't gay. That was a ruse."

"Really," I replied.

"Really. Marco told us a few days ago when he escaped from solitary up in Sedona and came down here to see us overnight."

"So, what did Marco tell you about me?"

“I’ll fill you in on that when we get together.”

“Why do we need to?”

“Someone wants to kill me, and I think you can protect me.”

“Who?”

“Can’t say now, but I think he tried to blow you up.”

“You know about that?”

“Doesn’t everyone?” she replied.

“Thought the explosion was pretty subtle.”

“Made the news. Nice little Mustang you had.”

“What do you think about a Chevy Cruze four door?”

“Boring.”

“You don’t seem very upset, Margo, for someone, who according to you, has somebody out to kill you.”

“That’s why I called you. I need a hero and I think you are qualified.”

We set up a time and place for a meeting Tuesday, the next afternoon.

We completed the call and I wondered what in the hell was going on. That was nothing new based on the quagmire this assignment had been, and that Marco might have blown my cover.

I decided over the next hour that I had to go to Sedona and wring his ratty neck and make it back in time for my Wednesday meeting with Don Guido, after finding how much damage Marco had done to my cover.

I called Margo back and told her that Marco had called me and had asked me to come up to Sedona and talk about some important business that he was supposed to take care of for the Dons but had forgotten to fill me in on when I took over for him. I asked her to put off our meeting until Thursday afternoon or evening, and to stay as safe as possible until then. I wasn’t sure if she was indeed being threatened or just another ploy to get attention. I told her that I was leaving the following morning.

###

The next morning, Tuesday, I drove up to Sedona and used my electronic key code to enter the safehouse since no one had answered the door. The Jeep was parked in the drive, and everything appeared normal.

I walked in and found both the housemother and Marco dead, and not for long. Both dispatched as best I could tell by a shotgun blast, obviously two, one for each. A

substantial portion of Marco's head was gone as he probably was shot right after answering the door and opening it. The housemother was in the hall that led to the kitchen, a blast in the chest, a butcher knife frozen in her hand where she fell. Probably trying to confront the assailant. Not a pretty sight.

A shotgun lay on the floor in front of the housemother's body in a puddle of fresh blood that had pooled in front of her body as she bled out from the hole that a twelve gauge would make at point blank range with double aught buckshot.

I called my boss, then Mark Grant. Got voice mail on both calls. Both got the same message, "Things are really fucked up here. Safehouse has been invaded with casualties. I need some cover. Call the Sedona PD. Will explain later."

I resisted the natural urge to pick up the shotgun and inspect it. Good move because just when I finished my calls the front door which I left ajar after entering flew open. I turned toward the entrance and saw three officers from the Sedona Police Department come charging in, guns drawn.

It was pretty obvious—I had been set up.

Chapter 11

I raised my arms immediately and fell face down to the floor breaking my fall with my palms, turned my head to the side and hollered "Gun in my waistband. I'm undercover law enforcement."

I could only hope that none of the three were too edgy or anxious to unload a clip from their Glock in what would be described as self-defense.

Of course, nobody on the scene believed me, especially since I had a wallet full of phony ID that were linked to someone with a criminal record.

I was cuffed and taken into town and ended up in a holding cell. I could only hope that the return phone calls would come in, but there were no guarantees, so I lay down on the stainless-steel platform attached to the wall that served as a seat and bed and started thinking.

Who knew I was coming up here? Only one, Margo. How did whoever murdered Marco and the housemother know that I was on my way and had taken the time to do the murders just prior to my arrival? Unknown. How did they know when I arrived?

Simple, someone had installed a transponder on my car was the most logical conclusion and tracked me from the time I left the parking lot at my apartment complex where the cameras were probably still painted over. What motive would the wives or Margo singularly have for murdering Marco and setting me up for the fall? Undetermined.

It's funny how people deal with stress. Some people freak out, some people habitually scream, cry, some sit and shake rocking forward and backward and mumble and others like me just fall asleep.

###

Several hours later I was awakened.

“Frontera, the Chief wants to talk with you.”

I anticipated an interview eventually, even kid gloves clutched around a roll of dimes and rubber hoses. Hey, I watch a lot of film noir movies. Maybe a bright light in my face would be an added touch. But then again, we were in Sedona, world famous for vortexes and crystals and other cosmic karma. Maybe the Chief is a follower of the Dali Lama. I could only hope.

I didn't end up in an interview room with the table and chairs bolted to the floor. I was escorted to the Chief's office.

“All right, Frontera, who are you really and who do you work for?”

Sincerely I answered, “I can't tell you. It will compromise a federal operation. All I can say is that I was probably set up for this by someone in a criminal organization that I was infiltrating.”

“Why would someone kill two people at a bed and breakfast in Sedona anyway?”

“I'll tell you this much, it is not a bed and breakfast; it is a safehouse for a federal organization and obviously after this will be shut down. The woman who was murdered was responsible for maintaining it and the guy who was murdered was an operative who worked for us.”

“Well,” he leaned back in his chair behind his desk, “you have some pretty influential friends. I got a call from the Governor himself to vouch for you and I've known Mark Grant for years since we were cadets in the Phoenix PD back when. He told me you couldn't have done it, and even though he considers you an idiot you wouldn't be that sloppy.”

I just cocked my head, sighed, and rolled my eyes.

He leaned forward a bit and pulled open a desk drawer, pulled out my snub nosed 686 and pushed it across the desk barrel first.

“Here, obviously we’re letting you go.”

“I’m not sure I want to go, Chief.”

###

An hour or so later I was back at the safehouse. The bodies had been removed and following the phone calls on my behalf a cursory investigation of the scene had been done. All that was left now was to clean up the mess.

I had explained to the Chief that as far as it went, I wanted to appear to have been taken in and remained in custody until I could sort this out, at least for a day or two. Whoever was behind this would be tipped off if I simply walked away from a setup like this. I would go back to the safehouse and stay there. I asked them to impound the Chevy Cruze and take it to a storage facility that they normally use for impounds and check it out for a transponder. I had the Jeep if I needed it, and anyone checking the location of the Chevy by virtue of a transponder would assume that I was in jail and it had been impounded from the scene.

He agreed.

The safehouse was equipped with cameras, four of them outside, and five inside. The outside ones had been spray painted over just like the ones at the apartments. Whoever did this came from the tree-lined perimeter and knocked out the cameras before ringing the doorbell and committing the murders. All the inside cameras had been disabled, obviously before the murders as they recorded nothing dated after nine in the morning of the murders which happened just after noon. Marco must have disabled them for a reason or reasons unknown.

It was getting late in the evening when I finally returned, so I pulled out rags, a mop and bucket and began cleaning up. Obviously, I would have to miss my meeting with Don Guido the next day.

The Chief had agreed that afternoon to call Cucina Pazzo and inform them that I had given him their establishment as my place of employment and that I was being held in Sedona regarding possible involvement in a crime. He said that they were being called just to verify my identity and place of employment.

After cleaning up the mess I checked out the kitchen and since The Outfit pampered its guests, I enjoyed a good meal and a couple of glasses of wine, turned the lights out and went to bed.

Tomorrow would be another day. The 686 was on the night table in easy reach. Before I fell asleep, I knew two things for sure. Marco deactivated the interior cameras and whoever committed the murders knew Marco and vice versa or Marco would have never had opened that front door.

In all the chaos of the last day I had forgotten about meeting with Margo until I had met with the Chief. She might have set me up or possibly was a pawn in this thing.

I had used my “one phone call” from jail, actually from the Chief’s office, to call her and tell her I was being held as a material witness to a couple of murders that I stumbled upon. A ruse, but I was interested in her response.

“Sweetie,” she said, “Don Angelo will get you out. I’ll talk to him, and I’ll bet he gets Ball right on it. You didn’t kill anyone, did you?”

“Of course not, I just walked into the scene at the wrong time and got busted.” How naïve could she be? Even if I did murder them, the last place I would admit it was on a phone in the police department?

“Talk to the Don, food here is terrible. But what about your concerns about your safety?”

“Most important thing now is that you get back here to protect me, and I can thank you in my own special way for your services. Whatever they may be.”

Oh Christ, I thought, do they ever give up?

After a few more moments I terminated the call telling her that my time was up.

Ball, as I recalled from my briefing, was the brothers’ attorney. I had told the Chief to expect a call from him.

Chapter 12

Ball was definitely on the ball. Next morning, I got a call from the Chief on my secure phone. Ball had called and inquired regarding my status. The Chief had told him that I was being held as a material witness and would probably be released within twenty-four hours following another interview or two and a statement. He had told him that there was no substantial evidence that I had committed a crime, simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. He said Ball seemed satisfied with the explanation and that was that.

I thanked the Chief for his cooperation, finished the call and tried to determine what my next move would be when I returned to Phoenix the next day.

The Chief arranged to have my Chevy Cruze delivered that afternoon to the now unsafe safehouse and he also told me when he called that he had his people go over the entire car, every inch of it, and they could not locate a transponder. So much for that theory.

I still had to wonder if Marco had blown my cover on his covert trip down to Phoenix to play footsie with Julia and Margo.

Chapter 13

Early the next day Thursday, after I was technically “released from custody,” I locked up the safehouse and drove back down to Phoenix. I arrived back about ten o’clock, just a hundred-mile drive

The next move to figure this out was obvious—talk to someone who likes to talk and might know something, ergo, Margo, besides trying to discern if she was indeed in danger. I called her from my apartment to tell her that I was back and said we needed to get together finally to discuss her concerns.

“I hope I know for what,” she said.

“We can consider that, and I know what you mean, but first I’m trying to figure a few things out including who has been making you feel that your life is at risk.”

“Ok, but you are taking all of the fun out of your welcome home.”

No sense debating. I just said to come over that evening about eight and we would have a few glasses of wine and talk things over.

I would hope that nobody who knows the real me would get me wrong. I enjoy the company of women, especially professional ones who have made their success on the merit of their qualifications and not on their backs. Many I have had the pleasure of working for and with during my career. My ex for the moment fit exactly into that category: self-made, self-assured and as a bonus, beautiful. We simply had a difference of opinion about lifestyles that we preferred and were taking one of our occasional time-outs. She was currently on her own and so was I. To be honest, the more I was around Margo and Julia, the more I thought about the woman who had been in my life.

