



FINALIST
WILLIAM FAULKNER
CREATIVE WRITING
COMPETITION

**THE
DEVIL
ORDERS
TAKEOUT**

BILL A. BRIER

A sudden turn on an icy road, and Grayson Bolt's life changes forever...

He thought he'd done doing the right thing, but the consequences were more than he could pay...

They brought Grayson back into Costanzo's office and pressed him into a chair facing the desk. He sat stiffly, gripped with apprehension. Chauffeur parked in his usual position, behind and right. Gonzo sat port side, gun in lap.

Costanzo sat supreme, perched in his high-back leather chair, hands folded on his desk. Solomon about to dispense justice. "I'm afraid you're going to get it hard, Mr. Bolt." Costanzo had that fatherly tone of *this will hurt me more than you*. "Did you ever stop to think that there's only one way of being dead, but many ways of dying?"

Grayson felt something cold touch his spine, all the way down. "I don't follow."

"Take your man Stockard. He killed two of your beloved family members, wife and eldest son. Isn't that right?"

A strangling tightness gripped Grayson's throat. "That—that's right."

"Wouldn't you say a part of you died too?"

"What's your *point*?" Grayson's voice erupted in suppressed panic.

"You don't have to die to feel dead. I'm going to kill your other son. That'll be your punishment."

Chauffeur let out a long sigh. "Aaah."

The blood drained from Grayson's face. Just like that. Most people held the basic principle that no man should be punished for the deed of another. Costanzo was not one of them. Grayson would be cut right to the bone, and his son would be the sharpest knife Costanzo could use. Costanzo had spelled out the thought in invisible brushstrokes. It was there and Grayson had tried not to see it.

Costanzo continued as though his words had no great significance. "It'll be tough, I know. But look at it this way." His face twisted into a cruel grin. "You've already lost one son, so you know what to expect."

A tax attorney with integrity...a powerful mobster determined to bend his will...

Grayson Bolt isn't about to compromise his integrity to help a notorious crime boss escape the cross-hairs of the IRS. But there's a steep price to pay for defying The Man—Grayson's beloved wife and older son.

There's only one way for Grayson to prevent his younger son, Jim, an innocent golf prodigy, from also being taken out: play a dangerous game of cat and mouse. And what will Jim be forced to do when the woman he loves gets ensnarled in a web of betrayal and deceit?

KUDOS for *The Devil Orders Takeout*

“...an intense and intriguing tale...set in a world of gangsters, sports enthusiasts, gamblers, and a father who’s willing to sell his soul to save his only son, it will keep you riveted from the very first page.” ~ Pepper O’Neal, author of the award-winning *Black Ops Chronicles* series.

“Filled with well-developed, realistic, and engaging characters, the story will catch and hold your interest from beginning to end.” Taylor Jones, *The Review Team of Taylor Jones and Regan Murphy*

“*The Devil Orders Takeout* is a tale of greed, corruption, and revenge—a chilling, thought-provoking story that will have you turning pages as fast as you can.” ~ Regan Murphy, *The Review Team of Taylor Jones and Regan Murphy*

“Brier likes to mess with your head and, bless his twisted little heart, he’s darn good at it. Anybody who says they know where this book is going even twenty pages from the end is either lying or deserves his own psychic hot line.” ~ Dr. Bruce Kautz.

The Devil Orders Takeout was a finalist in the 2015 Faulkner Creative Writing Competition.

THE DEVIL ORDERS TAKEOUT

BILL A. BRIER

A Black Opal Books Publication



GENRE: MYSTERY/CRIME THRILLER

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**THE
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TAKEOUT**

PART I

“Let the devil catch you but by a single hair,
and you are his forever.”

~ *Gotthold Ephraim Lessing*

CHAPTER 1

The sun sat low in the sky by the time Grayson Bolt finally stored the last of the luggage in the back of the Mercedes. His black suitcase looked stodgy next to Sandra's playful leopard print, complete with pink nametag. As usual, hers was stuffed near to bursting, while his held the bare essentials: underwear, toothbrush, and socks.

Their luggage habits reflected their personalities. Sandra had always been spontaneous and energetic, while Grayson had been cool, practical, and driven. Even now, minutes before departing on their first real anniversary celebration in years—a last-minute trip to Olive Garden didn't count—his mind was already running over everything he'd need to do when he got back to the office: finish the Henderson tax file, look into the Colbenson case. Tax season was almost upon him and—

Shut up, he commanded himself. *This weekend isn't about work. This weekend is about Sandra.*

Hard to believe someone as gorgeous and amazing as Sandra had agreed to marry him—and had actually stuck with him for all these years despite his long office hours.

"Is everything there?" Sandra called from the doorway.

"Yep!" Grayson hollered back, watching as she dashed to the car all bundled up in a puffy white coat at least two sizes too big. Even though she hadn't bothered to put on any makeup for the drive and had thrown her dark hair up into a messy bun, Grayson still felt his temperature rise the longer he watched her. She was stunning, with endless brown eyes that sucked him in and a crooked smile that made his heart slug faster.

She opened the passenger door and gasped in delight, pulling out a bouquet of twelve perfect red roses. "Grayson! They're beautiful!"

“I just hope they survive the ride,” he replied. “Maybe you should tuck them in the back, next to the gun.”

Sandra buried her nose in the bouquet, breathing in its scent. “They’re so romantic,” she said, planting a kiss on his lips. “You’ve earned a surprise for later.”

Grayson grinned and started the engine. *My God, she’s something.*

Sandra reached behind her and laid down the bouquet before turning back to him and batting her sparkling eyes. “I saw champagne but no bearskin rug. Will I have to send you out in the snow to wrestle a grizzly?”

“Grrr.”

As Grayson headed north on Interstate 87, Sandra applied lip gloss, snapped the visor mirror shut, and dropped the gloss into her purse. “Darn,” she said, rummaging inside. “I left my driving glasses in my car.”

“You could always wear your prescription ski goggles.”

“Wouldn’t I look cute?” Sandra flipped the mirror open again and peered in. She tugged the skin at the corner of one eye. “Look at this,” she said, turning to him. “Crow’s feet, and I’m not even forty. Should I get my eyes done?”

He glanced at her. “Forget it. You’re beautiful.”

“Men are lucky. Look at you, years older and—”

“Don’t remind me. I hate thinking of the big five-o.”

She closed the visor. “That’s okay. I like your gray.” She stroked the hair above his ear. “It matches your sexy gray eyes.”

“Careful or I’ll start hunting for that bearskin.”

Sandra smiled. “We’ve got the whole weekend without the kids. And please, let’s agree, no golf talk. I hear it every day from Troy.”

He raised two fingers. “Scout’s honor. He can pester grandma and his little brother for two days.”

An hour later they turned west onto Route 28, a peaceful mountain road recently plowed. A blue sky replaced earlier clouds, and the sun reflected off the snow. Grayson rubbed his temples as a dull throb began to build behind his eyes. “Sweetheart, I’m getting a migraine. We’ve got to stop.”

“I have Tylenol,” Sandra offered, reaching for her purse.

“That won’t help. I need to close my eyes. Maybe we should find a hotel for the night.”

“Oh, honey, we’re only an hour from the lodge. I’ll drive.”

“You don’t have your glasses.”

“I’ll be fine. Pull over.”

With the seat and mirrors adjusted, Sandra swung the car onto the road while Grayson leaned back and closed his eyes. He pictured the thickly wooded route of aspen and poplar as she maneuvered the car through the turns, and imagined the stream rising and falling on the left where the road dropped off sharply. The car thumped-thumped-thumped, and his eyes shot open. Sandra had drifted onto the shoulder.

“Sorry, honey. I was turning up the heater,” she explained with a guilty smile.

They rounded a bend and Sandra screamed. A tan horse lay in the narrow road, legs kicking. Sandra slammed on the brakes, and the car veered sideways in the slush, skidding toward the horse. Grayson grabbed the wheel and gave it a sharp turn. The car’s rear-end whipped back, just missing the horse’s thrashing hooves.

Sandra pulled over and stopped the car. “Oh, my God, I didn’t see it until—”

“That’s okay, you didn’t hit it,” Grayson said, wanting to reassure her. He glanced out the rear window. The horse wore a saddle and was struggling on an icy patch where trees arched over the pavement. “I’ve got to help that animal off the road and search for the rider.” He took her hands. “Everything will be okay.” He climbed out of the car and leaned against it for a moment. A sharp pain stabbed behind one eye.

The horse had wriggled up onto a knee at the edge of the ice. The poor thing panted heavily, its eyes wild as it swung its head back and forth. Grayson worried that it might regain its footing only to run off and get hit by a car or tumble over the cliff.

He ran the short distance to the animal. “Easy, boy. Easy.”

The horse was struggling to get to its feet, head bobbing. It got up onto both knees. Grayson took the reins and stepped back. The horse tottered to its feet with a loud nicker. Grayson stroked the animal. “Good fella. Good fella.”

“Help! Is somebody up there?” A child’s frightened cry came from the steep ravine below.

Grayson swung around. “Yes, yes! Down here!”

He moved to the cliff’s edge and looked over the side. About ten feet down and maybe sixty feet above a rocky stream, a young

girl wearing a blue riding helmet was caught in a thicket of hemlock, their roots protruding from the cliff like shaggy paws.

Icy panic squeezed at Grayson's throat, but he forced it down, calling out, "Everything will be all right. What's your name, sweetheart?"

"My horse fell on the ice!"

"I know, honey. He's fine, I have him right here. What's your name?"

"Kim," she answered.

Grayson looked at the horse. He wished he could use its reins to secure the girl and pull her up, but they were too short. "Don't worry, Kim, we'll get you out of there."

He could remove the horse's reins, hold one end, and toss the other to Kim. That would ensure she didn't slip from her fragile perch and plunge into the stream, and it would also give him time to use his cell phone to call for help.

"What's your horse's name?" he asked.

"Dakota."

"Okay, Kim. I'm going to toss you Dakota's reins."

"No!" she yelled. "Use his lead rope, that's better."

"I've got it," Sandra said.

Grayson turned to see her removing the rope from the saddle. He took it and peered back down at Kim. She was on her stomach, her hands clinging to the thicket.

"Tie the rope to Dakota's saddle and throw me the other end," she called. "He'll pull me up."

Grayson tossed her the rope, and she managed to hitch the loop under her arms. Then he swiftly tied the other end to the saddle horn.

"Let's go, Dakota," Grayson coaxed.

He stood by the gelding, tugging the reins, his temples pounding. Dakota's feet danced in place, but he refused to move. Grayson grabbed the bridle and yanked hard. The horse took two steps back, the rope snapped taut, and then he stopped.

Sandra, lying on her stomach at the edge of the cliff, looked over. "No, keep going!"

Grayson gave a hard jerk on the bridle, and the horse backed up a little more. "Good boy, easy...easy."

"Hold on, you're doing fine," Sandra shouted down to Kim.

Grayson heard an engine rev and looked over Dakota's back to see a battered green pickup round the bend and barrel toward him in the small turnout. The horse's ears twitched as he pranced nervously. The driver hit the brakes, and the pickup's rear end swept near the horse, stirring slush and spitting gravel.

Grayson gripped the bridle firmly to keep the panicked horse from bolting. The pickup's dented door swung open and a leather-faced man in a crumpled cowboy hat jumped out.

"What the hell ya doing with my granddaughter's horse?"

Grayson detected a drunken slur.

The man charged at him, clawing for the reins like a maniac, his glassy eyes raging. "Where's my—"

The horse jerked its head up, snorted, and swung its hindquarters around, hitting Grayson's side and almost knocking him to the ground. The man staggered, and Grayson shouted, "Hey! Get the hell—there's a girl down there. Back off!"

"Don't tell me what to do!" The man lurched for the reins.

The two struggled, each trying to control Dakota.

"Goddammit, you're scaring the horse," Grayson yelled. "We're rescuing a—"

"Aaahhhh!" Kim cried.

"Stop the horse!" Sandra shouted. "The rope slipped off one arm."

"That's my granddaughter!" the man hollered as Dakota neighed and pranced. "Gimme those reins!"

Grayson, almost blinded by his migraine, saw in horror the steel-shod hooves flash above him and chop downward like sledgehammers. One hoof caught him in a glancing and painful blow on the shoulder, knocking him into the slush, as the reins slipped from his hands.

