

The Barrett Solution

By Robert Norris

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Robert Norris

CHAPTER 1

FRIDAY EVENING, CONROE, TEXAS

Lieutenant Mark Owens turned on the television and popped open a cold beer. He had just settled in his recliner to watch the Friday night fights when his cell phone rang. He flipped the chair upright and reached for the phone.

“Owens.”

“Lieutenant, this is Wells at District Three. We just got a 911 call from a hysterical woman. She says her neighbor has been killed.”

Commander of the Montgomery County Sheriff’s Homicide Division, Owens brought himself up to his full height of over six feet and straightened his broad shoulders. *So much for the boxing match*, he thought.

“You send a unit?”

“Yes sir. Taylor and Johnson are on their way.”

“Okay. What’s the address?” Owens reached for a pencil.

“Number one Manor Lane. It’s down off 1485 where it changes over to 2100.”

Owens closed his eyes, thinking. “Sounds like Harris County. That might not be our call.”

“No sir. It’s down there in the woods, maybe a couple of miles inside the line, but it’s ours all right.”

Owens jotted down the address. “Tell those boys not to touch anything. I’m on my way, and you better put a Crime Scene Unit on standby. If the guy is dead, we’ll need them.”

“Yes sir.”

Owens grabbed his jacket and headed for his car. *One advantage of being divorced, maybe the only one*, he thought, *is that you don’t have to tell anybody goodbye*. When he turned the unmarked cruiser onto I-45, he flicked on the flashers hidden in the Crown Vic’s grill and kicked the speed up to eighty. He took the microphone off the dash and called in.

“Dispatch, One Adam Five. You hear anything from Taylor and Johnson?”

“Ten-four, One Adam Five. They’re on the scene,

Lieutenant.”

Impatient, Owens frowned. “Do they need an ambulance?”

“Taylor went over to the neighbor’s and looked in the window. He says there is blood all over, no way the guy is still alive. Johnson is with the woman who called it in.”

“Okay, tell them to stay with the woman. I’m turning onto 1485 now. I’ll be there in five. Send the Crime Scene Unit and the ME.”

“Ten-four, and Lieutenant? Taylor says this is not fresh blood, looks like the victim has been dead awhile.”

Owens nodded as if Wells could see him and stabbed the microphone back in place. He had the computer on the cruiser’s console set to GPS mode. A quarter of a mile from the turnoff to Manor Lane, he let up on the gas and swung the cruiser’s spotlight to the edge of the highway. But before he turned it on he saw the lights of a convenience store. The computer beeped once and he turned onto a narrow shell road that ran beside the store.

He spotted a county cruiser parked in the driveway of a mobile home. He stopped at the edge of the road and tickled his siren through one whoop to let Taylor and Johnson know he had arrived.

Taylor met him halfway to the front door.

“Evening, Lieutenant.”

Owens nodded. “What have we got?”

“The woman’s name is Wilson,” Taylor rubbed his chin. “Carrie Wilson, a real looker. She’s calmed down some. We took her through it twice, same story. Hadn’t seen the neighbor since yesterday and he didn’t answer the phone. Lights were all off so she went to check and saw him through the window.” Taylor paused, pointing at the mobile home next door.

Owens glanced over at the trailer near Wilson’s, shining his flashlight slowly back and forth, taking everything in.

“You want to go in and talk to her?” Taylor asked.

“No, that can wait. Tell Johnson to stay with her until we get back.” His flashlight continued to play across the ground. “Take your cruiser to the end of the drive over there and block it.”

Owens walked toward the neighbor’s mobile home. A CL-600 Mercedes was parked in front of the trailer. Owens checked the interior of the car with his flashlight and then jotted down the license plate number.

He watched Taylor climb out of his car at the end of the

drive. "Walk on the grass," he called out to Taylor. "Stay off the driveway."

Owens walked up the stairs and, following proper procedure, knocked on the trailer's front door. Not expecting a response, he struggled to pull on a pair of latex gloves.

"Damn things are always too small," he mumbled.

He reached inside his jacket for his .45 and tried the doorknob. It was locked.

Okay, he thought, we do it the hard way.

He stepped back and kicked the door open.

The thin trailer door gave way with a crash. Startled, Owens jumped back as a black cat dashed between his legs. The stench of death engulfed him. He quickly reached for his handkerchief, covered his nose, then stepped inside and turned on the lights.

Blood, old dried blood, covered the walls, the floor and the furniture. Across the room, a man knelt on the floor, as if in prayer, but his hands were cuffed behind his back.

Officer Taylor stepped into the trailer and immediately began coughing. "Jesus," Taylor wheezed. "What the, what a..."

Owens did not move. His eyes roamed the room digesting details as his mind calculated possibilities. "Don't touch anything," he mumbled over his shoulder.

Owens spotted a bloody piece of pipe on the dining table next to two computers. He noticed that the side panels of both computers were open and screws were scattered across the table as if someone had been working on them. Under the table, a bag of cat food had been slashed open. Owens bent to look at the bag. *Strange way to feed a cat, he thought.*

Taylor coughed louder, more insistently. Without looking around, Owens said, "Get out of here, Taylor. Go back out front and wait for the CSU van."

Owens stood in the center of the room for a long time absorbing details. Finally he walked over to the body. Taking care not to disturb the blood pool, he knelt beside the man. The body had been stabbed numerous times on both sides of the rib cage. A trace of rope burn showed on the victim's neck and he had cigarette burns on both arms. At the base of his skull Owens saw the telltale circle of a bullet wound. *No exit wound, Owens thought, probably a .22.*

His face twisted into an expression of disgust. "Brutal," he whispered. *You gotta wonder what this guy did, or what he knew,* Owens thought. He heard the lab van pull up outside and walked to

the door. He watched as Taylor directed the CSU team to stay on the grass.

“There are some tire tracks in the mud on the drive,” Owens called out to them. “Get some casts. And there are footprints over here by the car, get them too.”

Dr. Elizabeth Price, the medical examiner, acknowledged Owens with a wave.

“Hi, Liz,” Owens responded.

Price came from a small farming community in South Texas. She had vivid blue eyes and a fair complexion with the slightest dusting of freckles across her nose. More often than not, she kept her blond hair pulled back in a ponytail. She was thirty-five years old with a perfect figure, well toned from frequent jogging. She seldom wore any makeup and still had all of the wholesome appeal of a girl fresh out of the country.