The Dons' wives were like a throwback to Hugh Hefner's mansion of the nineteen seventies, or again, a stereotype, what every reader of "Playboy" thought those women were like then, and maybe what the wives thought they were as well.

Then, they were what they were, and I had to get somewhere with this, even if it were to save my own skin, so I would play along with Margo. Even if I wanted to be "Dudley Do-Right" in terms of what might be considered morals, on a practical basis having sex with one of your bosses' wives whose husbands were hooked up with the mob could have extreme negative consequences if it was found out and these women talked about everything to everyone, so, anyway, I stopped over-thinking it.

I went to the grocery store, bought some crackers, a good cheese, and a bottle or two of rather high-end red. Went home and sliced up the cheese and laid it out on a plate with the crackers. Polished a couple of glasses from my house that I had brought along when I relocated and prepared myself for fact finding and trying to tastefully avoid seduction.

###

Of course, there were the brothers. I had missed the meetings that week and obviously they knew why as far as the cover story went, but I was summoned to an early Friday afternoon meeting with Don Guido and a later meeting with Don Angelo.

###

Margo arrived, and I was a bit surprised. She was dressed rather conservatively. Still beautiful, and a bit beyond that but not at all the seductress that she had portrayed during our earlier meetings and telephone conversations.

I poured a couple of glasses of wine and brought out the cheese and crackers. We were seated comfortably on either end of the couch, and I raised my glass.

"Thanks for coming," I said.

She raised hers. "My pleasure," she replied, a good beginning.

"Look, I hope you can understand that I am somewhat confused. I just got out of jail as you know, and thanks for getting Ball to call the Sheriff on my account, but do you know what happened up there?"

"No, just what you told me when you called from jail."

I lied. "I got a call from Marco, and he asked me to come up to the B&B where he was staying for a while after he had taken care of his mother's burial. Said he just

needed time to himself but needed to talk to me about some business that the brothers had asked him to take care of. Since I was filling in for him, I figured that I had better go like I told you before I left. Long story short, I got there and he and the woman who ran the place had been murdered. The cops showed up and figured I had done it and I spent two days in the cooler before I finally was cleared.”

“Marco,” she said, her voice breaking, “dead?”

“Yes, I replied, and that’s why I wanted to talk with you about the concerns that you have about your safety. Look, you flirt, you are very attractive, but something is going on here and it is serious. I hope you understand that I can get very distracted by your invitations to indulge, but right now I’m very distracted for my safety and for yours and I don’t know what in the hell is going on.”

She sat her glass down on the coffee table and said again, “Marco, dead?”

I nodded.

“And you are afraid for me?”

I nodded.

A tear came to her eye, she wiped it away with the back of her hand, then leaned over the couch and softly kissed me on the cheek.

“Yes, I am,” I reaffirmed. It was the first genuine emotion I had witnessed that this woman had expressed since I first had met her.

I got up and got a tissue from a box in the bedroom and brought it back and gave it to her.

“Now let’s talk about this,” I suggested.

She dobbed both of her eyes and nodded.

Chapter 14

She composed herself and looked extremely vulnerable for the moment as she had but moments before.

“I’m sorry,” she said, “I don’t usually fall apart.”

“A few tears,” I said, “there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“For some people that may be true, but it’s not the image I want to project.” She dobbed her eyes again.

“And what exactly is that?” I was beginning to feel like my shrink Dr. Watt, but in a practical sense this approach could probably encourage her to share information, just as it does when Dr. Watt worked with me.

“Oh, you know.”

“I only know what I’ve seen so far.”

“And what was that?”

I decided to level with her. “The way I saw you until a few minutes ago was as someone who used her physical beauty to her advantage and enjoyed the impression that it made, especially on men, but I would suppose on women as well who envied you for that attribute.”

“Shallow?”

“I’d be less than honest if I said that you didn’t seem so. I had the impression that you figured out way back when how to manipulate men and women to your advantage and frankly enjoyed it beyond just the material benefits.”

“Sex?” she asked.

“Yes, I think you use it, but I also think that you really enjoy it. I believe that it affirms you.”

She nodded, then seemed to change the path for the moment. “You don’t seem like the kind of guy who usually works for my husband and his brother. Why all the questions? You don’t seem like the streetwise types that normally are part of his world.”

“I had a good shrink in prison, and she helped me deal with it,” I lied. “As far as the questions go, I have a selfish motivation to get to know you better. Besides protecting you, I want to protect myself and find out who tried to kill me. As far as the psychological bs, I want you to feel like you can talk with me, I mean really talk with me so we can come to grips with our problems.”

“As long as you aren’t billing me a couple of hundred bucks an hour for this,” she quipped.

“I think you could afford it, but no charge except perhaps saving both of our lives in return.”

She thought for a moment, then said, “All right, Dr. Freud, I’m an open book, but I warn you this may not be easy for me, I mean.”

“You want the soft questions first or the tougher ones?”

Another moment of consideration, then “Hit me with all you got.”

I started with a hard one. “Why were you so upset when I told you that Marco had been murdered?”

She choked on that one, putting the wadded tissue back to her eyes and shaking her head as she began to cry. I walked into the bedroom and brought out the box and put it in front of her on the coffee table. By the time I got there she was sobbing, her shoulders shaking as she breathed heavily, dropped the wadded tissue on the sofa cushion and pulled out a fresh one from the box.

I waited and finally she settled down, looked up at me, her eyes all puffy and wet from the tears and said, “He was the best. It wasn’t just the sex, which was great, but for a supposed tough guy he was very compassionate, caring, vulnerable just like I am right now.”

I couldn’t believe that she was talking about our rat, but then again everyone has a different perspective on a person, even a weasel like Marco.

“Sounds like you might be in love with him.”

She was looking down with a wadded tissue in her hand, then she nodded slowly and finally said, “Could have been, but there was no future there for me, at least making a commitment to someone who could never provide for me like Don Angelo.”

Practical even when affairs of the heart were concerned, I observed. Not a surprise though.

I decided to divert my direction to more practical matters. “You were, and I assume Julia, with Marco and you propositioned me to have sex with both of you. Weren’t you worried that your husbands would find out?”

“Are you, I mean, are you afraid of that? Is that why you made the gay excuse?”

Now the tables were turned a bit, and I replied, “Of course. Your husbands aren’t exactly the kind of guys someone would want to take chances with, especially if you were . . .” I paused on the next words.

“She completed it, “fucking their wives, not to mention other bonuses.”

I nodded.

Then she said, “It’s ok, all part of the deal. They get to put us on their arm and show us off at functions and when we go to restaurants, and we get to do whatever we damned well please with whoever we want to. No questions asked as long as we keep our part of the deal.”

A bit of the hardened Margo had emerged again, and she even offered a self-satisfied smile, reached over, patted me on the knee and winked.

Chapter 15

Somehow, I wasn't surprised, but I must have blushed. Her hand remained on my knee for a few moments, then she settled back at her end of the sofa and took a drink of wine, savoring it I thought for effect.

"You don't feel comfortable with that?" she asked as she put her glass down on the table.

"If it works for all of you, that's your business."

"You got something against liberated women having active sex lives even if they are married?"

"Like I said, that's your business. I haven't got an opinion about it." I needed to redirect this, so I said, "Tell me about the last time you saw Marco, when he came down overnight from Sedona. What happened?"

"All right," she replied, her cockiness muted for the moment. "You said this would be tough in so many words."

I nodded. "What happened?"

She took a deep breath, sighed, and began, "Julia and I did a three way with Marco, in one way or another all night. You know, drink a little, eat a bit and do it all over again."

"Is that all?"

"Pretty much, until he drove his Jeep back to Sedona early the next day."

"Just the three of you?" I asked.

"Well, yes, for the most part, but someone else was there and watched."

"Who?"

"Just a harmless mouse who likes to watch and get himself off I suppose."

"So, who was the mouse?"

"Tagger, our adorable driver and general gofer. He's so cute," she added. Then she remembered, "Marco told him that he wanted to have him come up and hang with him for a while. Said the food was great and the views were fantastic, but the only person he

had to talk to was the old lady who ran the place and she had all the personality of burned toast.”

“Did they make plans to get together?”

“I know they talked about it, but I really didn’t pay much attention.”

“Okay,” I said and moved along to the next step. “Why do you think your life is in danger?”

“I’ll show you,” she replied and reached down for her purse that sat on the carpet in front of the couch, somewhat under the coffee table. After a bit of rummaging around, she withdrew a piece of paper.

“This was on my car under the windshield wiper.” She handed it to me.

I read it. *Margo you are a slut and dead to me. You will be soon. I will make sure of that. Signed, An Admirer.*

After another hour or so of talking Margo looked emotionally drained. The cocky self-confidence had disappeared over that final hour, and she finally said, leaving her half empty third glass of wine on the coffee table and leaning toward me, “I would love to stay and just snuggle up to you all night. Just that.”

I slowly shook my head from side to side. It was indeed tempting, seeing her in such a vulnerable way, well, I’m not sure, maybe it made me feel more affirmed rather than being propositioned flat out by the Margo I had known before our meeting.

“That sounds very enticing, Margo, but this is not the right time for either of us. I’ll consider it if you are still interested after this is all over, but tonight, I just want to make sure that you are safe.”

She nodded slowly in understanding.

“I’m going to follow you home. I want you to go directly there. I’ll be right behind you until you get to your drive.”

She nodded, reached down for her purse, stood up, straightened her skirt and I followed her down to the parking lot.

I saw her red Mercedes convertible parked in a visitor’s spot closest to the building.

Then she put her hand in the purse and pulled out a little black plastic fob on her key chain with a button on it just like the one I carried to remote start the Cruze. She pushed the button and the car started and she waited for about a minute or so and it beeped before she walked toward it.

I came up behind her before she got to the car and said, “That’s pretty cool. Is it for what I think it is? The waiting a minute or so before going to the car.”