The man lunged for them, missed, slipped, and fell.

The horse reared onto its hind legs, and the rope's empty loop sailed up from below and into the air.

"Oh my God!" Sandra shrieked. "She's gone!"

CHAPTER 2

Grayson and Sandra watched the ambulance maneuver up the snow-covered gravel road from the creek below them. It carried the body of young Kim, who an hour before had plunged into the frigid rock-filled waters to her death.

The police told Grayson and Sandra to wait by the squad car while they took the grandfather's statement.

The two hardly spoke, still numb over the girl's death. Ten minutes later, one of the officers climbed up from the stream, paused a moment, and put a hand on one knee to catch his breath. He was a good thirty pounds heavier than Grayson, who, at six-one, tipped in at a solid one-ninety.

Grayson watched nervously as the officer approached his Mercedes. After peering inside, he bent down to inspect the front end. He stood, arched his back, and started toward Grayson and Sandra with a stern, no nonsense face. Grayson's mouth twisted, and he said under his breath, "I'll do the talking. I don't want you getting cited for not wearing your glasses."

The policeman took their driver's licenses, his dark eyes checking each closely. "Long Island," he said. "You folks are a ways from home. By the looks of your gear, you plan on doing some skiin' and shootin'."

"Not at the same time," Grayson said, then immediately wished he hadn't tried being humorous.

The cop gave him a cold stare. "I didn't think so." He tossed his head toward the car. "That Perazzi in the back seat. Factory choke?"

Grayson nodded. "Nothing fancy. I only shoot skeet. We were on our way to Miller's lodge. It's not far—"

"I know where it is."

Grayson spotted the crazy grandfather talking with another officer. The man pointed up the hillside, then to Grayson's car.

"That poor girl," Sandra said. It's awful, it's just—" She shuddered. "Is that man her grandfather? That's what he yelled."

The officer nodded. "Gus Stockard. He's a local. I'd like to hear from you two what happened." He put their licenses in his shirt pocket and took out a notebook and pen.

Sandra peered at the ground. Grayson started, "I drove around a bend and saw the horse on its back, struggling on the road. I stopped and—"

"You say the horse was lying on the road?"

"That's right. I had to swerve to avoid hitting it."

"I see." The officer clicked his pen and began writing. "Go on."

"I pulled over and ran to the horse." Grayson told him all that followed.

The officer stopped writing and turned to Sandra. "You've been awfully quiet, Mrs. Bolt. I saw a bottle of champagne in your car."

"It's our anniversary."

"So you decided to celebrate up here in the Catskills, drink some bubbly, get in a little skiin', some skeet shootin'?"

"That's right," Grayson said.

The officer turned to him with a scowl. "I wasn't asking you, Mr. Bolt."

"Yes," Sandra said. "We come here often. They know us up at the lodge."

"Your husband said that you came upon the horse lying in the road."

"That's right. He was trying to get up from an ice patch that he must have slipped on."

"Then what happened?"

Sandra cleared her throat. "My husband slammed on the brakes, and we skidded past the horse."

"Your car didn't hit the horse?"

"It certainly did not."

He squinted at her. "You sure?"

She held his stare. "Positive."

He peered at his notes and paged back. "That's right, your husband stated, 'I had to swerve to avoid hitting it.' That's what you said, isn't it, Mr. Bolt?"

Heat rose to Grayson's face. "That's correct."

The officer put away his notebook and pen. "That's interesting, because Mr. Stockard has a different version of events. He said that you—" He pointed to Sandra. "—were driving and struck the horse with your car."

Sandra's eyes flicked wide. Grayson shook his head, protesting. "He wasn't even here. How would he know? And did you happen to notice he's been drinking?"

"He lives right up there and saw everything." The officer pointed up the hill. "Sorry to spoil your anniversary, ma'am, but I'm going to have to take you both down to the station." He whistled and hailed his partner over.

"Wait a minute," Grayson burst. "He's lying. You looked at my car. Did you see any sign of—"

The officer opened the rear door of his police car. "Get in."

Grayson and Sandra looked at each other but climbed inside. Stockard appeared and pressed his face, twisted and hateful, against Grayson's window. "Bastard murderers," he yelled. "Don't think you're rid of me. She was all I had left and ya took her away. I'll get even. I'll get good and even."

A cold knot gripped Grayson's heart. He turned to Sandra, her mouth agape, threw his arms around her, and the car took off.

CHAPTER 3

Three ladies,” announced the chubby-faced Newark police chief. Foley laid down his cards and worked an ivory toothpick in his mouth. “And what do you know—a pair of treys.” Flashing a grin broader than the poker table, he added, “I guess that’s a full house.”

The tan-faced golf pro tossed down his cards. “Lucky bastard.” He rose to leave.

“He’d rather be lucky than good,” Grayson quipped, scooping up the cards. He hosted a monthly poker game with a few regulars at the private Knickerbocker Club on New York’s Fifth Avenue. He wasn’t the sharpest player at the table, but the game provided a good way to unwind, and he never lost more than pocket change. Over the years, he’d accumulated a faithful group of guys, most of them professional acquaintances from law firms or fellow golfers.

Others stubbed out their cigars, got up, and reached for their coats.

Grayson signaled Police Chief Foley to stick around for a nightcap. He wanted to express thanks for the chief getting him off the hook with the police, and also to tell him about his chat with Mario Costanzo. They ordered brandy and retreated to comfortable lounge chairs.

“Costanzo called again,” Grayson said.

The chief’s eyebrows rode up.

“Said to name a price,” Grayson added. “He’s desperate.”

“He’s also a mobster. You’d best avoid him like a Bronx alley. Let him find another tax lawyer dumb enough to hook up with his kind.”

“I told him emphatically that I’m not interested.” A waiter dropped off their drinks. “I didn’t get a chance to thank you the other day for getting me off the hook with the Catskill police.”

“They couldn’t have held you, even if I hadn’t known the chief. Not without evidence.”

“I admitted at the station that I wasn’t driving. With an eye witness, I didn’t feel comfortable lying.”

“What eye witness?”

“The little girl’s wacko grandfather, Stockard. A cop told me he lives up on the ridge within sight of the road. He told the cops he saw Sandra hit the horse. Said he heard tires squeal and looked down. Later he admitted that he only assumed the horse was hit. Saw it sprawled out and me getting out of the car on the passenger side. After your call, the cops were nice enough to us. Said that Stockard’s a known drunk and troublemaker. They gave Sandra a warning about driving without her glasses. Not a peep to me about lying.”

“A goddamn shame about the little girl.”

“Stockard’s threats made it all the more grisly. He screamed something about getting even.”

“Think he was serious?”

“From the look in his eyes, damn serious.”

“I think you should report him, then. It’s against the law to threaten someone. What exactly did he say?”

“Oh, nothing that would hold up in court. It was all vague and said in the heat of the moment. I don’t think the police would take it seriously.”

“I take it seriously. And I think you should, too.”



Grayson knocked off work early the next afternoon to take Sandra to dinner. She deserved it after what she’d been through. Not quite the weekend he’d planned.

“Cab, Mr. Bolt?” Ahmad, the doorman, asked, rolling a coin across his knuckles.

“Penn Station right away. Wait—make that Flower Madness, on West Fourteenth.” Flowers always brightened Sandra’s spirits.

Ahmad dashed to the curb, arms waving. “Late again, Mr. Bolt?”

“If I’m not late, I’m not working hard enough.” Grayson slipped Ahmad a tip and hopped into the cab.

If flowers lifted Sandra's mood, work lifted Grayson's. He'd spent the morning solving a client's complex tax problem. The client, a Puerto Rican, had invested his family's savings in a Jersey scrap metal business but had been advised by his brother-in-law that cheating the tax system was the American way. Fortunately for the immigrant, Grayson had found a loophole even more arcane than the man's phony tax form. But Grayson's fee would have left the man's checkbook low enough for him to kiss the ground without stooping, so he took the case pro bono.

Concern for others was something Grayson learned from his father. As a boy, Grayson could hit a golf ball farther, hurl a baseball faster, and think quicker than any of his peers. His father drilled into him that others hadn't had the advantages he had. And to keep his head on straight, Grayson received only a modest allowance as a kid, had to pay his own way through college, and spent two hours every week volunteering at the local food shelf.

The challenge of winning, especially under pressure, excited him far more than money. But he liked money too, and rich people getting leaned on by the IRS paid cheerfully for his expertise. Anyone gambling on the crap tables of the legal system ran to Grayson, and nobody threw hotter dice.

The taxi turned onto West Fourteen Street, pulled over, and dropped Grayson off. "Wait here," he told the driver. "I'll be back." He sidestepped a group of businessmen entering a Turkish deli and dashed into the flower shop.

"Mr. Bolt, what a surprise." Nagina, the owner, frowned. "Did you phone in an order?"

"No, I'm here spur of the moment." He took a deep breath, savoring the thick, sweet fragrance of exotic tiger lilies and classic roses.

"And how's your mother? Enjoying her visit?"

"She was only here a couple days. She's back in Florida now. Listen, I'm taking Sandra out to dinner and I'd like to surprise her with something."

"Roses, of course. Maybe I throw in some orchids. They whisper elegance." She pointed to a photograph of herself with President Clinton. "He was here, you know. Fifteen years ago." In a hushed tone she added, "The flowers were for—"

"I know, Hillary." Grayson had heard the story many times, and often thought to say, "Don't bet on it."

Nagina handed him the bouquet filled with romantic reds and a hint of passionate orange.

"They're beautiful," Grayson said. "Slap an extra twenty on the bill."

The cabbie dropped Grayson at Penn Station. Forty minutes later, he jumped off the train at Westbury, Long Island, loped through the parking lot with his briefcase and flowers, and climbed into his car.

He smiled, thinking back to when he'd first laid eyes on Sandra at a UN luncheon. An interpreter with curly black hair, full arching eyebrows, and enough sex appeal to stampede an assembly of ambassadors, she still had a figure that belonged in a Ferrari.

He turned onto his street where his ten-year-old son Troy swung a golf club in the front yard. As Grayson parked and climbed out of his car, Troy ran to him. "Hey, Dad, you shoulda seen me at practice. I changed my grip like you showed me and didn't hook one shot."

"Fantastic!" Grayson ruffled the boy's hair. "And your chipping, did you work on that like I told you?"

"I was gonna but ran out of balls."

"You want to play like a pro, right?"

"Yeah," Troy said, picking up a golf towel from the ground.

Grayson ruffled the boy's hair again. "Then listen to your coach, okay?"

"Hey, Dad," Jim hollered, scampering from the house, "make Troy give me back my Nintendo."

"Tell him to stop coming into my room," Troy said, wiping grass off his club.

Grayson tugged the bill of eight-year-old Jim's baseball cap. "Hey, sport, stay out of your brother's room. Troy, give him his Nintendo."

"Troy!" Sandra yelled from the porch, her face stern. "I told you to get in here, now! You too, Jim." She shooed them into the house and hurried to Grayson.

"What's the problem?"

She crossed her arms tightly. "He was here. I saw his pickup."

Grayson's heart clawed its way into his throat. "You mean Stockard's?"

She nodded rapidly. "It was green, with a dent in the door. It crept by no more than ten minutes ago."

Grayson's gaze swept up and down the street, but by now Stockard had disappeared. His stomach twisted, both from fear and from rage. This was the third time the bereaved grandfather had driven by their home, and he was always long gone by the time Grayson returned, leaving no trace behind but Sandra's lingering fear. The worst part was Grayson's utter inability to do anything about it. Driving by a person's house was hardly reason to have somebody arrested.

Grayson feared that, by the time he had evidence of criminal intent, it might be too late.



Grayson and Sandra stayed in that evening and ordered Chinese food. Grayson couldn't stop himself from continually stepping outside to look up and down the street for Stockard. The man was never around—only the troublesome whiff of his presence.

Sandra wiped off the table. "Sweetheart, we need to do something about that man. After all, he did threaten us."

She tried to sound practical, but there was an undercurrent of fear in her voice that Grayson recognized all too painfully. He recalled Stockard's words. *I'll get even. I'll get good and even.* What would make them even? With growing worries, he thought of his two sons.