But Owens knew there was not much country about Liz Price. She held a degree in Biochemistry from Texas A&M, a Medical Degree from the University of Texas, and a fellowship in Forensic Pathology. Pretty by any measure, Owens found her keen mind to be her most interesting attribute.

“What have you got, Mark?” Price asked.

“I don’t know, but it’s nasty. Gang-style assassination with plenty of torture first. I’d like to hear your thoughts.”

“Kind of odd, a gang killing out here in these woods.”

“Yeah, but take a look at this guy. I’m going over to talk with the woman who called it in. Sergeant Lamb?” he spoke to the team leader. “You guys let the doc do her thing, then go over the whole place. When you get to it, there’s an open bag of cat food under the table. Take a look at that, and you better check out the computers too.”

Owens waved as he walked toward the Wilson woman’s trailer.

After introducing himself, Owens took a seat at Carrie Wilson’s kitchen table and pulled out his notebook and pen. “I know you’ve been through this with the other officers, but if you don’t mind, I’d like to hear it myself.”

Carrie nodded. “I understand.”

“Your neighbor’s name was?”

“Harber, George Harber.”

As he took notes, Owens appraised Carrie. She had a youthful complexion but he noticed the trace of fine lines at the

corner of her eyes and decided she was older than she looked. Her hair was long, an auburn shade that Owens thought might be too perfect to be natural. She had a good figure and Owens caught himself glancing at the ample cleavage exposed by her low cut blouse.

“Do you know what Mr. Harber did for a living?”

“Ah, some kind of computer stuff, websites for companies, things like that.”

“Okay, so tell me why you went over there tonight.”

“Sure. We had a big rainstorm last night that blew some limbs off the trees. This morning I noticed a pine branch on the hood of George’s car. I saw it again this afternoon and I thought it a little strange. George takes a lot of pride in his cars. He buys and sells them.”

While Carrie Wilson related the events Owens took notes. Each time she paused in her story, he waited patiently, weighing the veracity of her words.

“Anyway, tonight I noticed that there weren’t any lights on in his trailer. Normally, on a Friday night George would be at his computer with all the lights on. I thought maybe he was sick. But when I called to check on him I got his answering machine. So I decided to go over and see if he was okay. It was dark and I took my flashlight. When he didn’t answer the door, I shined the light in the window and saw him. It was terrible.”

“And when did you last see Mr. Harber alive?” Owens asked.

She hesitated. “Ah, yesterday, yesterday morning.”

Owens knew that she was nervous, he expected that, but the detective in him sensed there might be something more. He didn’t think she was lying to him, just holding something back.

“And that’s all I know, Detective,” Carrie finished. “Just like I told the other officers.”

Owens noted that Officer Johnson nodded, affirming that the stories matched. Owens glanced around the interior of the trailer. Neat, well appointed, clean.

“Do you recall what time you called Mr. Harber?”

“Well, it was just after dark, so I imagine it was around eight.”

“You know any of his friends or associates?”

“No. We really didn’t know each other very well. George kept to himself.”

“No wife or girlfriends?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Are there any other homes on this road?”

“No. It dead ends down there in the trees.”

“Where do you work, Ms. Wilson?”

“I, ah, I work at the Flamingo over in Conroe.”

“Bartender?” Owens knew the Flamingo was a strip club.

“No.”

A stripper, I should have guessed, Owens thought. He searched her face briefly and closed his notebook. “All right, Ms. Wilson. I may want to talk to you some more tomorrow, but for now, that’s all.”

Walking back to Harber’s trailer, Owens took out his cell phone and speed dialed Andy Blackburn, the chief deputy of the department. Blackburn answered on the third ring.

“Andy, it’s Owens. Sorry to call so late, but we got a bad one and I wanted to give you a heads-up.”

“What have you got?”

“Torture, homicide.”

“Robbery?”

“Don’t know yet. The lab boys are still working. It looks more to me like a reprisal killing. Guy was handcuffed, beaten pretty bad, stabbed, then shot in the back of the head.”

“Are the news people onto it?”

“Not yet. We’re down in the southeast corner of the county, back in the pines, hardly anybody around. Look, Andy, I’m going to need some help on this one.”

“Okay, won’t Easy be back in the office tomorrow?”

Arthur Pickens, or Easy, as everyone called him, had been vacationing in Florida with his wife and twin boys. A fellow homicide detective, Pickens was a big affable man, with thick, close-set eyebrows. It gave him a look of perpetual confusion, but Owens knew that Pickens was not often confused.

“Yeah, in the morning.”

“Okay, you can use Easy. Get it all together and set up a meet in my office as soon as you can.”

“Yes, sir.” Owens closed the phone. As he came up to Harber’s trailer, he could see that cameras were still flashing inside the trailer. Dr. Price stepped out the door.

“Whoa, Mark,” she shook her ponytail from under her cap. “You’ve really got one here.”

“So, what do you think, Liz?”

She closed her eyes a moment in thought and Owens watched as she absently fondled her necklace. Although the cross on the chain was tucked out of sight beneath her clothing, he remembered she never took it off.

“There’s a lot. Burns, bruises, multiple stab wounds, some strangulation, and a bullet in the brain. I’d say this guy suffered some pain.”

“Cause of death?”

“Probably bled out from the knife wounds. The gunshot showed little signs of bleeding. Offhand, I’d guess it must have been just for insurance.”

“Time of death?”

“All I’ve got now is body temperature. I can’t be sure until we get him in. You want a guess, I’d say less than twenty-four hours ago.”

Owens glanced at his watch. “So around midnight last night?”

“That’d be close.”

“Chief wants a meeting in his office tomorrow. Can you make it at one o’clock?”

Price frowned. “He’s also going to want this autopsy report. What’s your call?”

He smiled. “I always put politics first.”

“How did I know you’d say that?” Their eyes met briefly, but she glanced away quickly. “Okay, I’ll be there.”

As she left, the sergeant of the Crime Scene Unit stepped out of the trailer, pulling off his gloves.