“You could have used one when they blew up your Mustang. Lucky for you that you said you forgot to lock the door to the apartment and got out of the car right after you started it and was walking back to lock the door when the Mustang blew up.” She tossed the little black plastic fob and keys in her palm and said, “The Dons’ and us wives’ cars are all set up with these. Can’t be too careful.”

“Pretty clever. How can I get one installed?”

“Talk to Tagger, he did them all.”

“I will,” I replied. “Pull up to the entrance to the complex and give me a minute or two to get my car and pull up behind you, then pull out on Camelback and go home.”

And that’s what we did.

The next day was Friday, and I was to meet with the Dons. I wasn’t sure what to expect.

Chapter 16

Friday morning before my early afternoon meetings with the Dons I made a few calls on my secured phone. First to my boss, then to Mark Grant.

I had told my boss about Marco on a call that I made while still in Sedona at the safehouse. On this call I brought him up to date and told him that there was some speculation on my part that Marco may have compromised his and my position when he purloined the Jeep and came down the hill to Phoenix. I informed him now that I had a meeting with one of the wives that Marco had been with when he came down and that she had given no indication that she was aware that Marco was a plant nor that was I, but I couldn’t be sure.

“What about the sons, the cousins and a ‘palace coup’?”

“No evidence of that either even though I haven’t had direct interface with them. As I mentioned before, I think that Marco either was misdirected or attempted to misdirect us for whatever reason. If they are planning a take-over, it’s completely under the radar, and the wives are in the same category. I don’t believe either pair have any interest in

taking over the Dons' enterprises. They all seem to enjoy the benefits of it and wouldn't want to go to the trouble."

"If this is all true, then why don't we extract you? Marco is dead, and it appears that whatever threat there was to the status quo doesn't exist anymore."

"I have three concerns. One is that someone tried to blow me up, another is that I believe that someone attempted to frame me for multiple murders, and finally one of the current wives is being threatened with death by a person or persons unknown."

"So?" my empathetic boss asked.

"So," I replied, "that indicates that there is still disruption within the organization. Look, I'm only a go-between and why would someone try to kill me or set me up for a double homicide? And who would want to harm or kill one of the wives?"

There was a pause, then, "Ok, Bakoda, two more weeks then you are out of there. I see this as basically your problem, but you have made a point or two about maintaining stasis in the organization."

I thanked the son of a bitch and signed off.

My call to Mark Grant was a whole different scene. Of course, I had to endure the barrage about losing his job by virtue of helping me out, all the dinners that I owed him and what an idiot I was. I set the phone down on the table while he droned on and on until he finally ran out of gas and asked, "So what do you want now, Sherlock?"

"What can you find out about a Devin Freehold Johnson, also known as Tagger?"

"A sterling member of the community, I am sure." Snide and sarcastic as usual but I liked Mark like a brother, and we had been through a lot of adventures together although he would never acknowledge that he enjoyed every hair-raising minute of them.

"Come on, Mark."

A moment or two of silence, then, "I can tell you about him just a bit now. Has a juvenile record that's sealed. Was in the military, then kicked out. Works for the brother Don Angelo."

"Thanks, Mark. Can we get into his juvie records and his military background?"

"Juvie records are hard to hack without a warrant, but I'll see what I can dig up. Military easier, in fact I have it pulled up, at least his training and basic assignments. He was a demolitions specialist."

"Thanks, Mark, that's good for two dinners. Bring a girlfriend, that is if anyone can stand you and your sour attitude."

“I’d say fuck you, but I don’t want to give you the satisfaction, buddy.”

The call was over.

###

As much as I was touched by Margo when she became vulnerable, or perhaps portrayed herself as such, something still bugged me the following day and had been a question mark since she had made the statement on the phone several days before. She said that when Marco had come down, he had “escaped from solitary.” His cover was that he was staying at a B&B for a while in a beautiful resort environment until he finished grieving for his mother. Maybe calling it “solitary” was just a quip, but it still made me wonder nevertheless if he had indeed blown his and my cover. I’m paid to wonder and did. I also wondered if Margo should qualify for an award for best actress in manipulation of a male. I’m sure that Julia would qualify as best runner-up.

###

I met with the brothers later that day and went through the same routine pretty much with both.

Marco is gone, Don Guido wrote. You have anything to do with it?

No, I responded on mine.

Did he kill our first wives?

Don’t know for sure, I responded again.

Find out who did as we told you before and take care of business.

I took a chance. Why me?

We know that you can. It is your business while you are here.

I just shrugged my shoulders and burned the note. There was that “we” again.

My meeting with Don Angelo went about the same way but he added, *I know you met with my wife last night. She is afraid.*

Yes, I replied.

Take care of her! he commanded in bold all caps with an exclamation mark.

Will do my best I replied after burning his blueline.

That’s why you are here. Why we wanted you.

Something was hinky about this whole setup. Why did the two of them infer that I was, in film noir terms, a “torpedo” or some kind of bodyguard. I’m supposed to be a

low echelon go-between. And I didn't know why anyone would have "wanted" me; I was just a fill-in for Marco that he recommended.

He pulled out an envelope from his coat's inside breast pocket and pushed it across the table. It was my weekly payment of a thousand dollars. He scribbled something on the pad and sent it over to me.

There's an extra 2 Gs in there for the trouble you had in Sedona.

I looked at him and tipped the bill of an imaginary hat, nodded, and burned the blue line.

The meeting was over.

Chapter 17

I decided to go with the flow for the time being, but I was beginning to have doubts about even The Outfit's involvement in this. Let's face it, they are pragmatic and will use any resource to achieve their purpose and ultimate objective. I am simply an operative for them and if need be, an assassin, and I always take everything I am told with a grain of salt as I know that they will even use me if it fits the purpose. I made up my mind if this went much farther, I would confront my boss and demand to hear or see the tapes.

Right now, though I was interested in one particular party in this whole quagmire, Tagger.

###

"Did my best," Mark Grant said, "but couldn't get through that veil on his juvie record. Military, like I said, he dealt with demolitions and got tossed out as 'Undesirable.' Was accused of stealing and stashing ordinance, explosives, and perhaps selling them on the open market. Could have gone to Leavenworth, but there wasn't enough direct evidence to take him before a court martial, so they just kicked him out. Too much trouble to prosecute I expect."

"Did they ever prove that he actually had any of that stuff?"

"No, I suppose, or they were just glad to get rid of him. From what I could gather he specialized in booby traps and IUD disarmament."

He paused, and then said, “After he got drummed out, he worked for a Phoenix limo service and somehow got recruited into the Dons’ operation to handle their wives’ transportation.”

“Thanks, Mark.”

“You still owe me a couple of dinners for this one.”

“Find that girlfriend to come along?”

“The list is long, just have to make a choice.”

“Let me know. If she is good looking, I’ll take her away from you.”

Of course, he responded with the usual four-letter word followed by “you.”

###

I walked up to Tagger and said, “Hi, I’m Tony Frontera. Thought we should get to know each other since we both work for the same people.”

Tagger was standing next to the Mercedes that the wives used for excursions into Scottsdale.

“Yeah,” he said tipping up the brim of his little black driver’s cap. “You are the go-between, the one who almost got blown up.”

“Right, that’s me,” I replied. “Here I am still in one piece.”

He looked down at the pavement and scuffed his highly shined right shoe around a bit and then offered, “I can set up your car with a remote starter that will let you be sure that it is safe to get in and drive it after it runs for a minute or so. It has a timer on it that beeps after sixty seconds.”

“I know,” I said. “Margo was over a while ago and told me that you could.”

I noticed a twinge when I said that Margo had been “over”, and his shoulders stiffened.

“I’ll tell you where to buy a unit, get it on Amazon, takes a few days and then call me and I’ll do the install.”

“Thanks, man,” I replied. Then, “You’re waiting for the wives I would guess?”

He nodded and said, “Always waiting. Takes fifteen, twenty minutes to drive them over here to shop, do lunch, whatever, then I get to hang out for three or four hours while they do whatever.”

“It’s a job. I get to pass notes back and forth between the Dons. Can’t quite figure that out but it pays well.”

“Just between us, bro’, this whole outfit is screwed up from the Dons on down to, well, you get what I mean.”

“I’m beginning to find out.” I said that I had to go and began to move toward the parking lot.

As I walked away Tagger said, “Dude, get that unit and give me a call. What’s your number? I’ll text you mine.”

I did and apparently the door was open. I was going to get to know Tagger.

###

I called my boss. “Need a little help. Want to access the juvenile records that are sealed on one Devin Freehold Johnson, aka Tagger.”

“Oh,” he replied, “the driver and gofer.”

“That’s the one.”

“Might take a day or two, but we can probably do it.”

“And by the way,” I added, “I get the feeling I have been set up on this one. Lots of red flags and they all point back to The Outfit. Just putting you on notice, I want to have a leveling session.” I had lost my cool but didn’t like being put in this position.

“Not sure if we can do that, Bakoda, just do your job.”

“Doesn’t work that way. Either we meet in the next week and let me listen to the tapes of your conversations with the Dons or videos if they met face to face with you or anyone else in The Outfit or I’ll walk and when I do, I’ll blow the whole thing up. I damned near got killed and I’m holding you responsible. I deserve to know what in the fuck is going on and for you to stop screwing around with me.”

“Bakoda,” he replied, “just do your job. You are playing with fire.”

“No, *you* are. Just remember who I am and what I do and that I have a long memory. In case you don’t get it, I’m seriously pissed, and you don’t want to be on the other side of that.”

My boss hung up on me.

I think he got the message.

Chapter 18

After threatening my boss, I wasn't sure what would happen next but wasn't that concerned, and frankly about the only thing they could do if I was really a threat to The Outfit was to send someone out with qualifications like mine to, let's say, neutralize me. Been hunted by the best before, and he knew it. Besides, I was being hunted now by someone else, so what would be the difference except that The Outfit's assassin would be a lot better. That was, of course, a big difference.

That wouldn't happen for a day or two if indeed it did, so I decided to concentrate on the issues at hand. Not a time to be distracted from the mission.