"I'll have him investigated, maybe seek a restraining order," he said. "Meanwhile, let's keep the kids inside." He took her hands and tried a comforting smile. "Some anniversary, huh?"

She brushed the hair back from his ear. "I never got to give you the surprise I promised."

"What did I miss out on?"

"I was going to get you that Rolex I saw you try on in the lodge gift shop the last time we were there."

"This nightmare will be over soon, and we'll celebrate our anniversary in Hawaii. You can surprise me there." He kissed her cheek and strolled into the family room where the boys were doing homework. "Hey, guys, I have to talk to you about something. But first, have either of you seen a green pickup around the neighborhood recently?"

They both said no.

“Troy, how about when you were swinging your clubs in the front yard?”

Troy shook his head. “Is there a serial killer stalking the neighborhood?”

“Maybe a rapist,” Jim said. “I saw on the news—”

“Nothing like that,” Grayson said, trying to laugh, but unable to make it work. “The grandfather of the little girl who was killed is upset, and your mother saw his pickup around. So we don’t want you outside playing for a while.”

“What’s the big deal?” Troy asked.

“No big deal, but until I find out more about him, we need to play it cool.”

Troy scowled, kicking at the carpet.

“Okay, you can play outside, but confine your practice to the back yard.”

“But my clubs are right by—”

“Troy! You heard me.”

“Fine,” Troy muttered. “But this is stupid. Nothing is going to happen, anyway.”

CHAPTER 4

The next morning, Grayson was in court when his secretary, Elizabeth, marched into his office, carrying mail, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *New York Times*. The office was a Manhattan loft located on trendy Great Jones Street. An original Salvador Dali hung over an imported black leather couch. Elizabeth placed the bundle on the credenza under the window and flipped the antique desk calendar to the correct date.

As she pulled Grayson's door shut, a gruff voice startled her from behind.

"Good morning," growled a round-faced stranger, standing in her office. The gentleman was on the heavier side, though the tailoring on his double-breasted suit almost concealed the fact. His dark eyes were set deep into his skull and his thick black hair was perfectly coiffed.

Elizabeth patted her hair and eased in behind her desk. "Good morning, may I help you?"

"I need to speak to Mr. Bolt," he said, his voice hard.

"I'm afraid he had an early court date. Do you have an appointment?"

He glanced at his watch. "It's no longer early. When's he expected?"

She regarded him while he chewed the inside of his cheeks. "Why don't you leave me your name and number?"

"The name's Costanzo, and my number's that chair." He threw a side nod. "Tell me the minute he gets in." He withdrew a paperback from his hip pocket and sat down.

Twenty minutes later the man's cell phone rang. He put the book in his lap and wrestled a phone from his coat, smiling as he looked down at it. "Hi, Ma. How you feeling? They feed you a good breakfast?"

Grayson's phone line lit up, indicating he was in his office. He had entered through the side door. Elizabeth eased out of her chair and slipped inside. "A Mr. Costanzo's here to see you."

Grayson nearly dropped the case file he was holding. "What?"
"He's very persistent."

"I've already told him I won't take his case. Get rid of him."

Elizabeth returned to her desk, trying to devise a tactful way to blow the man off. She waited until Costanzo had finished his call, then spoke up, "You know, Mr. Bolt is *very* busy. I'll tell him you were here."

"Here and waiting," he said, his nose buried in his book.

Her phone buzzed. She turned her chair away from the man. "Right away," she said softly and hung up. She stepped quietly to a cabinet, withdrew a file, and entered Grayson's office, closing the door behind her. She handed him the file. "Mr. Costanzo refuses—"

The door opened behind her.



Grayson looked up from writing to see the man standing in the doorway. His eyes were cold, black, and not particularly friendly. The man clumped over to the desk. "I'm Mario Costanzo." He glanced at Elizabeth and jerked his head at the door, a gesture that he seemed used to. He turned back to Grayson. "I'll only take a minute."

Words seemed to generate from deep in his throat, giving his voice a hardness you could etch with a laser.

Elizabeth stared at Grayson with her mouth open.

He tossed his pen onto the desk. "It's all right, Elizabeth," he told her, and she retreated to the other room. "Okay, Mr. Costanzo. One minute."

Grayson gestured to a chair and didn't try to wipe the impatience off his face.

Costanzo sat down and bent forward. "Mr. Bolt, I'd like you to reconsider your decision."

Grayson shook his head. "Look, I've already explained, I have a strict policy to maintain a low profile. It's something my clients require. To represent you would be a violation of that policy."

"I want to make you an offer."

“*Mr. Costanzo,*” Grayson said, with an edge, “you’ll only get yourself out of breath. I’ve told you, I’m not—”

Costanzo raised his hand, reached into a breast pocket of his fine blue suit, and withdrew an envelope. A thick envelope. He placed it on Grayson’s desk and gave it a light tap. “For two minutes of your time. That’s all I ask. I want nothing for nothing.”

Grayson glanced at the bulging envelope and knew it must be crammed with cash. Maybe twenty grand.

“You already know the basic details of my situation,” Costanzo said, “so I won’t spend time discussing them now.”

Grayson nodded and brushed a piece of lint from his sleeve.

“I have four tax experts working on my case, and they’re failing me. I’m not a lawyer, but I know—” He tapped his temple. “—*know*, there’s a way out of this.”

Grayson picked up a pen and drummed it on a legal pad. Costanzo was right. He simply hadn’t found a lawyer good enough.

Costanzo rubbed his hands together like men do when they’re nervous and want something. “Here’s my offer. You review my case and tell me how my lawyers can beat these bastards. That’s it. You deal only with me. No one will know of your involvement. That I promise.”

Grayson eyed the envelope again. Tempting. He wasn’t going to lie to himself about that. He might already be a successful lawyer, but anyone could find use for a \$20,000 surprise bonus. *And*, he rationalized, *it’s not like you haven’t helped sketchy characters before*. But those clients were different. Those clients were business owners trying to save as much of their income as possible. They weren’t mob bosses trying to outsmart the FBI. They weren’t alleged criminals accused of assassinating their rivals, running prostitution rings, and distributing hard drugs to poor neighborhoods. Was that the kind of client he wanted to help?

Chief Foley was right. Best to stay away from this hood, no matter how many Ben Franklins he offered. Grayson stood and shook his head. “Sorry, can’t do that.”

Costanzo leaped to his feet. “It’ll be our secret.” His mouth twitched. “You look at my case. If it’s hopeless—” He shrugged. “—so be it. Your job’s done. I’ll pay anything. The sky’s the limit.”

Grayson walked around his desk, picked up the envelope, and handed it to Costanzo. “That’s not something I can do.” He placed

a hand on Costanzo's shoulder and ushered him toward the door. "Goodbye, Mr. Costanzo."

Costanzo jerked away from Grayson's touch. "You just made the biggest mistake of your life, Mr. hotshot lawyer." He stormed from the office, knocking the files off Elizabeth's desk as he swept by, and slammed the door behind him.

"Goodness," Elizabeth murmured as she knelt to gather the papers. "What an unpleasant man."

"That he is," Grayson said, bending down to help her.

"He seemed awfully upset," she added, nervousness creeping into her voice.

"Don't worry," Grayson assured her. "He's just a lot of hot air."

But inside, he wasn't so sure.

CHAPTER 5

The next day, Grayson walked into his office and saw an envelope without a return address on top of his pile of mail. Inside, a single playing card: the ace of spades.

“That son of a bitch!” he spat as the import of the card struck home.

He picked up the phone and dialed private detective Harold Wilson, a friend and former head of the Pinkerton Detective Agency.

“Someone named Stockard is getting personal with me, and I need him investigated, pronto, Hal,” Grayson explained. “The bastard’s stalking my family, even sent me an ace of spades.”

“The death card,” Hal stated sagely. “That’s a strong smoke signal. You’re smart to have him checked out. Give me the particulars and twenty-four hours.”

Hal was true to his word. A day later, Grayson’s secretary buzzed. “Detective Wilson’s on line one.”

Grayson picked up. “Well, manage to learn anything?”

“Your boy’s a doozy.”

“Let’s hear it.”

“I’m sending a detailed email attachment, but here’s the highlights. Let’s see, he was booted out of the army as a sergeant. Has a few drunk and disorderly convictions. Did some hard time. He’s currently holding down a job with the traffic engineering department.”

“What’d he do time for?”

“Killing his son. Seems a few years back his daughter-in-law phoned him and pleaded for help. The son was chasing her through the house. Stockard, who’d been drinking, hauled his ass over there, and by now the son was clobbering the wife pretty bad. Stockard dragged him off, but the daughter-in-law had a change of

heart and started fighting him. That must have really pissed Stockard off, because he threw her down the stairs, which caused a miscarriage.”

“My God, where was Kim during all of this?”

“With the daughter-in-law’s parents.”

“What about the son?”

“Stockard choked him to death. Must be strong as a bear. A couple years later his wife and daughter-in-law died in an automobile accident. Subsequently, the maternal grandparents gained custody of Kim. Stockard, the paternal grandparent, was granted monthly visitation privileges.”

“I see.” *So little Kim was visiting Stockard the day she died.* “That’s it?”

“That’s the meat and potatoes of it. If he’s harassing you, I suggest filing a restraining order.”

“Yeah, that sounds like the best plan,” Grayson agreed. He was about to say so long when a thought popped into his head. “Say, do me a favor and find out what you can on Mario Costanzo.” Since turning the mobster down, and then being threatened by him, Grayson felt not just alarmed, but frightened.

“There’s a lot to know. You want I should start with baby pictures?”

“A brief email will be fine. I just want a handle on the guy.”



The following morning, Grayson stayed home and called his assistant, Thompson. “I’m not coming in for a few days. With all that’s been happening with this Stockard psycho, I want to keep close to my family.”

“No problem. I’ll hold down the fort.”

Grayson hung up, checked his computer, and saw an email from Detective Wilson. The subject line said *Mario Costanzo*. Grayson scanned it. Costanzo was into loan sharking, gambling, prostitution, narcotics, identity theft—cyber and otherwise—and murder. No personal vices except sports betting. Expected to be indicted for tax fraud.

That’s one nasty character. Grayson headed downstairs and saw Troy watching cartoons. “Hey, bub, why aren’t you ready for school?”

“No school, Dad. It’s teacher’s day.”

Grayson thought a minute. “I have the day off, too. What do you say we get in a round?”

An hour later, they were on the driving range, preparing to warm up.

“I want to watch you hit a few,” Grayson said.

He yanked out a club from Troy’s bag and reached in for his glove. When he pulled it out, a golf ball fell onto the concrete. He caught it on the bounce, looked at it, and sucked in a surprised breath. It had the ace of spades stamped on it. “Troy, where did you get this ball?”

“I got a whole bunch. They all have the same cool picture.”

“Where’d they come from?”

“Some old man.”

“What man?”

“Never saw him before. Yesterday, I was over there putting and he came up and gave ’em to me. Said I deserved them. Neat, huh?”

CHAPTER 6

Grayson headed north on I-87 into the mountains toward Stockard's house. Before filing a restraining order, he wanted to assess Stockard in person. Maybe he could reason with him, maybe not. Either way, he wanted to know whether this bastard planned to simply harass or actually attempt serious harm.

He turned onto Stockard's snow-covered gravel drive, parked, and stepped from the car under a sky of yellow haze. The air was cold, windy, and sharp as needles. He spotted Stockard in the barn and treaded inside, wondering if he should have brought his gun.

"I want to talk to you," he said firmly.

Stockard gave him a side-glance when the car door closed but ignored him now while he fed Dakota and another horse. The man stood lanky, with a dust-colored mustache and leathery, sun-stained face and forehead ending at a hat line where the skin glowed white. Faded jeans hung off his narrow hips and were tucked into snakeskin cowboy boots. Probably somewhere in his sixties. Hard to tell with his type.

Stockard threw down his pitchfork and strode past Grayson and out of the barn. "Follow me," he said, throwing the words over his shoulder.

Grayson trailed behind, gripping his collar against the cold. Stockard scuffed toward the house like a caged animal that had paced out the short distance many times.

The ranch-style house perched on a plot of high ground with large shade trees and a vast view of the valley and road below.