“We printed the whole place, Lieutenant. I’ll run them in the morning. I couldn’t tell if anything was missing, but the guy had a thousand bucks in his wallet, so it doesn’t look much like a robbery.”

Owens thought about that, turning it over in his mind.

“And I can’t make anything of the cat food. Looks like somebody cut the bag open...some food gone. I heard you telling the doc about the meeting, guess you’ll want me there?”

“Yeah, thanks. I’m outta here, got a beer to finish.”

As he walked to his car Owens dialed Arthur Pickens on his cell phone and waited for an answer.

“Hello, Mark.”

“Easy, how was the flight?”

“Crowded, bumpy. Just like the waiting lines and the rides at Disney World. Anyway, we’re here, that’s about all I can say. You didn’t call this time of night to ask about our trip, Buddy. What’s up?”

“We got a homicide down here in the woods close to the county line. The chief wants you to give me some help. I’ve set up a meeting in his office tomorrow at one.”

“The chief’s? Why all the interest?”

“It could be a gang assassination. Hard to tell, but it’s a pretty ugly one.”

“Suspects, motives?”

“No, nothing.”

“When did this happen?”

“Doc thinks some time around midnight last night. I’ll come back early in the morning, look it over in the daylight, but I’d like you to do a couple of things for me. Got a pencil?”

“Yeah, shoot.”

“George Harber, that’s the victim. H-A-R-B-E-R. Do a background check on him and see what you get. Then run a Carrie Wilson, see what turns up on her. Check with DMV for the registration on Texas plate, ah, number 1846 David Boy Charles.”

“Gotcha.”

On his way home, Owens recalled the first time he met Liz Price. She had only been with the department a week or so but because a female medical examiner was a bit out of the ordinary, rumors ran rampant. Some of his coworkers insisted she had to be a ghoul with bloodshot eyes and canine teeth. Others simply shook their heads at the thought of a woman dissecting bodies.

The night they met, he was at the scene of a domestic disturbance that had turned violent. Carmen Herrera shot and killed her husband after he stabbed her with a kitchen knife. The paramedics were just pulling away, taking Carmen to the hospital, sirens blaring. Inside the house, the cries of a baby rose over the racket of milling photographers and technicians. In the midst of the chaos Owens heard a female voice call out his name.

He noticed her eyes first. They were a deep, crystalline blue, like pools from a mountain stream. She looked at him as if he were the only person in the world and he felt something stir somewhere deep inside of him.

“I’m Lieutenant Owens,” he said.

“I’m Doctor Price, the werewolf medical examiner.” She extended a hand and flashed the most radiant smile he had ever seen. “Call me Liz, if you like.”

He held her hand an instant longer than a normal handshake but she made no effort to pull it back. He glanced down at her left hand in search of a wedding band and saw none.

“Okay, Liz,” he had managed to say. “The body is in here.” Owens started toward the kitchen, but she caught his sleeve.

“The deceased can wait, Lieutenant. Let’s check on this child.”

He remembered following her down a hallway to a back bedroom where they found a little girl in a crib, tears streaming down her face. Price put down her bag and Owens had watched as she picked up the baby, nestling the child to her neck.

He stood quietly while Price stroked the baby’s back and whispered, “Nada pasa, niña, nada pasa.” When the baby calmed down, Price changed her soiled diaper. He recalled how enthralled he had been, watching her gently place the baby back in the crib and pat the child’s back while she hummed softly. “Dormente, niña, dormente.”

In a few minutes the child was sound asleep. Then Price turned to him and said, “Now, you mentioned a body?”

After the crime scene was secured and the baby released to Child Protective Services, Owens had invited Price for a beer at a nearby tavern. Fascinated by her, he had stumbled with awkward small talk, but it was clear the attraction was mutual. It was an evening he would never forget.

The next night he had taken Price out for dinner. When they kissed goodnight at her front door, it was a deep, lingering kiss that left them both breathless. Reluctantly, he had whispered goodnight.

As he opened his car door that night Owens had noticed Price still standing on her porch, watching him. Thinking back on it now he laughed at his reaction: *big tough cop, former U.S. Army sniper, love-struck like some high school kid.*

The relationship turned fiery, on the verge of becoming serious, but county policy strictly forbid romantic liaisons between employees. In time, the necessity of secrecy had mutually cooled their affair and they hadn’t seen each other socially in months.

Now, seeing Price tonight at the crime scene, Owens came to the realization that the county's rules had not diminished his feelings toward her. But she had avoided any eye contact and he wondered how she felt.

CHAPTER 2

EARLY SATURDAY MORNING, GALVESTON, TEXAS

Raul Aquilleros stood five feet eleven inches tall. A solid, square-built man, he had the heavily muscled arms of a boxer. His eyes were a unique shade of gray, the color of dark pewter, with a slightly hooded Asian cast. He was a dangerous man, a professional assassin with kills in thirteen states and three foreign countries.

Coffee cup in hand, Raul sat on the patio of his waterfront hotel room gazing quietly at the Gulf of Mexico. Like an undulating carpet it stretched before him as far as he could see. Sometimes he caught a glimpse of a tanker headed out to sea, and would pick up his binoculars, study the ship, and wonder where it was bound. But this morning there were no ships on the horizon and as Raul sipped his coffee, he mentally reviewed the events of the past few days.

Nicholas Islamov had sent him to Texas to recover the money George Harber had stolen, eliminate any evidence that might link Harber to Islamov's operation, and kill Harber. Raul's flight from Phoenix had arrived in Houston on Wednesday morning. Although Harber lived in the vicinity of George Bush Intercontinental Airport, Raul was a careful man, preferring to set up his base of operations a safe distance from the target. So he had rented a plain, white Chevrolet Monte Carlo and driven to the beach in Galveston where he checked into the Flagship Hotel.

He'd spent the day Thursday locating Harber's home and familiarizing himself with the roads in the area. Harber lived in a trailer house situated on a lonely shell road with only one neighbor. It should have been an easy job.

Normally Raul preferred a quick clean kill, in and out. Unfortunately Harber had been uncooperative, forcing Raul to resort to strong-arm tactics. Even under torture, Harber refused to tell him where he had hidden the money. After Harber spat in his face several times, Raul lost his temper and became too heavy-handed with the knife.