Besides, I knew that odds were that that little bastard and I would kiss and make up, though the thought made my stomach roll just thinking about it. The Dons and the situation had for the most part given me an idea what was happening, and I had a pretty good idea that if they were volunteering information, my boss would eventually level with me rather than escalating the situation.

Besides professional curiosity and animosity regarding being used, I wanted to be leveled with Don Angelo because I wanted Margo to move in with me. No strings attached as far sexual intimacy went, just so I could protect her twenty-four seven. I had a good idea that she was dealing with a psycho, and one closer to home than she realized, or probably wanted to acknowledge to herself. She was such a manipulator she was probably knowingly or not egging whoever on. My boss said that I was playing with fire. There was no comparison to the potential explosions that the wives' behavior would create.

###

The next day I took the Chevy Cruze in to have the remote starter and timer removed just so I could have another one reinstalled by Tagger that I ordered the day before and would be delivered tomorrow.

"Why are you doing this?" the technician asked.

"It's annoying," I replied but failed to add, 'just like you.'

"None of my business but there is nothing wrong with it."

"Like I said, it's annoying."

"Never saw one with a timer and beeper."

"First time for everything."

“What’s it for?”

“Lets me know when the ac in the car has pulled the temp down. This is Phoenix, you know, hot in the summer.”

“How does it do that?”

“Magic,” I replied.

###

The next day after the new unit was delivered, I called Tagger. He said he would be over the next morning to install it.

It didn’t take long. He suggested I wait in my apartment until he was finished. I didn’t ask any questions as to why, a lot of craftsmen don’t want someone looking over their shoulders while they are working.

He came up to the apartment after he was finished, and I offered him a beer. He accepted and we sat down and talked for maybe half an hour.

He asked me why I was working for the brothers. “Just filling in for Marco, but Marco is dead so I might be around for a while.”

“How do you like it?”

“An easy gig and the pay’s good. Just have to put up with their quirks.”

“What about their wives?”

“Beautiful and spoiled and they like it that way.”

“What about Margo?”

“Ditto,” I said.

“She thinks you’re hot.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“What do you plan to do about it.”

“Not sure. I’ve got a job to protect and messing around with the boss’s wife isn’t a good career move.”

He nodded, took the last swig of beer, thanked me, took fifty bucks for his trouble and left.

If things go as I planned, wait until he finds out that she has moved in with me.

###

That afternoon I took the Cruze over to a guy who works on cars for The Outfit, in fact he had put the first unit in the Cruze. He was tied up when I wanted it taken out, so I

had to go to an independent auto electronics specialist to get it out in time for Tagger to reinstall a unit.

He inspected the install and did a once over on the entire vehicle.

“Looks ok,” he said as he wiped his hands on a shop rag after he was finished. “Just one thing, there has been another feature added.”

“And that is?”

“Another remote unit.”

“And?”

“It’s not hooked up to anything yet but could be sometime in the future and activated from up to a couple of hundred feet away from the car at any time.”

“What might be hooked up to it?”

“Don’t play stupid. A bomb.”

I was playing stupid and figured Tagger would come up with something novel.

“How can it be deactivated?”

“Simple,” he replied, “I cut the wires that would lead from the remote to whatever it was to activate. I put a little grease, dirt and gunk over the disconnected wires, and it won’t be noticeable to someone unless they get really curious.”

“How will I know for sure?”

“You won’t get blown up,” he said and laughed, punching me in the shoulder.

Somehow that didn’t seem reassuring.

After the levity, he showed me how I could look under the car and detect if the wires had been hooked up to anything. The wires led to a depression in the floorboard right next to where the rocker panel was on the driver’s side.

“That’s where it would be,” he said. “Just check under there either by looking or just put your hand under the rocker panel. If that depression has something in it, give me a call.”

“You are on my speed dial list,” I assured him.

Chapter 19

I got back to my apartment and my secure phone rang. It was my boss.

“Bakoda, I have information about Johnson, that Tagger guy.”

“Thanks,” I replied in a terse manner. After all, our last discussion, if you wanted to call it that, was acrimonious at best.

“As a juvenile he was a firebug, or at least it seems so, and a pretty good one. Brought up on arson charges several times as a minor but never prosecuted. Not enough evidence. They thought he tried to burn down a former girlfriend’s house when he was seventeen after she broke up with him. Could have killed her and her family.”

“That fits in with what I assumed. Thanks.”

There was a pause, and I could hear my boss take a deep breath before he said, “I owe you an apology for hanging up on you. You are right, you deserve to know what we got you into and I want you to come back here at your convenience and watch the video of the conference we had with the brothers that got this all rolling, and I’ll fill you in on a conference call recording after Marco was killed. It might explain to a degree why we couldn’t level with you when we gave you the assignment. It was at their request, but as long as it appears that they have begun to acknowledge that you weren’t just a temporary replacement for Marco and that they know what your role is, we think it would be all right to fill you in.”

“I appreciate that,” I replied. “It will make this progress if I am filled in and I’ll tell you where I am going with it as well.”

“If you can come this weekend, I will meet you at my office.”

“I’ll make arrangements. Is Sunday at ten in the morning, all right?”

“Fine, I’ll be here, and we can get this straightened out.”

After all the years I have jostled with this man, this was the first time he ever had apologized for anything. After the call, I made arrangements for a flight on Saturday.

Given what I suspected about Tagger, it was all circumstantial. He could have just been a lovesick voyeur. Then, there was the installation of the remote detonation device under my car. It could have been set up to detonate a stink bomb for all I knew. I doubted it, but at any rate, before I took the ultimate step, I would push him to see how far he would go, and Margo was the button.

Saturday, midday, I was on a plane heading east to meet with my boss and hopefully fill in the gaps.

###

I was prompt for my ten A.M. meeting with my boss. By ten-fifteen we were in a small conference room with a wall mounted TV at the end of a conference table. We were seated on either side.

“This is the video of my meeting with the brothers,” he began.

“They both came here together?”

“Yes.”

“What’s with all this animosity and the paper going back and forth and the gas burners?”

“Just watch and you will get the idea.”

“Did they know they were being videoed?”

“Yes, but they seemed to enjoy the whole thing. They are both quite eccentric as you have figured out and I must say, theatrical. The whole thing seemed like a lark to them, although they were candid about the situation.”

He pressed a remote and the screen came to life, and there they were side by side, the brothers who claimed not to be able to stand being in each other’s company.

Chapter 20

Don Angelo began. “We have some concerns about someone in your employ who also is part of our organization.”

“Marco Baker,” I heard my boss’s voice off-camera respond.

“Yes,” Don Angelo answered. “As you recall when we set this whole thing up, he was to be a go-between the two of us.” He paused and pointed to Don Guido. “That way you would know what we were working on businesswise and staying within the terms of our agreement to maintain peace among the different factions in Central Arizona.”

My boss responded, “An unusual arrangement to say the least, but yes, we agreed to it in exchange for providing you a form of immunity for maintaining order in Central Arizona.”

“And I believe that we have,” Don Guido replied. “Not out of violence but by forming a kind of co-op or collective where all factions benefited rather handsomely from a portion of the profits of our organization as long as they maintained peace among themselves. You see, there can be honor among thieves, especially when there is a profit.”

“And,” Don Angelo added, “they are self-regulating. If any of their members become too ambitious or, shall we say, make plans to get out of line, they take care of it themselves and don’t involve us.”

“It has worked for several years just as you explained and when we set this up you told us that this feud between the two of you was basically a stunt,” my boss said.

“Well, it didn’t start out that way. We had major differences,” Don Guido explained, “but when we got back together, we realized that if it was believed that our organization was broken into two rival factions, it would be more difficult for someone to take a run on us. Besides, it was kind of cool and kept everyone guessing.”

“All right,” my boss responded off-camera, “so why are we meeting today?”

“Your guy Marco, we think he is getting too wise. We think he is cooking up something.”

“Are you asking our permission to have you eliminate the problem if you feel it is necessary, by, how should I say, any means.”

“No, we are businessmen, not killers,” Don Angelo replied candidly. “Oh yes, we have some enforcers who encourage the payment of overdue debts or encourage businesses to take on our services to guarantee that they will be protected against unforeseen reversals, but we take it only so far. You specialize in the more punitive actions, not us. That is strictly old school, some things our fathers might have done.”

“I see, so what do you want us to do about Marco?”

“We want to take him out of the loop for a while, but have him watched, and see if he is scheming.”

“Who would replace him?”

“One of your people with all of the skill sets to determine if he is planning something fishy, and if so, take measures to eliminate the problem,” Don Guido answered.

“And one other thing,” Don Angelo added, “we want your best operative, but we don’t want that person to know the true nature of his mission so that Marco isn’t inadvertently clued into what we are trying to determine.”

“So,” my boss said, “you want someone who will come in and basically conclude over time if Marco is indeed hatching a plan, how far it is intended to go, and then eliminate the issue?”

“Precisely,” the brothers replied in unison and nodded their heads.

“So, if Marco is planning something, you want to let it play out to a certain degree, giving him enough rope to literally hang himself.”

They both nodded.

“Well, I don’t like the idea of sending someone in there blind, but we will entertain your proposal and I do have someone who I can recommend. He has all the skill sets that you require.”

“Thank you,” Don Guido replied, and both brothers stood up and extended their hands across the table toward my boss to shake.

###

My boss turned off the TV and turned to me, “So there you have it. The original arrangement with the brothers has worked in terms of maintaining order in what amounts to a geographical area about the size of Rhode Island that had been, up until they had made their original proposition to us, a hotbed of gang violence and feuding. We felt that we had to comply with their terms to maintain that delicate balance, even at the expense of being less than honest with you.”

“Obviously, what happened next was that Marco came to you and said that he felt that the sons were about to take out their fathers and take over the operation. You even said to me that if that was the case to take them out.”

“That was all part of the charade.”

“But what if I would have?”

“I hate to admit it to you, Bakoda, but you are simply too smart for that. We knew that once you got in there you would see that the sons had no interest in taking over, a couple of well-heeled ne’er-do-wells. There was simply more to it than that.”

“And Marco all but admitted that he was setting the sons up when he asked me if I had killed them yet.”

“Yes.”