Stockard clomped up the porch. "Come in," he said, without looking back.

Near the front door, an American flag fluttered and snapped in the wind. Inside, the living room was small and dark, filled with

wooden furniture. Its stench reminded Grayson of early morning in a saloon. Stained brown cushions covered a pine couch, and a female wrestling magazine sat on a cluttered coffee table with carved legs.

Stockard gestured for Grayson to sit by the window in an oak armchair. The curtains had brown splatters. Probably tobacco spittle. Beyond the fireplace, a hallway led off to the back. The house was like Stockard himself, spooky and prone to dark recesses. The old man pressed his shoulder against the stone fireplace and tugged a fat cigar from a fur-lined waistcoat pocket. "You wanna talk. Talk."

Awkwardly, Grayson cleared his throat. "First, I want you to know that not a day passes when Mrs. Bolt and I don't grieve for your granddaughter. But so help me, God—" He held up his hand as though swearing. "—Sandra did not hit Dakota with the car. He'd already fallen onto the road. We stopped and tried to help. As for Kim—" He took a breath and released it. "It was a tragic accident." *And if it weren't for your idiocy, it wouldn't have happened.*

Stockard looked down at his unlit cigar and stroked it with his thumb but said nothing. His free hand scraped, scraped against whisker stubble. He looked at Grayson. "Have ya seen combat, Mr. Bolt?" He bit off the end of his cigar and spit it onto the floor, missing the fireplace.

"What?"

"You heard me." Stockard struck a match on the fireplace and short-puffed the cigar. He threw the match into the blaze and hooked a slab-sized thumb under his thick leather belt. "Ever been on the battlefield?"

"South China Sea. But what the hell does—"

"Navy! I said battlefield, not a fuckin' boat."

Grayson's face grew hot.

Stockard blew out a huge puff of smoke that billowed like a ship's gun. "Tell ya what I done." He jammed the cigar into his mouth. "I done real fightin'. Vietnam. Two tours. Leveled thirteen villages in six days. Killed more gooks than you got brains."

Grayson's face grew even hotter. "What do you want from me, Stockard?"

"Whatsamatter, don't wanna talk about fightin'?" Stockard smoothed a finger down each side of a drooping mustache. "How

'bout dyin'? That's somethin' you know about. To die fightin' fer your country—well, that's dyin' ya can't blame anyone for except maybe piss-ass gooks, and hell, ya can't blame them for doin' their job. Another kind of dyin' is up close and personal. My son died two years ago when—”

“I know about your son. What's your point?”

“Ah, lawyer-man's been snooping.” Stockard's lips drew back from yellow teeth. “You see, we have a little different situation here.” He flicked a tubular ash onto his boot that blew away as he strutted up to Grayson and leaned into his face, the searing cigar tip inches from Grayson's nose. “The way I see it, if ya hadn't come along, Kim would still be alive.”

Struggling to hold his temper, Grayson knocked Stockard's hand away. “That's absurd and you know it. We were trying to save the poor child's life.”

Stockard straightened. “You and the missus will be held accountable. An' jus' gettin' even don't settle the score.”

Any feelings of sympathy evaporated from Grayson's mind as hot anger took over. He got to his feet, prepared to give Stockard a hard shove. But Stockard stepped back.

“Don't fuck with me, Stockard, and don't ever approach my son again.” Grayson jabbed his finger into Stockard's chest. “I'm not a piss-ass gook, and if you harass my family, you'll get real fighting, close and personal. If you want something, tell me, because mailing death cards and giving my son golf balls won't get you shit.”

Stockard laughed in his face.

Grayson turned and headed out the door, and Stockard followed him down the steps. “You'll get yours, big shot. Because if ya hadn't messed with Dakota after hittin' him with your car, he woulda picked his self up from the road and come home. I woulda found Kim and had her rescued proper. Not by a fuckin' yahoo with a rope, trying to cover up his missus's sins and be a hero.” He spat and hurled his cigar. It bounced and sputtered at Grayson's feet.

Grayson yanked his car door open and climbed in, slammed the door and hit the engine with a roar. “You stay away from my family,” Grayson repeated, voice strained. “I'm filing a restraining order against you, you understand? If you come near us again, they'll throw your sorry ass in jail.”

Stockard's mouth twisted into an obscene sneer, as though he was laughing at a private joke. He sauntered over and gripped the chrome windowsill with strapping hands. Grayson imagined them around Stockard's son's throat. The man bent down. Blood vessels pulsed in his temples. "You don't scare me, tough guy. I'll see that you suffer plenty." His voice was little more than the icy whisper of an obscene phone caller.

A cold knot twisted around Grayson's heart, the same one that he'd felt when Stockard put his face to the police car window.

"Remember," Stockard hissed, "you and the missus dealt your own hand." A smile played at the corner of his lips. "I'll bet she loves tickling your zipper and getting put to bed wet." He banged his palm on the car's roof. "See ya around, lawyer-man."

Grayson stomped on the gas, spitting snow and gravel. He gripped the wheel hard to keep his hands from shaking. He'd need more than a restraining order to feel safe from this monster.

CHAPTER 7

At eight a.m. sharp, the doorbell rang, and Grayson scrambled down the stairs. “I’ll get it.” He opened the door to reveal a trim middle-aged man with a snappy mustache and thick wavy hair. “Good morning, Mr. Bolt,” the man said, flashing a badge. “I’m Fred Belton. Chief Foley sent me.”

“Come in. Foley fill you in on everything?”

“Yes, sir. I’m to accompany your wife and children when off the premises.”

“Are you armed?”

“Armed and experienced, sir. Former secret service.”

For the next three days, Fred accompanied Sandra when she ran errands and drove the boys to and from school. Both the bodyguard and Sandra stayed with Troy at golf practice and Jim at baseball workouts. No one saw or heard from Stockard.

On the fourth day, Grayson worked from home. He planned to pick Troy up from school and take him to his golf practice. Maybe they’d even get in nine holes together.



Sandra yelled upstairs to Grayson in his office that it was time to pick up Troy. Five minutes later, when her husband still hadn’t emerged, she climbed the stairs to see what was taking him so long. She found him on the phone, talking business. She pointed to her watch, and he nodded but continued his conversation.

Fred and I will go, she mouthed, and he again nodded distractedly, turning back to his call.

She rolled up to Troy’s school under a dull, gunmetal sky. He came running when she beeped, hopping in the backseat behind

the bodyguard. “Hi, Fred. Mom, I thought Dad was picking me up.”

“He was held up on the phone.”

“Gee.”

She glanced back at him. His head hung down. “He’ll meet you at the course later, sweetie. You’ll still get to play golf with him.”

His face brightened. “Great! I’ll be all warmed up. You should play with us sometime, Mom.”

“I’d like that, but Canadians don’t grow up learning to play golf.”

“That’s okay, Dad’s a good golf partner.”

She gazed at him in the mirror and smiled. “You really like playing golf with your dad, don’t you?”

“For *sure*. Especially when I beat him on a hole.”

“Beating your dad’s important, huh?”

“Sure. I try to beat everybody. That’s what counts.”

Sandra pursed her lips. She disliked that Grayson stressed winning so much with the boys. Grayson’s dad had been that way with him, but she believed there were more important values, such as simply taking pleasure in the activity. “Can you enjoy playing if you don’t win?”

“Mom, the only reason to play is to win.”

She sighed. There was no point arguing. “Well, sweetheart, I wish you luck beating your dad.”

“I can hit my driver over a hundred yards. Well, almost. But on a short hole, if I get on the green, and my putter’s really smokin’, I’ll get a birdie and maybe beat him. Dad’s as good as Tiger Woods ever was. So if I can beat Dad, I can—”

WHAM!

Fred’s airbag exploded, and Sandra’s seat belt cinched against her chest. Her head jerked right. Blurred images swished before her eyes: cars, storefronts, a bus. A silver SUV came at her from the other side, tires screeching, horn blaring—

BAM!

Then there was nothing.

CHAPTER 8

Clouds drifted across the pale blue sky like barges, and shadows hung from ancient oaks like curtains. The mourners walked from their cars up the cemetery's grassy rise in groups of two and three, or clusters of four and five. The women dressed in overcoats. The men wore suits or sport coats.

They had come from a Requiem Mass at St. Mary's Cathedral, with its gothic columns reaching to God for grace, and gathered around the gravesite surrounded by tulips.

Grayson stood between Chief Foley and his mother, who was holding Jim's hand. Jim stared at the coffin stoically. He hadn't shed any tears, not when he first heard the news and not now, during the funeral. Sandra's mother worked a rosary between her fingers. A priest faced the gathering, his back to the twin graves. Grayson cast his eyes beyond the parked cars to a small dirt road that veered off into an apple orchard and thought of Troy. Troy liked apple pie, but Grayson couldn't recall if he himself did.

Dreamily, he began humming, "Don't sit under the apple tree with anyone else but me, anyone else—"

"Grayson!" his mother said under her breath, elbowing his side.

He stopped humming and thought of the sun, fat and powerful, burning the back of his neck. Sweat erupted from his pores, and he swabbed his face with a handkerchief.

The priest was still speaking. "...and may their souls rest in peace." He sprinkled holy water onto the caskets draped in a cascade of trumpet-shaped flowers.

Grayson stared at the coffins, and all of a sudden he saw Sandra and Troy's lifeless bodies inside. Their faces were powdered and made up by the mortician to look like they were simply sleeping, but Grayson could see the sadness at the corners of their mouths, the grief of being cheated out of life.

“Oh, my God,” he murmured.

Chief Foley leaned toward him and whispered, “What’s wrong?”

Grayson felt panic welling up inside him, threatening to erupt. “I can’t do this. I can’t *do* this!” Heads turned his way, but he didn’t care. “This isn’t right! It should have happened to *me*, not to them! My life is nothing without Sandra!”

Chief Foley put his hand on Grayson’s arm. “Grayson, listen to me. You have a son, Jim. *He’s* your life now.”

Grayson shook his head, jerking away from Foley’s touch. “You don’t understand. I should have protected them! Should have—Oh, *God!*”

His internal fortitude gave way, and he buried his eyes in his sleeve as sobs wracked his body. He didn’t care what anyone else thought. He just needed to release the pain that had been steadily building ever since he got the phone call from the police station. Yet the more he wept, the more pain flooded over his heart, as if he was drowning in a sea of black despair.

He felt a small hand grasp his own, and he looked down. Jim stared up at him with wide, solemn eyes. “It’ll be okay, Dad,” he whispered. “We’ve still got each other.”

Grayson dropped to his knees and hugged him, burying his face in Jim’s shoulder. His son was right. They still had each other. And he’d be damned if he’d let anything threaten them ever again.



Five days later, Grayson sat slumped at his desk, holding a framed photo in his hands. In the picture, a younger and happier version of himself embraced his two sons, and Sandra looked on adoringly. It was his family as it was supposed to be: innocent and happy—something that would never be possible again.

His phone rang, jarring him out of his thoughts. He grabbed for it and heard Chief Foley’s familiar voice. “How you holding up, pal?”

“I...um...I saw the psychiatrist you recommended.”

“Yeah, and?”

“He asked what I thought about my outburst at the funeral, I guess to see if I was a nut case.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That I saw their bodies in the coffins. That I really wanted God to take me. That I believed in Him.” Grayson relayed the awkward session as he made his way to the bar, phone in hand. “I told him that God had talked to me when I was ten. The doc said I had obsessive delusions brought on by guilt.” He plunked ice into a glass and mixed a scotch and soda. “Guilt or no guilt, I should have been the one in that car, not Sandra.”

The chief took in a long breath. “What about Jim? How’s he doing?”

Grayson sipped his scotch. “He’s in Florida with my mother. She thought a few days away from here would be good for him.” He peered into his drink. “I feel terrible about Fred.”

“He was a fine man, but a bodyguard knows his life is always on the line.”

“I’ve been thinking about something, and I don’t want you to think I’m off my rocker again, but I believe Stockard caused the accident.”

“Grayson, when a car gets hit broadside by two others, from two different directions, that’s an accident. Sandra must have run a red light.”

“Sandra was always a careful driver, especially with the kids in the car. Stockard blames me for his granddaughter’s death. He sent me the ace of spades and gave Troy golf balls with that fucking image stamped on them, and when I went to his house he repeated his threat quite emphatically.”