Raul had always been cautious. His prints were not on file with the authorities and any witnesses that might have been able to identify him had been eliminated. He had never left a trace. But this

job had turned messy, leaving him with the uneasy feeling he might have missed something. There was nothing he could put his finger on, just an itch he couldn't scratch. Given a small, insignificant piece of evidence Raul knew that a good cop would worry it until, like a bloodhound, he picked up the scent. This morning, the story of George Harber's mysterious murder had been front-page news. Experience told Raul that without other developments, the initial flurry from the tabloids would quickly fade. So he planned to hang around a few days to make sure the media lost interest.

Yesterday morning Raul had sent an encrypted email to Islamov explaining that although he had not recovered the missing money, he did have the hard drives from Harber's computers. Raul knew the information on the drives was far more valuable than the money. Under the circumstances, Islamov would not be too upset.

If all went well, in a day or two he would head back to Arizona and the safety of Islamov's desert hideout. Located in the middle of 640 acres of rugged terrain a few miles northeast of Apache Junction, Arizona, it was completely enclosed by an electric fence. Inside the fence, invisible motion detectors constantly probed the grounds in search of intruders. At the center of the property, a high concrete wall topped with razor wire encircled the house.

It was a large, rambling adobe home situated on a manicured lawn. On the roof, a guard manned an M-60 machine gun at all times. Behind the house, a garage housed two Hummers. A small hangar next to the garage sheltered a red-and-white JetRanger helicopter. The place was a fortress.

Thinking of the safety the stronghold provided, Raul leaned forward and plucked a Camel Light from the pack on the table, touching the end with his gold lighter. He took a long pull on the cigarette, letting the smoke settle in his lungs before he exhaled. The sliding door behind him was open wide enough for him to hear the television in his room. When the news came on, he took his coffee inside.

CONROE, TEXAS

Owens wanted to look over the crime scene in daylight before the meeting at the chief's office. He got a cup of coffee at the McDonald's drive-thru and headed for Harber's trailer. At a quarter past seven he walked into the convenience store at the entrance to Manor Lane.

A thin, dark-complected man stood at the register. *Pakistani, or Indian*, Owens thought as he approached the counter.

“Hi, I’m Lieutenant Owens, sheriff’s department.” Owens extended his ID folder and held out a hand.

“Bvora Baharat,” the man said, shaking hands.

Pakistani, Owens decided. “You the manager here?”

Baharat grinned. “Owner, manager, stocker, mopper, I am the man.”

Owens smiled politely. “I’d like to ask a few questions if you have the time.”

Baharat shrugged. “Answer anything I can. I see all those police cars last night. I am reading about Mr. Harber in the paper. I think you want to ask about him?”

“Did you know Mr. Harber?”

“Some. He is driving those fancy cars, flashing his money.”

Owens could tell Baharat didn’t like Harber. “He had more than one car?”

“One at a time. He is changing a lot.”

“Yeah, I know. What time do you close at night?”

“Midnight,” Baharat paused, grinning again. “Before if it’s quiet.”

Owens liked the guy’s sense of humor. “How about Thursday night, late, you see anything unusual?”

Barharat’s eyes narrowed. “Ah, yes. A white car I’ve never seen before is going down the road when I am closing. Is raining hard, and he is going slow, maybe looking for something.”

“He?”

“Man or woman, I don’t know, but only one person. I am bringing in the newsstand when the car is going by.”

Owens wondered why a passing car would attract Barharat’s attention. “Do you see many cars go down that road?”

“Just delivery trucks and the people who live there. That’s why I thought it was odd.”

A strange car turning onto a lonely road close to the time of death is too much of a coincidence to ignore, Owens thought. “Which direction did the car come from?”

Baharat pointed toward the county line. “From Huffman.”

Owens nodded. “What kind of car was it?”

“Ah, cars I don’t know, but I copy the license.”

Owens felt his pulse quicken. “You got the license number from the car?”

Baharat took a piece of paper from the counter behind him and handed it to Owens, who stared at the number then looked quizzically at Baharat. "Why did you take down the number?"

Baharat looked out the window at something in the distance. "A man runs a place like this out here, is staying open late, he pays attention to different things, you know? A strange car is driving in the rain, late at night, he notices."

"You see the car leave?"

"No, I don't think it left while I was here. I go home a little after twelve."

"Thanks a lot Mr. Baharat, you've been very helpful. What about Miss. Wilson, you know her?"

Baharat nodded quickly. "Nice lady. She hurt?"

"No, she's fine. Thanks."

The license number, Owens thought, *could be an early break in the case*. He hustled to the computer in his car. He typed the Texas plate number into the computer and drummed his fingers on the steering wheel waiting for a response. When the information flashed on the screen, Owens sucked in a deep breath. According to the registration, the vehicle was a white Chevrolet Monte Carlo owned by a Jose Alvarez living in San Jose, Costa Rica.

Costa Rica, very interesting. A stable, democratic Central American Republic known as a transshipment point for heroin coming out of Columbia. Owens toyed with the possibilities a few minutes before he picked up his cell phone and dialed the number on the screen.

"Hello?"

"Mr. Alvarez?"

"Yes."

"This is Detective Owens of the Montgomery County Texas Sheriff's Department. Do you still own a Chevrolet Monte Carlo registered in Texas?"

"Yes, I do. Something wrong?"

"Do you know where the car is at the moment?"

"Of course. I come to Houston often on business. I keep the car in slot thirty-two at the ABC Parking Garage by Hobby Airport. What's this about?"

"Well, I'm not sure yet. Have you been to Houston recently?"

"Ah, about three weeks ago. Why?"

Owens frowned. "The car may have been stolen. I'll check

and let you know.”

So much for the easy break, Owens thought. He picked up his radio mike.

“Dispatch, this is Unit One Able Five. Can you patch me to the Houston dispatcher?”

“Roger, standby.”

“Houston PD, dispatch.”

“Dispatch, Lieutenant Owens, Montgomery County. Do you have any units near Hobby Airport?”

“Ten-four, we always have four units in the area.”

“Can you have one of them check slot thirty-two at the ABC garage for me?”

“No problem. Might take a few minutes, you want me to call you back?”

“I’ll wait.”