“And why didn’t you direct me to make a move on him then?”

“Because we felt it went much deeper than a rat hatching a plot and that you would continue to dig if we just let it play out.”

“And then someone got to Marco before I could.”

“Changed the whole game plan in a sense but confirmed that there was more to this than just Marco.”

“And of course, the ex-wives became casualties.”

“That was when the brothers began coming out of the closet, so to speak, by directing you to find out who did it and eliminate them.”

I sat back in my chair and looked at my boss for a moment, steeping my clasped hands with my index fingers touching under my chin, the way he often did when he was acting superior to me.

“I guess in a way this whole thing was a backhanded compliment,” I finally replied after watching him staring at me for appropriate moments of silence.

“Bakoda, I will never admit it to you or anyone else once we leave this room, but you are the best we have. And, by the way, this meeting was not taped. I would never want that statement recorded.” He paused for a moment, then said, “All right, cowboy, get your ass out of here and take care of business.”

As I walked to the door to leave, my boss added as I turned to face him, “I will contact the brothers and tell them that you have been fully briefed. Feel free to communicate with them with discretion.”

I nodded, said “Yippee ti yi yea,” tipped an imaginary hat brim, slapped my hip like a real cow puncher and left.

Chapter 21

Now that things were more out in the open, I decided to ditch the Chevy Cruze. Didn’t need the potential of a bomb under my ass, so I caught a ride back to my place in Sunnyslope and brought back my pickup and parked it in the visitor section of the lot,

leaving the Cruze in my regular spot. I informed the apartment management that I had done so, and that the pickup had been loaned to me to help a friend move the following week.

My next meetings next to their stoves with the brothers were more down to earth. They knew that I knew the whole story now and we went from there. They confirmed that they wanted to know more than anything who had killed their ex-wives.

They were both great women. We, Angelo and I, were just feeling our oats and had too many temptations. Whatever happened to them, they didn't deserve it and we carry guilt over it, Don Guido wrote on the blue-line pad to me. *Make sure someone pays no matter who it might be.*

I told Don Angelo via the blue-line that I wanted Margo to move in with me so that I could protect her.

She stays out with other men all night, why should I be concerned about her staying with you? At least I'll know where she is.

I have to be honest, I wrote, she would be a bit of bait as well.

I understand, he answered. You using her for bait or her using herself all these years, what's the difference?

This could be a lot more dangerous.

In case you haven't figured it out, she can be dangerous.

My last message to the Dons was not to use their vehicles under any circumstances.

###

“Move in with you, honey, you finally came around,” Margo said when I called her.

“Strictly business,” I replied. “Your husband has been informed. You wanted protection, I’m more than qualified, and I’m confident that whoever wrote you that note is a serious threat, so get over going to bed with me and let’s just get over to my place and camp out for the duration.”

“Well, there have been a couple of phone calls since I saw you last. Called me foul names, said he would kill me and hung up.”

“Recognize the voice”

“Muffled, but it was a male voice.”

“Look, it’s escalating. Put your things together for a few days and call me. I’ll pick you up. Do not, I repeat, do not start or drive your car even with that remote starter and timer. Hide the keys so that no one can find them and try to use the car.”

“I think I am beginning to get scared. I figured this could be just a prank.”

“If you aren’t, you should be. Just get your things together and call me. I’ll pick you up in a red Ford pickup twenty minutes after I get the call.”

“Give me twenty minutes, maybe a few minutes more, and I’ll call, sweetie.”

“Ok,” I replied.

After we hung up, I couldn’t help but wonder why this woman didn’t seem to be taking this as seriously as it was. It seemed like a lark to her, a bit of adventure, maybe like the conquests that she had instigated and seen through for years, and maybe threats from men that she spurned. She didn’t seem to get a grasp on the fact that this was life and death serious. Hell, I was certain that this guy was unhinged, and serious as a heart attack.

###

Later I picked Margo after she called to tell me that she was ready. She was dressed casually but fit to kill and carried a small pink gym bag.

“A pick-up truck, pretty macho.”

“Shut up,” I replied. “I know that Marco probably told you what I am and what I do. Take my word for this, I plan to save your life and mine as well. No more kidding around. Your smart-ass attitude and come-ons won’t mean a damned thing when the psycho who is at the bottom of this comes for you and me. Just cooperate and get over yourself.”

She didn’t say another word all the way back to my place, and it was my real place—I took her to my house in Sunnyslope. All the way she was quiet and sulked with her arms folded in front of her chest.

###

“This is where you live? I mean it is clean and all, but not what I am accustomed to. Couldn’t we have stayed in a real hotel with a suite or something like that? Besides that, I was looking when we drove over here, and this doesn’t look like the best part of town.”

“It is what it is, and it works for me. You aren’t here for the neighborhood, décor or ambiance. I will make you as comfortable as possible. There is a bedroom down the hall on the right that you can use.”

“Sounds a little boring, sleeping solo.”

“Give me your cell phone, now,” I asked, rather demanded.

“Why?”

“I don’t want you making any calls. I want whoever is concerned to think that you are staying with me at the apartment. I will say it only once, I will ask, but please just stay here and do as I tell you until this is all over. If you don’t, I’ll have to handcuff you and bind your ankles. I don’t want to have to do it, but I’ll tape your mouth closed if I have to, so cooperate.”

She handed the phone over and sulked some more.

I hoped that I had made my point. God only knew with this woman.

Chapter 22

I left her at my place, and without a ride or a phone I figured that she would be pretty contained. There were some snacks in the kitchen and libation to take the edge off until I could go shopping for a little more sustenance. Of course, the TV had the normal array of drivel, old movies and what passes for entertainment, news, and sports.

I live at the top of Central Avenue at the base of North Mountain. The closest restaurant is about a bit under a mile down Central, a Mexican place called Via de los Santos. Good food and an intimate cantina. When I’m in town I spend quite a bit of my time there, of course, in the role of a construction consultant on projects all over the globe who is often absent for periods of time.

Since Margo was wearing heels, I doubted that she would try walking there since she didn’t know that it was even down the street. I told her that I was going to check out the apartment and to stay put and figured that she would. She was still sulky, but that was to be expected. Other than her few minutes of vulnerability several days ago, I was getting sick of her and was beginning to believe the Marco ministrations was just an act.

I drove back over to the apartment on Camelback, about a twenty-five-minute ride and checked things out. Everything seemed pretty normal. I checked out the Cruze. No bomb had been installed.

Fortunately, in case anything happened to the Cruze like had happened to my Mustang, my parking space was fairly isolated from the spaces of the rest of the tenants, up against a perimeter wall with vacant spots on either side.

On the way home I stopped to get more groceries for my real place since I had a guest and hadn't stocked up during the time that I was staying at the apartment. I enjoy cooking, so I spent a bit of time at the market.

I finally arrived home only to find Margo gone. Almost a third of a bottle of ten-year-old Scotch was gone as well.

Never underestimate a willful woman in heels.

###

"You know her?" Jimmy the bartender at the cantina at Via asked.

"I'm afraid so," I replied.

"Did you kidnap her?" Jimmy asked.

"She has a vivid imagination."

"She described you to a tee and where your place was. Was fairly flying when she got here. I served her one Kamikaze on the condition that she wasn't driving, and she fell asleep on the bar where she is now. I don't think she hit her head when she flopped. She kept asking me to call the cops and tried to get the regulars to loan her a cell phone before she passed out."

"All I can tell you, Jimmy, is that she was a date from hell, and I left my place for a little while and she drained a lot of good Scotch and ended up here. Nothing funny going on except for my bad judgment. She seemed normal yesterday when I met her, but today . . ."

"Well, if you don't mind, get her out of here. This is a neighborhood place, and the restaurant is family oriented."

"I know, just give me a minute."

"All right. She is a looker though if she wasn't so messed up."

"Try spending a little time with her and the looks wear off and your bar stock disappears."

"I hope it was worth it, you know what I mean," Jimmy said and gave me a wink as he leaned toward me over the bar while he polished a glass.

"I'll never learn," I replied and gave my wryest smile.

Jimmy nodded, "None of us ever do."

I didn't waste any time. I went over to the end of the bar, turned her around, bent forward, slung her over my shoulder and marched out with Margo to the applause of the denizens that usually hang out there, many of whom were friends of mine. I was

tempted to throw her in the bed of my pickup but thought better of it and put her on the passenger side of the truck and hoped she wouldn't puke during the five-minute drive home.

After I got her to my place and situated, I gave Mark Grant a call to ask another favor.

When Margo finally woke up, she was handcuffed to the arm of a chair in my living room.

###

"What the fuck?" Margo exclaimed when she finally came around, rattling around the handcuff on her wrist and chair arm.

"You broke the rules."

"I don't give a rat's ass about your rules."

"Keep talking that way and I'm going to cover that trap of yours with duct tape."

"I feel like hell," she said as she raised her free hand to her forehead.

"You should. I knew that you were spoiled, but not a drunk."

"What did you expect? Stuck in this place alone and bored."

"You know, I almost believe that you have some form of a death wish. You seem to be doing everything to put you, and I, I might add, in jeopardy."

"That's because I know that he would never do anything to hurt me, I mean, seriously."

"Who are you talking about?"

"I don't know, maybe my husband, Marco's ghost, a bunch of guys I've fucked, who knows? All I know is that they all loved me and wouldn't hurt me; you maybe, but not me. Hey, do you have a fuck'n aspirin? My head hurts."

I walked to my medicine cabinet and got two, then out to my storage shed, and finally through the kitchen where I picked up a glass of water.

I delivered the aspirin and water and laid the roll of duct tape I had gotten from the shed on the table next to her chair.

I gave her a remote for the TV and retreated to the kitchen to figure out what I would make for dinner.

I was seriously considering using that duct tape. Maybe I'm old school but women with potty mouths always turned me off. She was such a pretty package, but when

opened, there was nothing inside, but given all of that, I felt some compelling reason to protect her.

Chapter 23

Before we ate, rather good roasted chicken thighs and vegetables I would say, I escorted her out to the kitchen and manacled her to the table leg. Other than escorting her to the hall bathroom for obvious necessities, she was handcuffed throughout the evening and all night secured to the metal headboard of the bed in my spare room.