“I’ll be retiring, so I can’t help, but talk to the locals, and they’ll investigate.”

“That won’t work. No evidence, no witnesses. It’s my word against Stockard’s.”

“You never know what the cops could turn up. Give them a try.”

Grayson sipped his drink. He’d give something else a try.

CHAPTER 9

The next afternoon at his desk, Grayson's chest felt caved in, compressed by an invisible force. It happened every time he thought about how he'd stayed on the phone, rather than picking Troy up from school. No client was that important. No matter how severe their problem. He stood, walked to the French doors and looked across the yard to Troy's putting green for several moments, before lumbering back to the desk and taking from his pocket the ace of spades that Stockard had mailed to him. He looked at it a long time. Stockard wasn't through yet. He wouldn't stop until he finished the job by killing Jim. "I'll get even. I'll get good and even."

Yet, could he go through with it? Could he execute Stockard because of blind vengeance? He shook his head. The whole idea was foolish. He had to let the police deal with him.

He picked up the phone. He'd call the police right now. Ask them to start an investigation. He'd—

His eyes fell onto the framed picture on his desk. It was the last formal portrait his family had taken together. They were all sitting on the front steps outside the house, autumn leaves bursting into color around them. Sandra wore her favorite blue sweater. Leaning against her was Jim, his collar crooked. Grayson sat next to Sandra, one arm around her and the other around Troy.

Grayson's hand tightened around the phone as hot anger seared through him. Because of Stockard, there would never be any more family portraits. Because of Stockard, he could never again hold Sandra or ruffle Troy's hair. Because of Stockard, half his family was dead.

Grayson slammed the phone down.

At exactly five p.m., Grayson put on his coat and left the house under a darkening sky. He climbed into a limo and was driven eight minutes to an airfield, where he boarded a Piper Cheyenne turboprop. Seventeen minutes later, he landed near Short Hills, New Jersey, and slid behind the wheel of a waiting Mercedes.

At five forty-five he stepped into suite 407 of the Hyatt Hotel. He switched on two table lamps and closed the curtains. Fifteen minutes later a rap came at the door.

Costanzo toddled in, looking even more haggard than at their meeting in Grayson's office. *If you're a gangster, talking to the IRS must take a toll.*

"Mr. Costanzo, thank you for coming." Grayson gestured to a chair. "Please."

Costanzo removed his coat, sat down, and crossed his legs. Grayson took a seat opposite him.

"I read about your personal tragedy," Costanzo said. "Life's so precious, yet fragile. And to think, a stupid car accident."

Grayson coughed into his fist. "It wasn't an accident. My wife and son were murdered." The man showed not a flicker of emotion, though Grayson wouldn't have been surprised with a shrug. "I know the killer. He somehow caused the—the accident."

Costanzo rubbed his eye. "Caused it?"

Grayson told him about Kim's death and Stockard's threats.

Costanzo's dark eyes narrowed. "How could he manage such a thing?"

"I don't know, but he did." Grayson took the ace of spades card from his pocket and handed it to him. "It came in the mail two days before the car crash."

Costanzo returned the card. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because he's the reason I'll handle your tax matter exactly as you wanted."

Costanzo pinched the loose skin at his Adam's apple while the wheels in his head seemed to turn. "You've come up with a figure, have you?"

"No figure."

A stiff smile moved the corners of Costanzo's lips.

"I want your help. You see—"

"Hold on a minute." Costanzo leaned forward and gave Grayson a hard look. "Sometimes people get fucked over and think

they deserve justice. They see movies and they get nutty ideas. They think the police are incompetent, bumbling keystone cops. They might even think there's a Godfather who magically creates justice. Do you have fucked up ideas like that?"

"Not exactly."

Costanzo let out something between a snort and a laugh. He stood and reached for his coat.

Grayson got to his feet. "You haven't heard what I want."

"You're a nice man. Bad things have happened to you, now go home and forget it. If you'd like to discuss a reasonable fee for your services, perhaps we have something to talk about. If not, we're done."

Grayson was getting squeezed. He'd squeeze back. "Fifty million. As you once said, I want nothing for nothing."

"I also said a reasonable fee."

"And that the sky's the limit."

"That was before, this is now."

"Let's stop playing games. I won't ask you to kill anyone. That'll be my job."

Costanzo snorted again. "When we last talked, you were too good to get your hands dirty helping a client like me. Now you're talking about murdering someone in cold blood. What happened to your integrity, Mr. high-and-mighty-lawyer?"

Grayson took a deep breath. "Things change."

CHAPTER 10

Grayson scanned the airport terminal, watching for Jim. The boy had stayed in Florida with Grayson's mother all week, which Grayson had, at first, thought was for the best—it got him out of the house and away from the memories. But now, he wanted his son back with him, and, based on how quickly Jim had agreed, it seemed his son wanted that, too.

“Boo!”

Grayson flinched and turned around.

“Ha-ha, I scared you,” Jim said, laughing and jumping up and down.

“Hey, there's my boy.” Grayson knelt down, ruffled Jim's shaggy blond hair, and pinched his pink cheeks. “Looks like you brought back some Florida sunshine.”

“I'm hungry. All they gave me on the plane was a bag of crummy peanuts.”

“How about we eat at the miniature golf course and play a round?”

Jim's face lit up even brighter. “Yeah! That'll be fun.”

After they finished their hotdogs, Jim ran over and picked out putters and balls. He hit first, and Grayson watched his ball roll through the windmill arms and heard it rattle into the hole.

“Wow!” Grayson said. “A hole in one.”

“Yeah!” Jim hopped up and down. “Troy used to get mad at me when I did that. His ball always hit the thingy. He...” Jim's voice trailed off abruptly.

Grayson put his arm across Jim's shoulders and tugged him close. “You miss Troy, don't you?”

“It's not fair!” Tears sprang from Jim's eyes. “Why did he and Mom have to die?”

“Let’s sit down.” Grayson led Jim to a bench next to one of the putting greens. “You’re right, it isn’t fair.”

Jim scuffed his foot across the ground, and tears ran down his cheeks. “Why did it have to happen to them? Why not someone else?”

“Only God knows that.”

“Does God know everything?”

“Yep. Everything.” Grayson’s jaw tightened. When he was ten, God told him that he’d grow up to win the Global Golf Championship, but God had evidently changed his mind. After that, Grayson had transferred his hopes to Troy. Obviously, that was also out of the picture. “We don’t know why God does the things he does. But when bad things happen, it’s okay to cry.”

“Do you still cry?”

“Sometimes. I cry less now, but it still hurts inside.”

Jim wiped his cheeks with his fingers. “Me too.”

“All we can do is continue living our lives.”

Jim thought about that for a moment. “Come on, Dad.” He hopped up and pulled Grayson with him. “It’s your turn.”

They returned to the tee, and Grayson hit his ball, which bounced off the windmill. He took three more strokes to make the hole.

“I won that one, Dad,” Jim said with a grin, running to the next tee.

A flame began to flicker at the back of Grayson’s eyes, a small, weak, smoky flame. His heart tapped a little dance. Jim’s talent was obvious. But was it enough to win the global?

CHAPTER 11

At his house? Are you nuts?” Grayson sputtered into the phone.

He was standing at a phone booth outside a gas station a few miles from his house, the payphone Costanzo had ordered him to wait at when he called the day before. Grayson hadn't known what to expect when he arrived, but he *had* expected Costanzo to be on the line. Instead, it was a voice he didn't recognize, laying out a plan that seemed utterly insane.

“That's how it's goin' down,” the voice growled. “You got a problem with that?”

“That's bullshit,” Grayson shot back. “Why do I need you if I do it at his house?”

“Listen, you fuckin' amateur, if you don't like it, we'll hang up, and I'll tell The Man you don't want his help.”

A lump swelled in Grayson's throat. This was no good. He couldn't do it himself. He *was* an amateur, and amateurs made mistakes. Let the professionals with killing experience manage the sticky details. Grayson's plan was for Costanzo's people to kidnap Stockard and take him to an isolated location. They'd give Grayson a gun, he'd kill Stockard, and they'd dispose of the gun and body. It had seemed simple when he'd thought it up, but now doubts were filling his mind. He nibbled at his lower lip. Maybe he should hang up and forget it.

“I haven't got all day, dickhead.”

Grayson ran a hand through his hair. He had to do this to protect Jim. But alone, and mistake-free? Fuck! “What do I do?”

“That's better. You'll be picked up around the corner of the mini-market on Glenoak Road, two miles west of the 87. Park a little ways down the street, out of sight from the road. Tonight, one o'clock.”

“One in the morning?”

“No, fuck-face, we’re doing this in broad daylight with bells on.”

Grayson felt woozy. “That soon, huh?”

“Do you want this job done or not?”

“Okay. Who am I meeting?”

Click. The phone went dead. Grayson’s breath felt cut off, and trepidation thrust an icy finger into his heart. *My God!* Tonight. He would kill Stockard tonight.

He got back into his car, gripping the wheel so tight his knuckles turned white as he headed home. Fear pooled into his stomach, so strong it was almost sickening. As buildings blurred past him, a timid voice drifted through his mind. *You don’t have to do this*, it told him. *You can still back out. Go to the police. They’ll handle it.*

Part of him really wanted to listen to that voice, to pull a U-turn, and make a beeline for the nearest police station. What was he thinking, trying to pull off a murder like this? He had no idea what he was doing. And even with Costanzo’s men, the whole thing was dangerous as hell. Besides, did he really want to get involved with the mob?

More importantly, did he even want to kill a human being?

He turned into his driveway, walked through the door, and headed straight for his den. He needed a drink—badly. He poured a shot of scotch with shaking hands, gulped it down, and then poured another.

He sat down and frowned at his desk, rolled a pencil slowly across its surface beneath the palm of his hand. Staring at the ceiling, he gnawed a fingernail then ran a hand through his hair. He fished the playing card from his pocket then shoved it back almost before he looked at it. He chewed his lower lip. Finally, he shook himself. Stockard wasn’t human. Grayson had to destroy that monster once and for all.

CHAPTER 12

By six o'clock that evening, Grayson had already thrown up twice. After a shower, he dressed in khakis and a tan shirt and put gloves in the pockets of his wool coat. He sat in his den and downed two scotches. The ticking grandfather clock against the wall told him it wasn't even seven. He couldn't just hang around another four hours until leaving to kill Stockard. Go to a restaurant? Not with his queasy stomach. A movie sounded good. Maybe an R rated, since Jim wasn't with him. He was spending the night at Elizabeth's watching *The Lion King*.

At ten o'clock, he returned home, hardly aware of the movie he'd seen. Both Jim and the housekeeper were in bed. While mixing a drink, Grayson realized his clothes were all wrong. They should be dark and free of loose fibers. He finished his drink, changed clothes, and managed to keep down a few spoonfuls of yogurt.

Finally, eleven o'clock rolled around, and he left the house in black jeans, a black shirt, and a black nylon jacket. Two hours later, he turned off highway 87 to Glenoak Road, headed west two miles, and turned right at the mini-market. Clouds masked the moon, leaving the sky dark as northern seas. Good. Stockard's property had plenty of trees but no concealing shrubs.

Grayson cruised slowly past the market. A neon light flickered under the awning. No cars or people anywhere. He parked about fifty yards from the corner, where the car couldn't be seen from the main road, and reached into his jacket for his gloves. Shit! They were still in his overcoat at the house. He'd have to be careful not to touch anything. He stepped out of the car into the cold, zipped up his jacket, and made his way toward the corner. Out of sight from the road, he stood behind a tree.

It was five past one. He jammed his hands into his pockets and shifted from foot to foot, hoping to get warm. The only sounds were the constant buzz of the neon sign and an occasional passing car. He thought about his phone conversation with Costanzo's goon. Sounded like a hood: gruff and nasty. And what was that he called Costanzo, The Man?

A black Lincoln edged around the corner, and Grayson slipped back into darker shadows. The car approached, revealing the dim outlines of a driver and passenger. A sharp twinge hit his gut. He had expected only one man. He stepped into the street and the car jerked to a stop. When he approached the driver's window, it lowered with a hum. The man inside gave him a cold-eyed look and a nod. "In back."