Fifteen minutes later the dispatcher reported that a white Chevrolet Monte Carlo was parked in slot thirty-two. The license plates were missing. *Probably not a random theft*, Owens thought. *The plates were more than likely now on a different white Monte Carlo*. Owens called the county dispatcher and put out an APB on the car.

A county cruiser was parked in front of Harber’s trailer with an officer guarding the crime scene. Owens pulled up behind the cruiser and climbed out of his car.

“Morning, Lieutenant,” the officer said.

“Morning.” Although Owens didn’t know the officer, it wasn’t unusual that the young patrolman recognized Owens.

The trailer was wrapped in yellow crime scene tape, the door still hanging from its hinges.

“A cat ran in there a while ago,” the officer said. “I chased him out.”

Owens walked toward the trailer and made a slow tour around the outside, looking for anything he might have missed in the dark last night. At the front door, he raised the tape and ducked under. Inside the door, he stood a long time, studying the blood trails across the floor. *Harber had been tortured*, he thought, *but why? Was it for revenge, or did Harber possess some valuable secret?* Owens moved to the kitchen and checked the contents of the refrigerator, the oven and a few cabinets. He spotted numerous software manuals in the bookcase at the end of the hall. Owens

briefly studied the titles, wondering if they had any bearing on the killing.

The telephone's answering machine light flashed indicating a message had been left at 8:04 last night. *That would be Wilson's call*, Owens thought. He pushed the play button and listened but there was no message.

Five phone numbers were recorded on the caller ID. Owens jotted the numbers down on his notepad. He halfheartedly opened a few drawers, knowing the CSU boys would have gone over everything with a fine-tooth comb.

Finally, he ducked under the tape, glancing back as he left. He waved at the officer, started his car, and backed up the road to Carrie Wilson's driveway. Apparently, Wilson had seen him coming and she opened the door just as he was about to knock.

"Good morning, Lieutenant. You're at it early this morning."

"Yeah, I guess." As she held the door open for him, he thought she seemed more composed than she had been last night.

"Have a seat, Lieutenant. Coffee?"

"Sure, I never turn down coffee."

Carrie was dressed in shorts and a halter top, revealing an excellent figure. Watching her pour coffee, Owens couldn't help but imagine how she would appear under the lights at the Flamingo.

"Sugar, cream?"

"No, black is fine. Tell me, did Harber have a cat?"

"Yes. Felix. God, I forgot about Felix. He must be distraught."

"Ms. Wilson, I'd like to go over everything you know about George Harber again, if you have the time. Friends, family, anything you can tell me."

"Its just Carrie, if you don't mind."

"Okay, Carrie."

She smiled and took a sip of her coffee. She put the cup down and leaned across the table, commanding Owens' attention.

"Look, Lieutenant, let's make a deal."

Owens' eyebrows shot up.

"If you don't already know it, you'll find out I'm no angel. I haven't had any trouble with the law in a long time, but I don't want to rehash my past in the news, you know? I don't know much about George, but I'll tell you all I do know. I just don't want to be caught in a searchlight, okay?"

Owens held her gaze for a few seconds. *Great*, he thought, *a stripper with a record.*

“What sort of trouble?” Owens took out his notepad.

She glanced down at the table. “Prostitution mostly.” She shook her head without looking up. “Some bad checks, a little grass, nothing to be proud of.”

“Well, I can’t guarantee you anything, but I’m not working vice. This is a homicide investigation, so let’s hear what you have to say.”

Carrie raised her head, nodding. “Okay. George was a loner. If he had any relatives, he never mentioned them. He was nice to me, but he wasn’t the sociable type, like he stayed away from people.”

Owens scribbled notes. “Guy living in a run-down trailer, driving a \$120,000 car. Strange combination.”

“Cars were sort of George’s hobby. Like I told you last night, he was always buying and selling different ones. He had a Ferrari before this one.”

“Pretty expensive vehicle,” Owens mused.

“You bet,” Carrie smiled. “He always had a lot of cash, so I wondered if he was into more than just websites, but it wasn’t any of my business. Last week he said he expected someone to bring him a big payment for a job.”

“Did you ever see anything unusual over there?”

“Well, George got a lot of deliveries, three or four a week. Stuff for the websites he said, but it seemed like a lot.”

“These were UPS or FedEx deliveries?”

“Both.”

“Do you know what size the packages were?”

“Well, I was there one day when a delivery came. It was about, like the size of a shoebox, maybe bigger. A couple of times they left deliveries with me when George wasn’t home.”

“Always the same size?”

Owens watched as she closed her eyes, searching her memory. “The ones I saw, yes.”

“You saw him socially?”

Carrie glanced away. “Yes, some. He was always kind, generous.”

I’ll bet, Owens thought. “And that’s all?”

“It probably doesn’t mean anything, but he liked to go to the reservation.”

“The reservation?”

“Yeah, you know, the casino at the Indian reservation over in Louisiana. He went a couple of times a month.” She shrugged. “Maybe he won a lot.”

“Anything else you can tell me?”

“No,” she paused as if uncertain, “I can’t think of anything.”

Owens closed his notebook and stood up. He handed her a card. “Okay, Carrie, call me if you think of anything else.”

She nodded and walked him to the door. “Lieutenant...thanks.”

Owens waved over his shoulder as he walked to the cruiser.

Standing in the door of her trailer, Carrie Wilson watched Owens as he left. *Not a bad guy for a cop*, she thought, *and certainly attractive enough*. She was relieved that the ordeal of his questioning was over. *Or was it?* Carrie wondered if she had made a mistake by not telling him about the metal box George asked her to keep for him.

CHAPTER 3

SATURDAY, APACHE JUNCTION, ARIZONA

Nicholas Islamov had the big leather chair in his study tipped back with his feet propped up on a massive mahogany desk. He took a Cuban cigar from the humidor at his side, snipped the end and passed the cigar under his nose.

Paneled in dark wood, the study had tile floors covered with fine Isfanhan carpets. Gleaming assault rifles of various makes studded the walls. Each one held a full clip. A Russian Kalashnikov rifle adorned the wall behind Islamov's chair. It was his favorite. The AK-47, as it is commonly known, is popular with terrorists and insurgent forces worldwide. It could spit out 7.62-millimeter rounds at a rate of 600 per minute.