When she awoke the next morning I asked, “Okay, are you ready to play nice?”

“You are a sadist.”

“Oh, it can get worse. Now, are you ready to play nice?”

Just then the doorbell rang, and I went to answer it while she remained chained, so to speak, to her bed.

It was a cop, and he had a box with him.

“Detective Grant asked me to deliver this to you. He said you called him last night and requested it.”

I thanked the officer, opened the box, pulled out the contents and returned to the bedroom, leaving the instructions on the coffee table in the living room.

I was putting the ankle bracelet on her when Margo said, “What in the hell is that?”

“An ankle bracelet,” I replied, “just in case you decide to go wandering again. I can track you from a laptop or my phone twenty-four seven so don’t get tempted.”

Then I added, “Look at the bright side. If you wear this, I can take off the handcuffs.”

###

How long have you got? I wrote on the blueline and passed it over.

Six months if I’m not lucky, a year if I am.

Who knows?

My brother of course, and my wife and a few key people in my organization.

No hope?

Don Angelo shook his head and burned my note.

Anything that we, or I can do?

Settle this mess before I'm gone. I want to leave a clean slate behind for my brother. My son has no interest here and frankly I don't want him involved and he never has been. I hope he settles down someday and pursues a legitimate career. If not, he will always be taken care of.

I read his long note, looked at him, nodded my head and burned it.

The meeting was over.

###

My boss had called the day before on the secure line and informed me of Don Angelo's condition.

"This puts even more emphasis on your mission. The death of a principal could put the stasis of the whole situation in The Valley in jeopardy."

"I know," I replied. "Hate to see the old guy go down though."

"Shed a tear at his funeral. Now, get to work and don't fuck this one up."

My boss was back in his usual demeanor. That was reassuring; made it easier to hate him.

###

Somehow this was all, in a twisted way, beginning to make some kind of sense.

I was thinking this over while I was in my Eames chair with my feet up on the hassock in my living room while I watched Margo pace around, sulky as usual with a Scotch and water over ice in her hand. She had almost drained the bottle and I figured the next to go would be the Vodka. She didn't seem like a Bourbon girl. For the last twenty-four hours she had given me the silent treatment, hadn't spoken a word, which I found refreshing.

My secure phone rang, and I went into the kitchen to answer it.

"I stopped by your apartment complex and checked out the Cruze. It has been armed, there is a bomb right in the place where I told you that it would be," our technician said.

"Not a surprise. It wouldn't have been set up that way if someone hadn't planned to do it."

"What do you want me to do about it? Like I said, the wires have been cut, it can't be activated by a remote the way it is."

I told him what I wanted him to do. He said to give him twenty-four hours.

###

The next day I drove over to the apartment. Looked around the perimeter. The setup was several units of two-story units with common areas, and of course, the pool in between. There were four apartments on the ground floor and four on the top for a total of eight per building.

I paid special attention to my building and inspected it completely. I found nothing to be concerned about. I had an idea that eventually that would change. I called Mark Grant.

###

“I want you to call Tagger.”

Margo looked up at me over her half empty tumbler of Vodka. “That little squirrel. I doubt that he’ll want to talk with me again.”

“How so?”

“Among other things, the last time I saw him I called him a limp dick.”

“You know he’s obsessed with you.”

“So are a lot of guys. Wish even a sadist like you were. We could do some interesting things.”

“Listen, I told you that I was protecting you, but you broke the rules and as long as you do it will not get better.”

She shrugged and took a drink. “Why do you want me to call him?”

“Tell him that you want him to come over to the apartment. Tell him that you know that he is good at figuring out electronic glitches and I am worthless at it, and you want him to take a look at your smart phone.”

“Is that all?”

“You could apologize for calling him a limp dick.”

“What do I get in return for all of this?”

“We’ll stop by your place on the way over and pick up your skimpiest bikini.”

“Why?”

“You get to work on your tan.”

“Give me the phone,” Margo said.

Chapter 24

Margo did as I asked, and Tagger was to come over the next afternoon at about two.

In the meantime, Margo and I had made our way back to the apartment via her home in Paradise Valley to pick up her bikini.

“While you are in the house, pick up a few more things, like panties.”

“Are you some kind of a pervert?”

“Possibly, but this is business. Just do it.”

“What about that thing on my ankle?” she asked.

“Stays on. Don’t need for you to go wandering, like I told you.”

“What about something for me to drink? All that you have over there are a few bottles of beer and wine.”

“I’ll pick something up for you.”

“A good single malt Scotch would be nice, at least ten years old.”

I nodded. She might have been an alcoholic, but she knew her Scotch.

“Make that two bottles,” she added.

###

That evening we were at the apartment. Margo seemed more comfortable there for some reason, maybe because it was on the east side of town and not in sketchy Sunnyslope where my house was.

I had put together a dinner with things I had picked up on the way over along with her Scotch and we settled down after we ate and began to have a conversation.

She asked me, “Why do you do what you do?”

“I might ask you the same thing.”

“No, really, why do you do what you do?” she insisted.

“I’ve asked myself the same question. I suppose that I can put a lot of rationalizations together, but I’ve been doing it a long time, I’m pretty good at what I do, and after a while stopped asking myself why.”

“Marco told me you were an assassin, but he exaggerated a lot.”

“He probably did.”

“If you were, could you just kill anyone?”

I paused for a moment, then finally answered because this was the first time that I had engaged with her since we had last discussed Marco’s death. “I would only do

something like that if it were for a compelling reason to do the right thing I suppose. That could be for self-defense, to protect someone from harm or to stop a potential negative outcome for people in general. I know it sounds a bit trite, but there are bad people out there.”

“So, have you?”

“I’m not sure why you would ask that. If I have, I wouldn’t tell you, and if I was dumb enough to tell you that I did I’d be a damned fool.”

She swished her Scotch around with the ice in her glass.

“Could you kill me?”

“Frankly, for the last few days I could have been tempted, but rest easy, my job is to protect you, even if you are a pain in the ass.”

I raised my glass of wine and smiled. She clinked it with her Scotch and smiled in return.

###

Margo slept in the bedroom, and I on the couch. The next day at about noon after I whipped up a breakfast, I did a bit of staging in anticipation of Tagger’s visit at two.

I left the double doors to the bedroom open so that it could be seen from the living room with the bed unmade, sheets disheveled. A few of Margo’s undergarments were strewn about as if taken off in haste and left on the floor. The bathroom had all the usual woman’s makeup and stuff covering the vanity. Margo didn’t pay much attention to me, just kept looking at herself in the mirror in the bathroom. Obviously scrutinizing her makeup or something.

About one-thirty I asked Margo to put on the bikini and go down to the pool and lounge.

She poured a Scotch and took a towel from the bathroom and went to the door.

“Drape the towel over your legs, at least so the ankle bracelet is covered.”

“I was planning to do that anyway. I don’t want anyone down there to think that I am a criminal or anything like that.”

She flipped the towel over her shoulder, raised her glass in the other hand to me, opened the door and left.

###

At two precisely, Tagger rapped on the door.

I waited a few moments before answering.

“Where’s Margo?” he asked. “She said there was a problem with her computer.” He walked in and looked around, taking in the entire place.

“She’s down there,” I said and escorted him over to the balcony where we both could see her lounging by the pool.

“I think you came out here on a wild goose chase. I didn’t know she called you, but the server for our Wi-Fi was doing some kind of maintenance and update or something. Anyway, it all came back up after a couple of hours. I’m sorry, but if I would have known, I would have called you and told you to forget about coming. Want a beer for your trouble?”

“No,” he said, taking everything in again after we walked back into the living room. “I’m pretty busy anyway and need to get going.”

“Well, sorry again, but you know how women can be.”

“Yes, I do. I can’t believe that she wouldn’t just call me. Then again, knowing her, I’m not surprised,” he finished and walked to the door.

“Well, we’ve been pretty busy around here, if you know what I mean.”

His fists were clenched, and I could see steam coming out of his ears.

Chapter 25

I told Margo that we were staying at the apartment. I kept her phone, but she could hang out by the pool with her bracelet on, which seemed to satisfy her as long as the Scotch held out. Besides, she liked my cooking.

In the meantime, I kept my eyes out, looking for someone dressed as a maintenance or repair man, actually, a specific person.

Nothing happened for a few days. I kept looking, she kept tanning and drinking. I would go out occasionally for groceries and Scotch. Margo stopped putting the moves on me. Seems like, given enough Scotch, after dinner she just passed out at about ten, then I would pick her up and carry her to the bedroom.

I began to wonder if my strategy was off base since nothing had materialized, even though I had set the wheels in motion.

I have to admit, this whole thing was beginning to give me a new appreciation for my ex, Darla Cummings. She is so down to earth, smart, industrious, self-made, and whatever other accolades I can attribute to her.

She was just as attractive as Margo, in different ways of course. Physically she was damned near perfect in my estimation. We just lived in different social worlds. I was the junkyard dog in her rather refined social circles. I guess that it didn't bother her as much as it bothered me. She was a successful businesswoman who cultivated clients in a variety of social venues, and I just didn't fit in. I like to think of myself as a tough guy, but hanging out at those functions made me feel totally outclassed, and when asked "What do you do?" I had to respond that I worked in international construction, and I looked the part. As I sat on the terrace and looking out my window that was on the parking lot side with a pair of binoculars, I self-analyzed, and as I looked down at the poolside at the lush, my roommate taking in the sun, I realized that I couldn't have done better than to be with Darla Cummings.

Such are the things that one considers when in the mind-numbing practice of surveillance.

###

Three days into this I had drifted off for a bit, unavoidable. I awoke when I heard a vehicle drive into the complex's parking lot. I went to the window on the other side of the apartment which overlooked the lot as I did whenever I heard a vehicle come into the complex. The "maintenance man" had indeed arrived and began getting out of a Ryder rental van carrying a large canvas bag.

I went back to the balcony and called out to Margo down by the pool and told her to come up to the apartment. She raised her hands in a "what's going on" gesture, and I just said, "Come up, it's important."