Grayson returned the look without the nod and climbed in. He'd wait for his companions to explain the plan, but the goons only chatted idly with each other. About last night's football, and how The Man had scored over a million dollars, but lost almost as much when Surge Michaelson clobbered Nick Nelson in a golf match. They liked reruns of TV's *America's Most Wanted*. Maybe saw old friends.

After forty-five minutes, Grayson had finally had enough. "Would you guys mind telling me the game plan?"

The driver's mouth twisted contemptuously. "What do you think the game plan is?"

Grayson's jaw tightened. "Look, you guys have your instructions. Now are we going to play I've-got-a-secret or talk business?"

"Testy, testy," the driver said, then turned and winked at his partner.

The partner's cell phone rang, and he tugged it from his pocket. "It's me, boss... Uh-huh... Uh-huh... I'll have the midget bring him in." He hung up and said to the driver, "We got a problem with Snake. One of the midget's boys. The Man wants to handle it personally."

They were on a lighted highway now, and Grayson could make out their features. The driver was swarthy, with an apish slope of his broad shoulders. He had a face only a gangster's mother could love, flat and pockmarked with divots like a par three tee box. The other one, the long-necked and long-faced one with the phone, turned back to Grayson. A vertical cleft in his chin made his face

appear longer yet. Dark brown eyes sat deep within his expressionless face.

“Asshole,” he said. “I’ll ask you a question.”

Grayson had recognized the rusty voice as the one from the payphone. He figured the guy had more than just a streak of ruthlessness in his nature. “Who the fuck are you that The Man would want us to help kill someone?”

“Take that up with your boss,” Grayson snapped. “I’m not doing this dance after every question. Why at his house?”

“Because that’s where he’ll be when you stab his ass,” the driver said.

Grayson’s mouth dropped open. “What? I’m not stabbing anyone. You’re supposed to give me a gun.”

Longface twisted toward the driver. “Gonzo, turn the car around.”

“Wait a minute!” Grayson tapped the driver’s shoulder. “Keep driving and give me a goddamn gun like you’re supposed to.”

“You best keep your nose out of the weapons business,” the driver said, scowling.

Grayson’s lips quivered with anger. “And if I don’t?”

“I’ll blow it for you. Right through the back of your head.”

“Listen, dickhead,” Longface said, “if you want to call the plays, you can carry the ball. The Man said specifically you’re to use this.” He swung his arm around and thrust a gray blade in Grayson’s face. “Take it.”

Grayson found himself holding a crude ten-inch piece of sheet metal shaped like a knife. Soiled cloth was taped around one end to serve as a handle.

“I’m supposed to use this...this knife?” Grayson cradled it in both hands like a Samurai warrior. He hoped they were joking.

“Hey, he catches on quick,” the driver said.

“It’s not a knife, numb-nuts,” Longface said. “In the killing business, it’s called a shank.”

“Yeah,” the driver added. “You’re gonna shank your man, Stockard.” He chuckled, his shoulders bouncing.

Longface aimed a dark stare at Grayson as if sizing up his nerve. “If you don’t have the balls, we can turn around.”

Grayson returned his look. “Keep driving.”

The driver turned west onto Highway 28. Grayson placed the shank on the seat. *Okay, so that’s the way it’s going to be. Stock-*

ard gets it with a shank. He looked at Longface, his weapons benefactor. "What's your name? I know his." He nodded to the driver. "It's Gonzo."

"Chauffeur," the man said, not looking back.

Grayson felt his insides eating at him. He looked out the window into darkness, focusing on the humorous idea that Chauffeur should be driving. Stockard popped into his mind and his stomach did a flip-flop before settling into a dull knot.

At two-twenty, the Lincoln passed the spot where the horse had fallen. A mile up, they turned off Highway 28 onto Stockard's road. Chauffeur put his forearm across the seatback, turned to Grayson, and laid out the plan in grisly detail. He finished by saying, "In a minute, we'll turn out the lights and ease up to the house. We'll get out without slamming the doors and enter through the rear porch. Once we're inside—"

"Are we going to break a window or something?"

Chauffeur switched on his cold-eyed look. "Now don't you think breaking a window just might wake up your soon-to-be-dead Stockard?"

"We'll use this." Gonzo turned around and held up a key.

CHAPTER 13

Grayson pressed his lips together, desperately trying to conceal his unease. The moment had arrived: he would break into a man's house and commit murder. A part of him wanted to break down and beg Costanzo's men to take him back home, but he forced the panic down. He'd gone too far to turn back now.

Gonzo unlocked Stockard's back door and slipped inside. Chauffeur and Grayson followed. Chauffeur took out his phone, which supplied enough light to move around without bumping into things. They stood bunched together on the rear porch beside a washing machine crowded with cleaning supplies. A deflated wading pool sat crumpled in the corner. Chauffeur removed his shoes and signaled others to do the same. Grayson bent over, set down the shank, and slipped off his Italian loafers, wondering how Gonzo had obtained the key.

Chauffeur led the way into the kitchen. Grayson took up the rear. The sink was on the left under a window. On the right, the refrigerator hummed. They moved past a table in the middle of the room. Just ahead, in the darkness, would be the living room, the grungy curtains, and the armchair Grayson had sat in. Right now, he could see that only in his mind.

Chauffeur and Gonzo turned right at a hallway. Careful not to rustle his nylon jacket, Grayson shifted the shank to his left hand. He opened and closed his right fist several times, then switched the shank back.

The three crept down the narrow hallway like shadows, past a closed door on the right, a bathroom to the left. Chauffeur and Gonzo stopped short of an open door on the right. Chauffeur turned to shine his light at Grayson and made a stabbing motion. Grayson showed him the shank. Chauffeur turned the phone off.

The plan was for Grayson to stay just outside the door while Chauffeur and Gonzo went into the room. Chauffeur would creep up next to the bed, gun raised. Gonzo would stand by the door, count to five, switch on the room light, and Grayson would enter. Chauffeur's gun would be pressed in Stockard's face. After Chauffeur roused Stockard to his feet, his and Gonzo's job would be done. Then, Grayson would step close, ask Stockard a few questions, get a few answers, and give him a thank-you-shank in the gut.

Chauffeur and Gonzo entered the room. Seconds later the lights came on and Grayson stepped in, shank behind his back. Chauffeur had Stockard almost on his feet. The man breathed with a mix of wheezes and gasps, his dazed eyes still trying to focus.

Grayson moved in front of Stockard. Close and personal. Close enough to see the terror in Stockard's eyes. Grayson's legs felt shaky, but he forced himself to stay cool, squeezing the shank's handle still held behind his back. "How'd you do it?"

Stockard's eyes bulged with terror.

"Tell me," Grayson spat through clenched teeth. "How did you kill my wife and son?"

Stockard's lips trembled.

"Talk, now!"

"Ah...um..." Strangled sounds came out of Stockard's mouth, but no intelligible words.

Chauffeur stepped forward. "This will help him open his trap." He backhanded Stockard across the face with his gun. Teeth and blood flew from the old man's mouth.

Stockard's hand shot to his face. "St—stop!" he cried. "Jesus Christ! Wha—what da ya wanna know?"

Gonzo spoke up. "You were already asked twice, dipshit."

"I didn't—" He glanced at Chauffeur, who drew back his gun. "—okay! I did it."

Grayson now had the shank pressed against his thigh. "How?"

Stockard stared at his bloodied hand then at Chauffeur. He wet his lips. "I—I rigged the traffic light in her direction to be green when it sh—shoulda been red. She entered the intersection against cross traffic."

Chauffeur scoffed. "How the fuck'd you do that?"

"I—" Stockard's eyes fixed on Chauffeur's gun. "I work for the traffic engineering department."

Grayson recalled Wilson telling him that. Stockard looked at him then back at the gun. “I s—stood at the corner’s control box and worked the controller on the electronic board. At j—just the right time, I turned the signal green in both directions.”

“I don’t fucking believe you,” Chauffeur said, threatening that backhand again.

Stockard’s arms went up. “S—she drove through that intersection every day, taking the kid golfing.” He swallowed with a loud gulping sound. “It—it took me three days at the controller before the timing was j—just right.”

For one long instant, Grayson felt the entire room freeze, as if it would never change: Chauffeur’s gun. Stockard’s face. The shank against his thigh.

“Holy fucking shit,” Gonzo burst. He got behind Stockard. “Do it now!”

Grayson raised the shank waist level, eyes locked onto Stockard’s.

“Now, dickface,” Gonzo yelled and gave Stockard a hard shove.

Stockard lurched forward and Grayson’s free hand shot up to stop him. Stockard’s mouth opened around Grayson’s index finger. Jaws clamped down. Grayson screamed, “YAAHH-ah-a-hhh,” and thrust the shank into Stockard’s gut. Stockard thrashed against him, and Grayson stabbed him a second and a third time, each thrust more frenzied than the last. Finally, Stockard’s eyes rolled and he slumped to the floor with a long groan.

Grayson dropped the shank next to Stockard’s body, where it was quickly submerged in the blood still spurting from all of Stockard’s wounds. Grayson looked at his bloody hand and clutched it with the other.

“All right, the job’s done,” Chauffeur said, coolly.

“Hold on,” Grayson said, feeling faint. He bent down and pried his finger from Stockard’s mouth.

“Hey, dumbshit,” Gonzo said. “You wanna leave your business card, too?” He pulled out his handkerchief and wiped Grayson’s fingerprints from the shank’s handle. The pungent smell of blood and human excrement felt suffocating.

Stockard moaned, stirring feebly.

“Hey, he ain’t dead yet,” Chauffeur growled.

“Let me fix that,” Gonzo said. He lifted his foot and gave one hard stomp onto Stockard’s throat, then a kick to his skull, then another. And another. Grayson flinched as bones crunched and splintered.

By the time Gonzo finished, Stockard’s head was nearly unrecognizable, a crumbled puddle of mush. Gray brain matter peeked out of white bone. Teeth were scattered everywhere, while the lower jaw remained intact, grotesquely showcasing half of Stockard’s tongue. The other half had been sliced off and buried somewhere under the pile of bone splinters. One eyeball hung from its socket, while the other had rolled against his shoulder and stared into space.

Grayson felt like he was going to faint.

My God, what have I done?

CHAPTER 14

Two weeks had passed since Stockard's killing, and Grayson couldn't shake the residual terror that comes after you wake up from a particularly nasty nightmare. He'd learned from Wilson that Chauffeur had worked for The Man over fifteen years, starting as a driver—hence the moniker. Gonzo was The Man's godson and carried water for Chauffeur. He earned his name as a juvenile and, like Chauffeur, was a “made” member of the crime family. They had both carried out a laundry list of crimes, including murders.

Grayson sat on a cold park bench under a harsh, gray sky. He watched a young couple with two small boys bundled in coats and earmuffs feed breadcrumbs to ducks, and his mind drifted back to his own two boys and the time they all ice fished in Canada. Jim had angled a rainbow trout, and when he yanked it from the hole, it flopped onto the ice. He had picked it up and held it for everyone to see. It glistened pink and magenta in the low sun while it spawned a profusion of eggs into Jim's tiny hands.

Grayson was smiling when he heard the crunching sounds of footsteps on the frozen grass. His smile vanished when he looked up and saw Costanzo and Chauffeur approaching from their car. He hadn't seen Costanzo since their meeting in the hotel, and it worried him not knowing what this get-together was about.

Costanzo extended his gloved hand, and they shook. “Good morning, Mr. Bolt. My apologies for being late. I was visiting my mother, who's not feeling so good these days.”

“My sympathies.”

“She's a tough bird.” Costanzo gestured that they walk. Chauffeur trailed behind, his long neck stuffed inside his black leather trench coat, looking like a high-paid assassin. “Too bad about your finger. My doctor sew it back okay?”

Grayson held up the bandaged finger. “Hopefully good as new. Won’t know about feeling or mobility for a few weeks.”

“It’s a good thing you thought to retrieve it from Stockard’s mouth. Aside from the benefit of having it back, of course.”

Grayson turned to him. “What’s the other good thing?”

“One you should appreciate. The police believe they’ve apprehended Stockard’s killer.”

Grayson pulled up short and searched Costanzo’s face.