Islamov was a man of average height and proportion with dark, wiry hair. Only his eyes distinguished him from the next man on the street. They were black, ominous circles, constantly darting about like the eyes of a predator in search of prey. He was not a particularly handsome man, but it wasn't his looks that attracted women to him. It was his enormous wealth, the power at his fingertips, and the distinct aura of danger around him.

He lit his cigar and inhaled deeply, savoring the fine tobacco. Outside the French doors, he could see a well-proportioned woman sunbathing by the pool. He watched as she unfastened the top of her bikini and applied suntan lotion to her breasts. He paused to admire her body briefly then glanced over the top of the concrete wall at Superstition Mountain, just beyond the boundary of his property. It formed a jagged silhouette against the bright blue Arizona sky.

Nicholas Islamov, or Nicky as his close associates called him, was a Russian-born Jew. With the fall of Communist Russia, he had left his homeland. Israel has always maintained an "open arms" policy, offering refuge in their country to any member of the Jewish faith. Although Israel is a party to extradition treaties with the U.S. and numerous other countries, only one man has ever been extradited. Considering the business ventures Islamov was contemplating at the time, the security of Israel appealed to him and

he had established his Israeli citizenship in Tel Aviv.

Now halfway around the world, operating a covert business in flagrant violation of U.S. federal statutes, Islamov took comfort in the fact that his Israeli citizenship provided him a safe haven. In defiance of authorities, El Al would board an Israeli citizen on a flight to the Holy Land.

Islamov's operation was complex, tangled in the shadows of global politics and the Machiavellian antics of third world dictators. It brought in millions in cash, far too much to trust to one man to cleanse, so he spread the task among a number of various people scattered across the country. He didn't care how they sanitized the money. He had other issues to deal with. He paid them 15 percent right off the top.

It was expensive but necessary. The problem was, every now and then, a laundryman, like George Harber, took more than their share of the money. When that happened, Islamov sent Raul to rectify matters.

Yesterday, Raul had sent a message indicating that, although he had not recovered the money, he had killed Harber and removed the drives from his computer. Now, Islamov was anxious for Raul to return safely.

Harber was just a cheap crook that didn't even know Islamov's name. Raul was different. He knew everything. If someone persuaded Raul to spill his guts, Islamov thought, it could shake the foundations of the White House itself.

SATURDAY AFTERNOON, CONROE, TEXAS

The headquarters of the Montgomery County Sheriff's office is located in Conroe, just off Loop 336 at #1 Criminal Justice Circle. Officers referred to it as the CJC.

Heading north on the Loop, Owens called Easy Pickens on his cell phone.

"Mark?"

"Yeah, you want me to pick you up?" Owens asked.

"No, I'm at the CJC now. Maria dropped me off."

"Good. I can take you home after the meeting. You get anything for me?"

"Some. First the gal, that was simple. She's got a sheet, hooking, paper hanging, possession, all about ten or twelve years ago. Talked to her boss, he says she was on stage at the time of the

murder. Mark, she's an exotic dancer, a stripper."

Owens nodded. "I figured that. Look, Easy, if that stuff is that old, can we keep it to ourselves unless it means something?"

"Sure, whatever. The guy proved more difficult. Nothing on the name you gave me. The Mercedes is paid for, registered to Gulf Auto Imports."

"Okay, I may have a make on the car the killer was driving. I put out an APB on it. I'm on my way in now. So, I'll see you in a few minutes."

Owens found Chief Deputy Andy Blackburn standing outside the door of the conference room. He could see through the door where people were milling around, waiting.

"The sheriff is here, Mark, so make it good."

"The sheriff?"

Andy grinned. "Yeah, he gave up his tee time to listen to his favorite detective."

Owens frowned. Everybody knew he didn't hold Sheriff Conover in high regard. Owens spotted Conover seated in the corner of the conference room. He was a big man with a gut that hung well over his belt. He had pale eyes, thin white hair and a mustache Owens thought was too small for his paunchy face. Owens had always thought Conover was more interested in votes than in justice. Although the sheriff never missed an opportunity to expound on the department's arrest record, it was common knowledge he often overlooked the indiscretions of prominent citizens or their children.

Owens waved a hello and the sheriff acknowledged, halfheartedly raising a hand. Andy Blackburn moved to the head of the table and motioned for everyone to be seated. Owens sat next to Pickens, directly across the table from Dr. Elizabeth Price. The CSU team sat on the other side of Pickens, across from the new Assistant District Attorney, Peggy Moreland. In contrast to the plain, stiff-collared young assistant at her side, Moreland was a woman who turned heads. Owens had heard the jokes around the courthouse that there was always a trail of men behind her in the hallway, watching her walk.

As the head of the county's legal system, the District Attorney's office is responsible for the investigation and prosecution of crimes committed within the jurisdiction. But Owens knew this would be Moreland's first capital case in Montgomery County and it was clear she was willing to let the Sheriff's Department take the

lead in the investigation.

“All right, people,” Blackburn said. “We’ve got a murder to deal with. We made the front pages this morning, but the story didn’t give anything away. Let’s see if we can keep it that way, at least until we have something. Lieutenant Owens will run the team, but any press contacts are to go through the sheriff, got that?”

Everyone acknowledged. “Okay, Lieutenant, tell us where we are.”

Owens stood and took the head of the table. “Best I can tell,” he said, “we’re at Number One CJC.”

Owens waited until the laughter subsided and began laying out the details. He checked his notes but made no mention of Carrie Wilson’s record.

“This morning, I went back to the scene and questioned the proprietor of the convenience store on the corner. He saw a white car turn down Manor Lane around midnight Thursday. He got the car’s license number. I ran the plate and it turns out, the car belongs to a man living in Costa Rica.” He paused to look at his notes. “Jose Alvarez. He comes to Houston often and keeps a car at a lot near Hobby Airport. I had Houston send a unit to check it out and the car was there, but the license tags were missing. My guess is the killer is driving a white Chevy Monte Carlo like the one he stole the plates from. We have an APB out on the car.”

The sheriff held up his hand. “Did you run a check on the guy himself?”

“Alvarez?” Owens asked.

“Yeah,” the sheriff insisted. “The guy who owns the car.”