She finally did. "Get your clothes on. I want you out of here."

"What the hell?"

"Just do as I tell you. Here are the keys to my truck. Take it and drive to your house and stay there until you hear from me."

"Why?"

"Because you and I are in danger if you stay here. Trust me and I'll explain later, but for god's sake, just do it."

I handed her my truck keys, and she went to the bedroom to change.

Five minutes later she came out in jeans and a tee shirt with boat shoes on, no socks.

“Wait until I tell you to leave,” I said as I went to the window overlooking the parking lot.

I kept looking down, and about a minute later I said, “Go and don’t stop for anything. Just get in the truck and get the hell out of here.”

I had parked my truck on the opposite side of the building from where the Cruze was parked. She left, and I waited for about twenty minutes before I went downstairs.

I checked out a corner of the building, then came up and called Mark Grant.

“Mark, call the complex,” was all that I said.

“Will do,” he responded. “Send the squad?”

“Hold off for about forty-five minutes.”

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

“By the time they get here the problem will be resolved.”

After the call, I took my Smith and Wesson and walked out the front door and down the stairs.

“Tagger, you’re busted.”

The “maintenance man” turned and looked at me, his hands on the bomb that he was affixing to the corner of the foundation of my complex. I had the Smith leveled at him.

“Don’t get stupid,” I warned him. “Let’s go upstairs and talk this over. I think I can get you out of this permanently, but you have to level with me. Are any of these three corners activated?”

“Not yet,” Tagger responded. His hands were shaking.

“Then, the bomb squad will take care of them. Come on, let’s go. Your only chance.”

He dropped his tools, stood up, shrugged and I motioned him toward the stairs to my unit.

“Tell me what’s going on. I want to know everything and maybe I can help you. Tell me about Marco first.”

And for the next half hour or so he told me everything or at least his version of it.

As I thought, he was insanely jealous of anyone who had a relationship with Margo, to the point where he was willing to blow up the building where my apartment was in his rage, Margo, me, and any tenants who were at home when the bombs went off.

When he finished, I said, “One more thing, you planted a bomb under my Cruze. We’re going to go down to the parking lot, and I want you to crawl under it and disarm it.”

“Can’t the bomb squad do it?”

“No, you put it under there and I want you to disarm it. Get to it and I’ll make sure that you are out of here before they show up.”

“How do I know that you can?”

“I’m sure that Marco told you that I work for very influential people and that I can make sure you will be out of here and never face prosecution for this, but you have to do as I say now.”

We went downstairs. Every tenant in the complex was on the sidewalk surrounding the building, having been evacuated from the building where Tagger had planted the bombs.

I pointed to the Cruze where it was parked and motioned him to walk over and deactivate the bomb. He looked back at me, I nodded, and he turned and moved forward.

I remained on the sidewalk by the parking lot and watched as he slid under the car. I saw him shuffle into place, then raise his arms toward the bomb. I waited a moment and pushed the button of the remote in my pocket.

The whole car erupted in a ball of flames. Tagger was indeed out of here before the bomb squad showed up just as I had promised him.

Obviously, he had closed a circuit inadvertently that set the bomb off, or so the police report indicated.

I owed Mark Grant at least another dinner, maybe a Caribbean cruise.

Chapter 26

It came as no surprise that I was asked to leave the apartment by the management. Seems that they didn’t appreciate a tenant having two of his vehicles blow up in the parking lot and his building rigged with explosive charges, not to mention having the bomber blown to smithereens.

As the pretense for renting the place had not been required, since all the principal parties either knew who I was or who I represented or were dead, it was no great loss. Besides, now I could work out of my place in Sunnyslope and that was more comfortable for me. No pool to check out the view though.

The Dons and I continued to pass notes and burn them because there was more to this than a couple of lovesick Lotharios obsessed with the boss's wife, and let's face it, besides the Dons, nobody else in their organization knew who I was unless Margo opened her mouth. I thought the note passing and all that was kind of pointless since we all knew they talked and that I was there to help with both of their operations, but they liked it that way. Like my boss had observed, eccentric.

At the very least though, the Dons wanted to know definitively who was responsible for the murder of their first wives. The arson had the signature of Tagger all over it, but what kind of a motive could he have? Tagger had given me some information about the murders; indeed, he had admitted that he set the fire, but claimed that he did not murder the women, but he only knew a certain amount. I needed to know more. I let this all roll around in my brain for a few days and finally decided I knew the missing link. It all came around to my pal Margo and her proclivity to talk when sufficiently lubricated with expensive single malt Scotch.

What Tagger had told me after I caught him booby trapping the entire building was that Marco had recruited him to stage the arson after the killing of the first wives. Marco had told him that big changes were coming in the organization, and they would be able to move up, and getting rid of the first wives would be a favor to someone who was going to take over one of the Don's organizations.

Tagger had asked Marco who, and he had replied that he didn't know specifically, but that he was one of Margo's squeezes and that he figured the two of them planned to take over at some point in the near future.

All right, so he had said that Margo was involved more or less. Could be true, maybe not. Both Marco and Tagger were infatuated with Margo, so it was possible that Marco had said that she was involved just to get Tagger to go along with the plan. So, if Margo was really involved, who was the mystery person?

Finally, I had asked if he had killed Marco and the housemother. He reluctantly admitted to it and had planned to murder Marco since he had watched Marco and the

two wives having sex when he had come down from Sedona. The same reason he tried to blow me up—Margo drove him crazy with jealousy.

“Marco had said that he was staying at a great place in Sedona for a while and I decided to go up and get him. I told him that I would come up for a visit and we set it up. I blacked out the cameras and when Marco answered the door, I shot him and then the old bitch that came charging down the hall with a butcher knife.”

“You didn’t set me up for the fall on that one?”

“Hell no, I had no idea that you were coming up. Just dumb luck that you almost went down for it.”

I asked him why Marco deactivated the cameras in the house that morning.

“I told him that I was playing hooky coming up there and I didn’t want anyone to know, since he told me there were video cameras in the house when we set it up for me to visit.”

At least, most of the pieces of the puzzle were falling into place, but the mystery man; Margo had that last piece of the puzzle.

I went out from my place and bought a bottle of premium single malt Scotch, came back, and called Margo.

She answered her phone. I said, “Hey, I kind of miss you.”

“Most men do, no matter how much of a handful I am,” she replied.

“That you are, but you are, well, what you are, and over all I find that very appealing.”

After a pause, “So, secret agent man, what is this call all about?”

“Oh, I thought you might like to come over and hang for an afternoon or evening. I’ve got a fresh bottle of Glenlivet that’s never been opened.”

“Tempting, but are you going to handcuff me or gag me?”

“Probably not.”

“Disappointing. Under the right circumstances that could be very stimulating.”

“Well, maybe we can work on that, but for now, I would just like your company.”

“I haven’t got anything else going on. How about tomorrow for lunch at your place. You know, you are a damned good cook.”

“I cook to please,” I replied. “Be here at about noon. Seared sea scallops in butter and fresh vegetables.”

She said that she would be.

After thinking about it a little bit I realized that Margo probably got as much of a jolt from being a flirt and a tease as actually having sex. Well, then maybe not.

Chapter 27

Margo came over in her Mercedes convertible and looked as glamorous as ever. We enjoyed the scallops after she had a Scotch rocks and I settled for a glass of passable red.

By about one-thirty, and several more Scotches, she was getting dreamy on the couch sitting a foot or so from me.

“I should help you wish the dishes,” she said, screwing up her words a bit.

“No need. I’ll do them later.”

“So, what do you want to talk about?” she asked and took another drink.

“To be honest, maybe a career change.”

“For you, secret agent man?”

“Yes, I’m not getting any younger and working for a government agency well . . .”

“Doesn’t exactly pay very much,” she finished my sentence. “This place isn’t exactly The Ritz.” She waved her hand that was not holding a drink around.

“I know, but I figured that I could do better, maybe working with you.”

“What exactly do you mean, sweetie?”

“Before Tagger managed to blow himself up, he told me some big changes were going to happen in Don Angelo’s operation and that you were aware of what was going on, and that someone in the organization now was planning to take control.”

Margo seemed a bit stunned, not sure if it was what I said, or the Scotch, or both. I let it rest for a few moments and finally she slowly nodded her head, then took another drink.

“Anyway,” I continued, “I know quite a bit about the Dons’ operations now and, well, I think I have special skills that would be useful after a reorganization.”

She took another drink, thought, and said, “I’m not sure what you have heard or know, but there is a possibility that some changes could materialize within a year. I’m not part of that reorganization. I like my life the way it is without running a business like the brothers do, but there is someone who might be willing to offer you a position when that happens, you know, like, a close friend of mine.”

“Well, I know that the Dons have some thumb breakers and arm twisters, but no one who offers the specialties that I can. I’m sure you might suspect that Tagger really didn’t blow himself up.”

“She thoughts did pass through my brains,” she slurred.

“Well, I would never say that I did, but however it happened, it certainly appeared to be an accident inflicted on himself by a bomber.”

“And if you done it, well, not a trace of suspicion,” she slurred again.

Promising, I thought.

“I could be useful in situations like that.”

“Like I said, I couldn’t make that decision, but I can pass along your interested, I mean interest.”

“Who would I be dealing with?”

“Can’t say now. He is very influential, but he has hired people in the past for special assignments like you talk about.”

“Oh,” I replied, “Tagger told me that he and Marco were hired by someone to neutralize the Dons’ first wives.”

“Yeah, could have been him. I know he was afraid that if they spilled da beans like they threatened, well, his practice would be, well, you know, destroyed because it could be connected with the mob.” She took another drink. “Marco and Tagger, both told me that they did it and got paid for it.”

Then she giggled, and added, “Mob, hell those old farts are a bunch of pussies. The Dons I mean.”

“How did you find out about it, Marco and Tagger and the wives?”

“Hell, he told me after they had done it. The guy who put them up to it. All these guys run off at their mouths when they are in the sack and want to impress you.”

“And you never told the Dons?”

“God no, after this is all over and he takes over, I plan to marry him. I don’t think they would have had the balls to kill him, but they could always have hired someone,” she paused, “like you for instance, sweetie.”