“If they had your finger, they’d have fingered you.” Costanzo smiled. “Funny, play of words, huh?” He rubbed his arms. “Let’s keep moving.”

But they did have Grayson’s blood in Stockard’s mouth. Fortunately, thanks to Gonzo’s skull crushing goodbye, they’d probably figure all the blood was Stockard’s.

“Anyway,” Costanzo said, “the shank found on the floor was made by ex-con Ellis Washington,” Costanzo explained. “He’s the one going down for the killing.”

Grayson tucked both hands into his coat pocket. “That doesn’t prove he killed Stockard.”

“The police seem to think so, and it will be in your best interest not to disabuse them of that belief.”

“I don’t know about this. I mean, an innocent man being convicted for a—” Grayson glanced around and lowered his voice. “—for a murder I committed. He’ll rot in prison.”

Costanzo’s mouth curled into a wry smile. “Nothing for you to worry about. Besides, once in jail, he won’t live long enough to rot.” His cell phone rang. He reached into his pocket, began talking with the caller, and walked away.

Chauffeur edged up to Grayson. His voice had a dark edge, which suited the day’s gloom. “I know your kind, Bolt. You’re a smartass who won’t stay upright long because you think you can play by your own rules and are too fucking dumb to know better. The Man told you, but I’ll tell you again in case you’re forgetful. He wants Washington put away, so save the violin for someone else. Have a nice day, shithead.”

Someone whistled. Costanzo stood by his car, waving for Chauffeur. “It’s the midget. Get your ass over here, fast!”

CHAPTER 15

Chauffeur sat curbside behind the wheel of a Lincoln at JFK, the heater on, and wishing he were home in bed. He had just pulled up when Misha, aka, the midget, a mid-level operator who ran The Man's West Coast identity theft division, opened the back door. Huddled behind him were Snake, his wife and five-year-old kid.

"Hop in," the midget told them, then he climbed in front.

Chauffeur pulled away from the curb and headed toward the George Washington Bridge, and away from the rising sun.

Snake worked for the midget. Quick on his feet, he could talk his way out of just about anything. But he had made the mistake of forgetting to take his cell phone along on his family's Hawaiian vacation. In fact, he'd left it in a car he'd used for a job the day before his flight, and the midget found it the next morning. Chauffeur had ordered Misha to meet the family upon their return to LAX and immediately escort them to New Jersey, where they were to meet The Man.

Chauffeur glanced at them through the mirror and smirked. *They look like fuckin' pumpkins in their Hawaiian getup. Must be freezing their asses off.* Snake, wearing his usual snakeskin hat, belt, and shoes, had a sunburned forehead, and his nose was already peeling. Thinking he was about to get a promotion, the self-satisfied prick sat grinning like a moron. But he knew better than to ask questions. The little girl slept while the wife's eyes flitted around like a frightened bird's. She had good reason to be anxious.

The Lincoln turned into an alley and pulled up beside a new white Caddie parked in front of a warehouse.

"You stay here with the kid," Chauffeur told the midget. "You two, Mom and Dad, come with me."

Chauffeur opened a sheet metal door and led them into the musty, dimly lit, and nearly empty warehouse. An early crimson sky showed through the windows near the high ceiling. The Man and Gonzo sat in chairs behind a long folding table. On it rested four folded hands and one cardboard box.

Chauffeur threw a thumb toward two chairs facing the table, then dropped into one beside The Man.

The woman sat stiffly, hands in her lap. Snake took on a relaxed pose—arms folded, feet crossed.

“You two have a nice vacation?” The Man asked.

“Yes, sir,” the woman replied coolly.

“It was very nice, Mr. Costanzo,” Snake said. “Just wonderful.”

Chauffeur shook his head. *The dumb fuck has no clue what’s coming.*

“Do you know why you’re here, Snake?” The Man asked.

“Misha told me I was to be transferred, but didn’t say where, just that I was being promoted.” He smiled, his chest swelling. “Oh, and that you wanted to tell me—uh, tell us—about it personally.”

The Man took out a phone from his breast pocket. “Is this yours?”

The wife’s Hawaiian sunburn immediately drained from her face.

“It—it looks like—” Snake said.

“It’s his,” Chauffeur droned, leaning back in a slouch.

The Man slowly turned the phone end over end on the table.

Snake swallowed hard. “I forgot it when we left for vacation.”

“So I’m told,” The Man said. “You left it in the BMW after your last run. Misha called your wife to let you know he had it.”

Chauffeur smirked. *For once the midget did the right thing and followed his suspicions.*

Snake nodded.

“Right now the phone can’t be used,” The Man said. “Requires a password.” He took a minute thumbing keys. “Your password’s hard to crack. What is it?”

“Um...the password?”

“You heard right, dickhead,” Chauffeur snapped.

“Capital L, star, V, lower case a, star, n, star, n.”

“That’s right. I forgot to capitalize lv.” He tapped keys. “Here’s an interesting text exchange between you two.”

The wife threw a hand to her mouth and gasped.

The Man snickered, but didn’t look up. “From *Ann*: ‘The F called again.’” He looked at her and cocked his head then went on, “Then *Snake* answers: ‘We’ll talk tonight.’ Then another from *Ann*, two days later: ‘Two Fs came to the house. Offered a deal we should take.’”

The Man stood, reached in the box, and took out a hammer. He put the phone on the floor, bashed it to bits, then scooped up a few tiny parts, and approached the woman.

“Open your mouth,” he ordered. She burst into tears. He grabbed a fistful of hair and jerked her head back. “Open your fucking mouth!”

“Please, Mr. Costanzo, she didn’t—” Snake said.

Chauffeur slapped his palm on the table. “Shut the fuck up!”

Her mouth opened, and The Man stuffed the pieces inside. “Now swallow.”

She gagged then gulped.

“Look at that,” Gonzo said. “She swallowed her words.”

She gagged again, lowered her head, and retched.

“What a shame,” The Man said, stepping back. “And on your pretty Hawaiian dress. Take it off.”

Her eyes bulged.

“Now!”

She shook her head and took in rapid breaths of air.

“Mr. Costanzo,” Snake whined.

Annoyed, Chauffeur whipped out his gun. “One more peep and you’re gonna swallow a bullet.”

Ann wriggled out of her dress and it dropped to the floor, revealing a lacy blue bra and panties.

The Man yanked her bra off. “Give me your underpants.”

She threw a hand to her slobbering mouth, bent over, slipped them off, then clutched her arms around her front. Silent tears streamed down her face.

The Man took the panties, sniffed them, looked at them thoughtfully, then stuffed them in his pocket and paced back to the box. He pulled out two ropes that he threw to Gonzo. “Put her on her back and tie her arms around this post.” He patted the post,

then turned to Snake. “Anything you want to say before the fun begins?”

“I swear, I wasn’t gonna let her do it. That’s the God’s truth.”

“But you admit, she wanted to rat us out to the feds.”

“Na, she was just scared, that’s all. Come on, Mr. Costanzo.”

The dimwit took The Man for an idiot. Chauffeur backhanded his gun across Snake’s face, and blood flew. “Mind your manners, asshole.”

Snake grabbed his face and crumpled to the floor.

The Man again reached into the box, pulled out a roll of tape and two jars—one small, one large. He went to Ann, lying on her back, tied up, and crying. “Snake, get over here.”

Chauffeur kicked him in the side. “He didn’t mean next week.”

Snake stumbled to his feet and went over.

The Man handed him the tape and his wife’s underpants. “Tape these in her mouth. But don’t seal it completely.”

Snake’s hands shook like he had fuckin’ palsy.

“Now hold out both hands.” The Man removed the small jar’s cap and poured a thick watery substance into Snake’s palms. “Smear that on her face.”

“What is it?” Snake asked and sniffed.

“Never mind,” Chauffeur said. “Just do what you’re told.” Chauffeur had concocted a savory mixture of meat juice and honey, which he was proud of.

Snake obeyed.

“Get it into her nose and mouth,” The Man ordered.

After Snake complied, The Man gave him the large jar and told him to open it.

Snake twisted the lid off. “Jesus Christ!” he burst and flung the lid. “Fuckin’ fire ants.”

“Hold the jar down hard over her face.”

Snake broke into tears.

“Now!”

Chauffeur pushed his gun against Snake’s head. “Or I’ll do it standing over your dead body.”

Snake shook his head desperately. “I—I can’t.”

The Man shrugged. “No big deal. We’ll just bring the little girl in here, and Chauffeur can do everything to her instead. Gonzo, go grab—”

“No!” Snake howled. “I’ll—I’ll do it.”

Snake turned his head away and pressed the jar against his wife's face. She squirmed, and her screams were like echoes from the bottom of a well.

"Tap the jar," The Man said. "Get 'em all out."

Snake did so then flung the jar and frantically brushed ants from his hands and arms.

"Look at 'em go for the eyes," Gonzo said. "They're fuckin' hungry."

"You see what happens when people fuck with me?" The Man said and took out a gun. He pointed it between Snake's eyes. "So long, you stinking piece of shit." He pulled the trigger. Snake's head exploded, blood flew, and he fell onto his back.

"You still want to take out the kid?" Chauffeur said.

"We'll let the midget do it."

CHAPTER 16

Grayson and Chief Foley had just slid into a booth at the Knickerbocker Club, their poker playground. Grayson had ordered a stiff glass of scotch, which wasn't his first stiff drink for the day, but he wasn't going to think about that. Since killing Stockard, he felt no relief, no gladness, no sensations at all. Just hollowness. Now with the weight of it bearing down, he could neither eat nor sleep. He needed something. Someone to talk to. Anything to help him snap out of it.

"How is it living the life of luxury?" he asked.

"Feels damn strange not being chief. Jersey's no place to retire and sit on your ass."

"You're too pretty to retire."

"That's why I'm taking my gold watch and moving to LA."

Grayson shifted in his chair. "Listen, Chief, there's a couple of things I need to tell you. First, I—"

An arm came between them, holding a tray of drinks. "Jack Daniels, up. Walker black with a twist." The waiter placed them down and left.

Grayson hoisted his scotch. "To a lifelong friendship." They touched glasses and sipped. Grayson tried again. "I...um...I took a piece of that Costanzo case."

The chief's eye's widened. "I don't fucking believe it!" He thumped his drink onto the table, and it splashed. "Didn't I warn you? Didn't I tell you to stay away from him? He's like a leaf that blows from one gutter to another, a killer who'll do it without thinking. Christ, he'll do it instead of thinking." Foley shook drink splashes from his sleeve.

Grayson peered into his drink and made an effort to smile. He was having second thoughts about confessing murder to an honest policeman, even a retired one. And he certainly wasn't going to

say anything about Costanzo's help. He trusted the chief's confidence, but not his conscience. How might he react?

"You said there were a couple of things. What's the other one?" The chief lowered his head to look into Grayson's downcast eyes. "Come on. No more tantrums, I promise."

Grayson pursed his lips.

"We've been pals a long time, so spit it out."

"I'm..." Grayson put a finger in his drink and swirled the ice cubes. "I'm not sure you're the person—"

"The person you should confide in?"

Grayson nodded.

"You saved my life. Don't you think that counts for something?"

"We were at war."

"Horseshit! A dozen men stood on deck, and only one jumped in to save me."

"I was young and foolish." Grayson pushed his drink aside. "Okay, this is it. I...um...I killed Stockard."

The chief didn't blink. He had probably learned to control his expressions a long time ago.

"He confessed to killing Sandra and Troy by manipulating the traffic light, so, um, I killed him."

"I read about the murder. He was stabbed, head crushed like an eggshell. Never figured you had a hand in it."

"Not a hand, a finger." Grayson raised the bandaged finger. "Stockard bit it off just before I stabbed him."

The chief took in a sharp breath.

"It's sewn back on." Grayson didn't want to mention Costanzo, but he didn't like the chief thinking he could stomp a man's head. "It was someone else who gave Stockard the broken egg treatment."

"Someone helped you?"

"When in a bear trap, you don't want to chew off your own leg."

"God, I wish you had let the police do their job. They might have found out about the traffic light manipulation. And by the way, how the hell he'd do it?"

Grayson shrugged.

The chief took a gulp of his drink. "That's a dark hole you've jumped into."