Owens glanced at the confused expressions around the room. “Ah, Sheriff, apparently Mr. Alvarez’s license plates were stolen.”

“You check, Lieutenant. A guy with a name like Alvarez probably has something to hide.”

The sheriff’s flagrant discrimination angered Owens. He glared at the sheriff a moment before he nodded. “Sure, Sheriff.”

Owens pointed to Sergeant Lamb who picked up his papers and cleared his throat. “Well, we got lots of prints, all from the victim. Tire tracks in the drive are Goodyear MP-11’s, the kind rental agencies usually put on their cars. Foot prints are a size eleven boot, I’ll try and get a brand for you on Monday.”

Lamb held up a photograph from inside the trailer. “Looks like the killer first hit the victim in the head with a piece of pipe.

You can see where the blood splattered on the wall over here.”

He pointed to a spot on the picture and the room became still. “Then he handcuffed him, put a rope around his neck and drug him over here. There’s a clear blood trail across the floor. Next he must’ve burned his arms with a cigarette. No cigarette butts were found. Then he started in on him with a knife. Finally, he shot the guy in the back of the head. There’s no exit wound and I’d bet money the doc is going to find a .22-caliber slug in his brain.”

“What makes you think it was a twenty-two?” Moreland asked.

“Part of the noise a gunshot makes comes from the bullet breaking the sound bearer. A twenty-two is subsonic, easy to silence. They’ve got just enough power to penetrate and bounce around inside the skull like a Ping Pong ball.”

Moreland shot Owens a questioning glance.

“The weapon of choice for a professional.” Owens agreed. “No shell casing, no knife?”

Lamb shook his head. “Picked clean. He knew what he was doing.”

“What about the computers?” Owens asked.

“Computers are pretty fancy, state of the art machines, but they don’t work because the hard drives are missing.” He shrugged.

“No prints on the computers?”

The sergeant shook his head. “Wiped clean.”

“Money?”

“Yeah, the victim had a thousand dollars in his wallet. Nixes robbery as a motive, unless there was more money and he just left some to throw us off.”

“No narcotics?” the sheriff interrupted. “No paraphernalia?”

“Nothing, Sheriff.”

“No trace material, hair?” Owens inquired.

“A little. We found two human hair follicles in the carpet, otherwise, nothing. Cleanest site I ever saw.”

“These follicles,” ADA Moreland held up a hand, “are the roots still attached?”

“No. Both appear to have been broken off. At this point I can’t say if they are from the victim or his killer.”

“My understanding,” Moreland glanced down the table at Dr. Price, “is that while the root can render a DNA profile, the stem itself offers no irrefutable means of identity. Is that correct?”

Dr. Price nodded. “Human hair exhibits two growth stages.

During the telogea phase, growth ceases and it produces only minor DNA traces. During the anagen phase growth resumes and the papilla, or root, becomes rich in DNA material. Without the root, nuclear DNA analysis is of little value. Some successful experiments have been conducted with mitochondrial DNA, but nothing you would want to take to court. Basically, without the root, the only thing we can determine conclusively is what part of the body it came from.”

“We can do a microscopic analysis of two hairs,” Sergeant Lamb injected, “and state that they appear to be, or are at least a close match.”

Moreland scribbled something on her pad. “And defense can produce expert testimony that a comparison of hair follicles is an inexact science and therefore inclusive.”

“Yes.” The sergeant held up three small keys. “Oh, I almost forgot. We found these safe deposit box keys.”

The killer may have been after those keys, Owens thought. “The only problem,” he drawled, “is safe deposit keys often have nothing on them to identify the bank. Some of them don’t even have the box number on them.”

“Right. They can be a mystery by themselves. Fortunately, we lucked out this time.” The sergeant pushed some papers across the table to Owens. “His account records. Found them in his desk drawer.”

“Good work.” Owens winked at the sergeant. “These might be the best clues we have so far.” He turned to Dr. Price. “Doctor?”

Price picked up her papers. “The autopsy, of course,” she glanced over at the sheriff, “is on hold to accommodate my presence at this gathering.”

Owens almost laughed out loud at her audacity. *She’s an open book*, he thought.

“The approximate time of death is around midnight Thursday based strictly upon *algor mortis*...”

“Excuse me Doctor,” Peggy Moreland interrupted, “but don’t you mean *rigor mortis*?”

Price leaned over, looked down the table and gave Moreland a friendly smile. “When a human being expires, the heart stops and the blood flow, which delivers oxygen to the cells, ceases. Without oxygen the brain dies quickly, but most of the other body cells live for a while by resorting to anaerobic respiration to obtain oxygen. Anaerobic respiration produces lactic acid, which in turn causes the

body muscles to stiffen within a few hours of death. It lasts up to thirty-six hours until the bacteria in the body consumes the acid and the body becomes limp again. That's rigor mortis. Algor mortis," Price continued, "relates to the progressive decline of body temperature to the surrounding ambient temperature. That's the fastest way to approximate time of death. But in the final analysis, when the autopsy is complete, we combine it with livor mortis, rigor mortis, potassium content, various ocular changes and stomach content to determine a precise time of death. I'll have that for you by Monday. Okay?"

"Yes, thank you Doctor."

Owens smiled inwardly. However gently she had delivered the message, Liz Price had effectively served notice of the perils of venturing into her field of expertise.

"But," Price glanced around the table, "I can tell you this man didn't die a pleasant death. He was beaten, choked, burned, stabbed and shot. He suffered a lot of pain."

"Okay, folks," Owens said. "Monday, Pickens and I will run down these bank keys, and check out the Mercedes. Doc, you finish up the postmortem." He smiled at Price, quietly applauding her jab at the sheriff. "Sarge, we didn't get a make on the victim's name, so run his prints and see if you can find out who he really is."

The door to the conference room opened and an officer stuck his head in. "Sheriff? Sorry to interrupt, but there's a reporter from the Houston Chronicle on the line. Says he heard something on his scanner about a request for Houston to check a car for us. He wants to know what the story is."

The sheriff started out the door scowling at Owens. "So much for keeping the lid on."

Owens shrugged. *Goddamn media*. "Counselor," he turned to the ADA. "I'd like to open up these deposit boxes and take a look at his bank accounts, maybe get his phone records. Can you handle the warrants for me?"