Her head began to wobble around a bit, and she put down her glass on the coffee table, spilling it in the process. “Mind if I take a little nap?”

Out like a light. I picked her up and carried her into the spare bedroom and deposited her onto the bed.

That was at about three. She slept until six, when she finally came around. I had done the dishes and cleaned up the coffee table and tossed the almost empty bottle of Glenlivet. I don't drink Scotch.

She put herself together with the help of a new loaner toothbrush and a travel size of Crest that I kept for visitors, and I walked her out to her car. She looked like she had a headache, no surprise. She looked fit enough to drive and she took off.

Chapter 28

The twenty-two-caliber short round is almost archaic. It is overshadowed by its big brothers the twenty-two long and magnum. It is usually used for short range work, like when I was growing up on a farm, for varmints like rats that infested our barn and granaries.

It is indeed lethal though for humans in the hands of someone who knows how to use it. A classic hit man's choice. It has enough punch to penetrate a skull but then slows down and starts spinning, turning the brain's gray matter to mush. Additionally, when fired from a relatively long barrel pistol or one with a silencer it has a fairly quiet report.

I met with Don Angelo at the restaurant at one end of the table in front of the six-burner gas stove.

I know who was responsible for your ex-wives' deaths.

You sure?

Yes.

I don't need to know any more, but please take care of the issue.

I will. And he is a threat to you and your organization as well.

Well, best we get that business taken care of. You have my blessing.

I nodded, and we burned our respective bluelines.

###

A few days later I parked down on Central Avenue at about dusk. I was about a block away from a high-rise building. Behind the building was a three-story parking garage for the tenants and visitors. Most everyone had left for the day when I walked into the garage and climbed the stairs to the second floor and found a Lexus in a reserved space.

I approached the Lexus and pulled out a little tool from my pocket that tire changers use to remove the air valve from the stem of wheels before changing the tires. I dropped to my knees, took the cap off the front right tire's valve and unscrewed it with the tool. There was a whoosh of air and the tire went flat.

I retreated to the stairwell, positioned myself under the staircase and waited.

About half an hour later the owner of the Lexus got off the elevator on the second floor and crossed the garage toward his car. He was carrying a briefcase and wearing an overcoat. He beeped the Lexus and the doors unlocked and the interior lights went on. He opened the back door on the driver's side and put his briefcase on the seat, took off his coat and laid it over the briefcase. Then he got into the driver's seat and started the car.

The Lexus sprang to life, and he put it in reverse and began to back up, but it became immediately obvious that he had a flat tire, right front.

He shook his head from side to side, hit the steering wheel in exasperation and got out of the car. He walked around the Lexus and saw the flat on the front. He leaned down to inspect it more thoroughly.

That's when I walked up behind him and shot him in the back of his head with a Ruger twenty-two caliber target pistol loaded with a twenty-two short.

###

I got home in time for the late local news.

"A noted Phoenix attorney was found dead this evening in a parking garage behind the building where his practice is located. Mark Ball was shot execution style according to Phoenix Police on the scene."

The reporter went on to explain that Ball represented numerous defendants in a variety of criminal and civil cases and that it was easy to speculate that someone unhappy with his representation might have been responsible.

I muted the TV. I hate local news.

I switched over to Turner Classic Movies and settled down to watch a Film Noir classic.

Chapter 29

The next day I got a couple of calls. One on my secure phone from my boss who I filled in on what had transpired the night before. He had no problems with it, the whole idea was to protect the Dons' organizations from disruption.

The second was from Don Guido.

"Angelo and I want a sit down, face to face," he said. "We need to level with you about a few things."

"That's refreshing," I responded. "I've felt like a mushroom during most of this assignment. Everyone, including my own organization, has been keeping secrets from me in one fashion or another from the beginning."

"Where can we meet?"

I knew for whatever reason, they wanted to maintain the illusion that they were not speaking or in each other's company.

"Why don't you both come out to my house. It's out of your neighborhoods and I don't think my neighbors would care who you are."

"Sounds all right."

We set up the meeting.

###

Two days later the Dons arrived at my house, together. We sat down in the kitchen around the table. I had a jug of Italian red wine opened and glasses, old country style. Not wine glasses, just tumblers. Some sliced bread, prosciutto, cheese, balsamic vinegar and olive oil were available on a platter and in small bowls in the middle of the table.

Glasses were poured all around and a "salute!" was made. Everyone nodded as they took a first drink.

Don Angelo began. "First off, I wish to tell you and your organization that I am not dying. We," he glanced at his brother, "came up with that to ferret out whoever in our organization was getting too ambitious."

I felt relieved. I really liked both of them, quirks and all.

"We believe now," Don Guido said, "that we can move forward without concern, thanks to you."

"I appreciate that," I replied. Then I added, "Don Angelo, I'm relieved to know you are not in danger health wise."

“Well,” Don Guido said, “we agreed a long time ago that if anything happened to either one of us, the other would consolidate the organization and continue on.”

“Thankfully, you don’t have to be concerned about that now.”

“There is one thing we want to know,” Don Angelo said.

“And what might that be?” I asked.

Don Angelo replied, “My wife, Margo, was she involved? I mean, really planning this whole thing?”

I thought for a few moments before I replied, then, “She knew about the wives’ murder after the fact from what she told me. Marco, Tagger, and I suppose Ball told her about it. She said that she didn’t tell you to protect Ball.”

Don Angelo dropped his head a bit and said some, what seemed to be, curse words in Italian.

Then he said to me, “What can you do about this?”

I fiddled around with my glass for several moments before responding. I raised my head and said, “Don Angelo, I think this is a domestic dispute between you and your wife. With all due respect, this is not part of my job description to resolve those types of issues.”

Don Angelo slowly nodded, took a drink from his glass, and said, “I suppose that you are right, this is my business, I will resolve it.”

Other than a final “salute!” and half a platter of meat, cheese and bread being gone, the business was finished. The brothers left.

I immediately called Margo, went to my bedroom, and pulled out five thousand dollars in my stash cash that was there for just in case.

“Get your clothes together in a carry-on bag and do what I tell you as quickly as you can.”

“What’s going on?”

“Look, your life is finally catching up with you and I’m sure your days are numbered unless you get out of town now.”

“Someone killed Mark Ball, and now you are telling me that I’m in danger.”

“Yes.”

“What should I do?”

“Do as I say, get a small roll-on or a sports bag full of necessities and meet me at the airport, Terminal 3. Call me when you get there. Do it now. I’ll be in ticketing.”

“In an hour I can be there.”

“Just do it,” I said emphatically.

###

I met Margo at the airport and gave her an envelope with five thousand dollars in hundred-dollar bills in it.

“Your husband knows that you knew about the murder of the ex-wives and covered up for Ball.”

“How?”

“I had to tell him, but he already suspected that you were involved somehow, but even though I think you are a user and manipulator of anyone who has a penis, I’m giving you a break.”

She looked down at the floor and her shoulders began to shake. I grasped them both to steady her.

“Take the money and get the next flight out of here to the most innocuous destination possible. Don’t use your debit cards or credit cards, they can be traced. Don’t call Julia, me, or anyone here. Buy a burner phone at Walmart. Throw the one that you have now away before you board in a public waste basket. Not at the gate that you are leaving from, another one at a different gate with a flight to a different destination.”

“You really think that I am in that much danger?” She was beginning to shake again. I steadied her again until she settled down, then hugged her for reassurance.

“Yes, in so many words, he asked me if I would take you out, and I don’t mean on a date. I saw the look on his face. He’ll find someone else to find you and do it. Just get out of here and lie low. And by the way, he’s not dying, the brothers came up with that to get Ball to play his hand and I would guess to see if you were involved somehow.”

“I don’t know where to go.”

“Just go, it doesn’t have to be that far. Just get there and stay down. And for god’s sake, don’t screw every guy who finds you attractive, and stop running off at the mouth when you drink too much. Become invisible.”

“What will I do for money when this runs out?”

“Get a job. Waitress, bartender, server, and I wouldn’t even suggest what you are really good at.”

She nodded, raised her head, leaned forward, and kissed me on the cheek, then went to the ticket counter.

Maybe it was my good deed for the day or maybe I was just another victim of Margo along with Marco, Tagger, and Ball, not to mention Don Angelo and who knows who else.

###

I got back to my modest bungalow in Sunnyslope. It was a refuge and I felt that my assignment was over. It was a bit late, but not too late, and I sat down in my Eames chair, pulled out my phone and called Darla Cummings, my ex.

“I’ve missed you more than ever,” I said when she answered.

“I thought you would never call,” she replied.

Epilogue

My dance with the Dons was over, the back and forth in front of the stove. I’m not sure if they found another go-between or if The Outfit recruited one to take my place. Once I’m out of an assignment, I find that just walking away works best for me.

Darla Cummings and I got back together. She agreed not to drag me to her networking functions, and I agreed not to take her to biker bars for lunch, even though I think the food is underrated. We agreed on Via de los Santos since we both liked their Mexican food and she liked Jimmy the bartender and Mike who worked late afternoons and evenings. She would come over to my place on alternate weekends and I to hers and things worked out fine. She likes my cooking too, so all culinary bases were covered. All the other bases were covered too. It felt good again.

It was about five months later that I got a call from Mark Grant. He suggested a lunch. I agreed and of course I would buy since I owed him. Lost count how many and then there was the Caribbean cruise that he hadn’t held me up for yet.

“She got it,” he said.

“Who?”

“Margo, in St. Louis.”

“Not surprised,” I replied. “She was going down that road from the beginning. Looks like Don Angelo found someone who tracked her down.”

“No, seems from what I have been able to gather from the lead detective there, it was the wife of a married guy that she had taken up with. He had bucks and his wife had a thirty-two automatic. She killed them both.”

I shook my head slowly back and forth. You play close to the edge long enough, and eventually you fall. It always seemed to work out that way.

Then I reflected on how close I had been to the edge all these years, and as I had in the past, I set it aside and moved on.

If you enjoyed reading **Murder and Pasta**, please leave a star-rating and send some feedback via the author's Obooko [download page](#).