"That shouldn't be a problem, Lieutenant."

"All right folks, let's be here at ten on Tuesday. Call me anytime."

Chairs scraped around the room as everyone got up to leave. On his way out the door, Chief Blackburn pulled Owens aside and put a hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry about the news thing, Mark, you couldn't help it. I'll take care of the sheriff."

“Thanks, Chief.”

Normally, on a Saturday morning, few people frequented the marble corridors of the CJC. But this morning, word had spread the sheriff had canceled his golf game and many people found reason to be in the building. Traffic in the hall resembled that of a weekday morning.

As the detectives made their way toward the parking lot, Owens spotted Peggy Moreland waiting by the door. Tall and slender, she wore a black suit, cut close, barely revealing a silk, ivory blouse underneath. She leaned against the wall, her legs crossed at the ankles with all of her weight on one leg, arms folded across her waist. A briefcase sat on the floor beside her feet. Owens couldn't help thinking what a striking woman she was. She pushed off the wall as the detectives approached and straightened.

“Could we have a word, Lieutenant?”

“Of course,” Owens said.

Moreland cut her eyes briefly at Pickens. He fussed with his jacket and said, “Think I'll wait in the car.”

Owens had not had an opportunity to observe Moreland in court, but he knew she brought an excellent record from Austin. People were curious about why she had left a position as a big city prosecutor to come to Montgomery County. Owens figured she had some political ambitions.

Up close, she was taller than he remembered, maybe five-nine without the high heels. She had chestnut hair, expertly cut just above the shoulders. She tossed her hair away from her face, exposing a flawless olive complexion. “May I call you Mark?”

Owens smiled. “Anything you like.”

“Fine, Mark it is.” She returned his smile. “I'd like to commend you on your presentation. Very professional.”

Owens shrugged, ignoring the flattery.

“A couple of weeks ago you brought in a suspect I released because I didn't believe there was sufficient evidence to hold him. I wanted to make sure you weren't harboring any hard feelings over that.”

Owens grinned. “You gotta call 'em like you see 'em.”

“Right, but I'm new on the block here and this looks like it could be a tough case. I just wanted to make sure we don't start off on the wrong foot.”

Owens held his grin. *How could he be angry with such a beautiful woman?* “I understand. No problems, Counselor.”

“Good. What’s your view of this?”

He held his arms out, palms turned up. “Well, the scene was so clean, my guess is...the killer is no amateur. Obviously the victim was tortured and given that the hard drives from his computer are missing, I think you have to figure the killer was after information.”

“What kind of information?”

“I don’t have an answer for that one, yet. I’m hoping we’ll find something in one of the safe deposit boxes.”

Moreland nodded and stooped to pick up her briefcase. “I’ll get a judge’s signature on your warrants. They should be ready first thing Monday.”

They walked together to the parking lot and Moreland stopped at her Lexus sports car. She tilted her head toward Pickens who was waiting in Owens’ car.

“What’s officer Pickens like?”

“Easy? He’s a good cop, the kind of guy you want watching your back.” Owens laughed. “He’s not troubled with an ego, so he’s not afraid of looking stupid if his instincts are a little off the mark. That makes him a good cop. Don’t let those blank stares fool you, he doesn’t miss much.”

“All right, Mark, have a nice weekend.”

“What’s left of it.”

Owens climbed behind the wheel and started his car. He waited for Peggy Moreland’s sleek sports car to pass before he pulled out.

“Looks like you got a new friend,” Pickens said.

“Maybe. We’ll see.”

“Fine looking woman. Word is she’s got family money. She left her husband in Austin and goes by her maiden name. I’d be careful there, Mark, you know department policy.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Owens glanced at Pickens, wondering if he knew about Owens’ affair with Liz Price. When they had been seeing each other they had been very careful, but it was a small town where secrets were hard to keep. He drove in silence for several minutes. Finally, at a traffic light, he turned to Pickens. “So what do you think about the case, Easy?”

Pickens ran a hand across his face. “Guy leaves no trace of evidence, I gotta think this ain’t his first rodeo.”

“You’re thinking a pro?”

“Yeah. Smells like settling the score on a bad dope deal to

me. You figure out anything about the cat food?”

Owens tapped the steering wheel as they pulled away from the light. “I don’t know, Easy. Maybe the guy did his thing...the cat was there and hungry, so he slit the bag open so the cat could eat. There was nothing in the bag but cat food.”

“So you’re saying we got a guy who could brutally murder somebody, then feed his cat.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s what I’m saying.”

“Funny thing to me,” Pickens said, staring out the window.

When Owens stopped in Pickens’ driveway, he raised a hand and gave Easy a high-five sign. “Monday morning,” He said as Pickens got out of the car.

On his way home, Owens bought an early edition of the Sunday Chronicle and pulled in at a restaurant he frequented. Over dinner he scanned the front-page story of Harber’s murder. Owens found the reporter’s theory that Harber was a bank robber from Costa Rica amusing. *Some kind of detective this guy is*, he thought. After his meal he took the newspaper home to finish in his recliner. He had a couple of beers, watched the late news and went to bed.

He slept fitfully plagued by an old, recurring dream of a night when he had been with the Houston Police Department. The dream always started the same way, with the deafening clatter of a burglar alarm shattering the night. While his partner took the front door, Owens had circled to the alley behind a jewelry store. His pulse pounded in his head, as he moved carefully through the shadows, maneuvering around garbage cans and dumpsters. Suddenly, he picked up the form of a man standing in a doorway. Owens ordered him to come out with his hands up, but instead the man jumped out of the doorway and lit up the ally with the flash of his gun.

The impact of the shot knocked Owens down. His shoulder blazed with pain and he could feel the steady flow of blood spreading across his chest. His vision began to cloud but he could hear the urgent footfalls of his partner who at any moment would turn the corner and come face to face with almost certain death. Owens clenched his jaw, aimed his pistol and fired. The shooter pitched forward just as Owens lost consciousness and the scene went black.

The Barrett Solution

The pictures in the dream were never quite in focus and the sequences sometimes seemed to dissolve or spin away like a transition in a movie. Often he woke in a cold sweat, dazed from reliving the violence. When he finally managed to go back to sleep, the same scenes were still playing in the theatre of his mind.