"Nights are the worst. Can't tell if I'm awake or asleep. I see Stockard's terrified face and hesitate, but stab him anyway. Then remorse drives me mad. I try to remind myself that he killed Sandra and Troy. After that I heave my guts."

The chief tossed down the rest of his drink and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "This is a big deal, Grayson."

"I know."

"I might be retired, but I've got responsibility still. I've got my conscience."

"I know." Maybe he shouldn't have burdened his friend with a confession.

"I'm not saying the bastard didn't deserve it. He completely deserved it. But murder is murder. You've put me in a difficult position."

"And I'm sorry, really sorry. I just—I just couldn't keep it to myself. I had to confide in someone, and you're the best friend I've got. I know you need to do what you think is right. And whatever it is, I won't fault you for it. But—please, Chief, look at it my way. As a husband and father."

The chief let out a long breath. "What are you planning to do now?"

"I don't know. Another guy was arrested for the crime. He's no angel, but I can't let him rot in prison for my sin. I'll do something." He looked straight into his friend's eyes. "You have to know, if I had to do it all over again, I'd make the same choice."

Foley reached out and gave Grayson's shoulder a squeeze with a sad smile. "I understand. I probably would, too."



Grayson got to wondering on the way home why Costanzo wanted Washington to take the fall for Stockard's murder. Costanzo had somehow got hold of Washington's shank and made sure it was the murder weapon. But if he wanted Washington dead, why not simply have him killed?

Grayson called Wilson and asked him to check into it. A few days later, Wilson called back. "I've got that rundown on Washington."

"And Costanzo's connection?"

“He’s connected, all right. Washington was locked up for five years on a first-offense armed robbery conviction before getting paroled. He’s now charged with first-degree murder of your boy Stockard.” Wilson chuckled. “Knowing Stockard’s charming nature, I’m sure it was warranted.”

“What have they got?”

“A jailhouse witness who’ll testify that Stockard assaulted Washington in prison, but Washington’s lawyer has a different story. He says it’s true that the two were in the same prison, but in different cellblocks, and there’s no evidence they knew each other or ever came in contact.”

“There must be some evidence against Washington.”

“Fingerprints.”

“What?”

“His fingerprints were under the shank’s cloth handle.”

That explained Costanzo’s insistence on using the knife. “What’s Costanzo’s involvement?”

“That’s where it gets interesting. Made-men and the police believe that while in prison, Washington iced a made-man but was never charged for lack of evidence. In Costanzo’s big-shot role as Don, he was expected to seek retribution and have Washington taken out.

But Costanzo had a problem. The police knew he was expected to kill Washington. So rather than ordering the hit and becoming a suspect, Costanzo shifted responsibility for retribution to the State by framing Washington for Stockard’s sad demise.”

Grayson swallowed hard. This was getting too close to home. He tried to keep his voice from shaking as he asked, “If that’s true, who killed Stockard?”

“Wasn’t able to find out. But I could keep digging.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Grayson said, maybe too quickly. “Thanks for your help.”

Grayson hung up, relieved to have cut Wilson free before he unearthed too much. As it stood, with the probability of Washington being convicted, Grayson could maybe have the good fortune of continuing to sleep in his own bed.

He padded into his den and mixed a scotch and soda, drained the drink, and thought well enough of it to mix a second before the ice melted. As he settled in at his desk and sorted through the day’s mail, a letter from the New York County Court caught his

eye. Opening it, he found a jury summons to appear Monday morning, eight o'clock.

CHAPTER 17

All rise,” the bailiff directed. “The honorable Judge Wendy S. Welcome presiding. Case number 87270, the State of New York versus Ellis P. Washington.”

Grayson Bolt, juror seven, second row, end seat, stood beside eleven other sworn citizens. The bailiff told them to be seated, and the judge gave instructions while Grayson struggled to control his rage.

Costanzo had somehow yanked strings to get Grayson on the jury to assure a conviction. Now that he knew Washington had indeed committed murder, just not this murder, Grayson had no objections to him being convicted and put away. But he resented being the hangman. Even one-twelfth of one.

The judge finished her remarks and the prosecutor, Clayton Morrison, stood and buttoned his coat. A tall African American with shoulders that disappeared around the corner, he strode to the jury box with an easy grace and scanned the faces of his prime audience with eyes so black they were like the tinted windows of a sleek limousine. His face transformed into a smile wider than his back.

“Good morning, jurors.” His voice was velvet-edged. He explained how they would find the defendant, Ellis Washington, guilty beyond reasonable doubt of maliciously stabbing and killing Gus Stockard on the night of October third. They would learn that the defendant made the weapon, and that he had motive and no alibi.

The defense told the jurors that Washington was innocent and had never been charged with a violent crime. In fact, the crime for which he had been incarcerated, armed robbery, was committed with a toy gun, and there existed not one shred of evidence placing him at the murder scene.

The trial was expected to last two or three days. On the morning of the second day, the defense put Washington on the stand. Coal-skinned and awkward, the man had curly black hair and a thick mustache that drooped over his lips. He wore baggy gray pants, a matching wrinkled coat, and an electric blue tie. Drops of moisture clung to his forehead. He said lots of yes sirs and no sirs, the no sirs usually accompanied by rapid headshakes. One of his “no sirs” grabbed Grayson’s attention, the one in response to the question: “Have you ever killed anyone?” Maybe it was Washington’s eyes that shone large and honest, or the certain headshake, or the body posture, or . . . Grayson didn’t know what it was, but something made him believe Washington was telling the truth.

Grayson glanced at Chauffeur sitting in the back of the courtroom. He’d been there throughout the trial, giving him all the dirty looks he had in stock. Now the man met his gaze with a hostile stare.

At four-thirty, the jurors were excused and told to return the next morning at nine-thirty. Grayson arrived home, clomped into his den, and had a drink. He couldn’t shake the feeling that Washington was telling the truth about never killing anyone. If so, this trial was a travesty without the least justification. He picked up the phone and punched in Wilson’s number.

At ten o’clock that night, Wilson’s knock came at the door. He had just visited Washington in jail. The accused told him that he’d never killed a made-man in prison, that the story was made up to protect the killer, who was himself a made-man. And since the authorities never knew who the real killer was, Washington—who never saw the inside of a high school—was pleased as a birthday boy with his exalted status.

Two days later, the judge finished reading the jury their instructions, and they retired to the jury room. The first order of business was to elect a foreperson. They chose a middle-aged mother of five with hair piled in a beehive. After being elected, she pronounced, “I know how this will turn out, but I’ll keep an open mind.”

Ken, who was only old enough to have voted last year, and whose shirt pocket held an iPod, suggested they take a vote and perhaps “wrap this thing up.”

Two others spoke up, preferring some discussion. "Shouldn't we kick things around a bit?" Eric, the retired accountant, suggested. The forewoman agreed.

For half an hour, everyone kicked it around: Washington was guilty because he made the weapon. His fingerprints were on it and nobody else's. He had motive, was already a convicted felon—God knows, he just got out of prison. And did you see those cold eyes?

The forewoman stood, her large breasts tugging her pink blouse apart between buttons. "It seems we're all in agreement here. Why don't we take a vote? All those for guilty raise your hands."

Everyone's hand—everyone's except Grayson's—shot up straight as flagsticks. Not one bent elbow, and twenty-two eyes locked onto Grayson. He had told Foley that he would not let Washington rot in prison, for his sin. He couldn't go back on his word. Not now. But dare he risk being tied in a gunnysack and thrown into the East River? Without allowing himself to think further, he blurted, "But there's no evidence."

The thirty-something plumber threw down his pencil. "Oh, for God's sake!"

"There's always someone," Joyce, a crossing guard, muttered while chomping on a stick of gum.

"All right, now," the forewoman said. "Let's not get into a dither. Everyone has a right to express their opinion."

"Thank you, ma'am," Grayson said, nodding at her. "Washington admitted making the shank for protection while in prison, but said he gave it away when he left. To me that sounds—"

"What's he going to say, for crying out loud?" the bald man next to the woman in the wheelchair retorted.

"That's a *pret-ty* weak defense," the woman at the far end added, studying her nails. "I don't buy it."

This was going to be a tough sell. Grayson would try a different tactic. "It would be like one of us owning a gun. The gun's stolen and then used in the commission of a crime. Ownership of the gun is not proof of who committed the criminal act."

"Are you a lawyer or something?" the woman in the wheelchair said, adjusting her cushion.

The gray-haired insurance man placed his palms on the table. "That may be true, but the fact is Washington had a grudge against

the guy from their prison days. He made the shank and stabbed Stockard with it. Case closed.”

There followed several comments of agreement.

The plumber stood. “Everyone for guilty, raise your hand.” He raised his, and talking stopped. People looked at one another. Ken’s hand rose tentatively, then another’s, then everyone’s except Grayson’s. He sat, lips pressed firm, hands folded on the table. Wetness formed on his brow, but he ignored it. He had to think of something.

“Are you going to hold out and make this a hung jury?” the insurance man asked. “If you are, tell us now so Ms. Forewoman here—” He jerked a thumb at her. “—can tell the judge and send us home.”

A drop of sweat fell on Grayson’s bandaged finger. He stared at it.

“Well?” the forewoman said. “The man’s right. What’s it going to be?”

Grayson muttered, hardly above a whisper, “He’s innocent.”

“What was that?” asked someone across the room.

“He needs to speak up,” another said sharply.

Grayson pursed his lips. He’d have to concoct a story.

“Okay, that’s it,” the forewoman said. She stood and headed to the door. Her hand grasped the knob.

“I know for a fact that he’s innocent,” Grayson said calmly.

All heads swiveled to Grayson.

“How the hell would you know, old man?” Ken demanded.

“Because,” he wiped his brow with a handkerchief, “because I know who the killer is.”

The room was quiet as the shank plunging through Stockard’s gut. Grayson folded his hands on the table. “Stockard’s sixteen-year-old stepdaughter killed him.” Grayson waited several long moments to let the idea sink in, while he tried to think of what to make up next. “Stockard had been molesting the girl for eleven years. Almost every night of those eleven years, Stockard would go into her bedroom, have his way with her, and whisper to her that if she ever told anyone, he would cut her mother’s stomach out and make the girl eat it.”

Jurors gasped, and several threw hands to their mouths. “I’m going to be sick,” Joyce murmured.

“Should we take a break?” Grayson asked. He hated lying, but it was the only way to save Washington.

“Come on, finish the story,” the plumber said. “She’ll be all right.”

Joyce lowered her hand and nodded. “Go ahead.”

“A year ago, the stepdaughter ran away to the city and became a street prostitute. She was arrested not long after but refused to give her real name for fear of being returned to her stepfather, so was remanded to a nunnery in the Bronx. She learned through the Internet that her mother had died. So, she went back to her house, removed the key from the ledge, went inside, took the knife from where she knew Stockard kept it, and stabbed him in the stomach.”

“My God,” Joyce said. “The same way he had threatened to kill her mother.”

“Wait a minute,” Ken said. “How do you know all this?”

Everyone looked at Grayson.

“She told me,” Grayson said calmly.

All eyes widened at once.

“She was shocked that an innocent man would be convicted of a crime she committed. She secretly took all our pictures that first day in the courtroom and used the Web to learn some of our identities. After discovering that I’m a lawyer, she came into my office and told me her story. She gave me permission to tell you, but only if necessary, and without disclosing her name.”

The room felt as if all the oxygen had been sucked out of it, and nobody said a word.

“I think it’s time we took a new poll,” the forewoman said finally. “All in favor of not guilty, raise your hands.”

All twelve jurors put their hands high in the air.

“Then, it’s agreed.” The forewoman’s gaze wandered from face to face. “What’s said in the jury room stays in the jury room.”

Everyone looked at each other and nodded.

Grayson let out a silent sigh of relief—then he thought of Costanzo.



“Please rise,” the bailiff directed.

The judge marched in, took her chair, and everyone followed suit. She asked the forewoman if the jury had reached a verdict.

“Not guilty.”

Chauffeur bounded from his chair and glared at Grayson with such a withering look, Grayson felt a chill down to his toes. Then Chauffeur turned and stomped out of the courtroom.

CHAPTER 18

Grayson left the courtroom, feeling like his insides had been carved out. Through swirling rain, he scurried to his car and drove aimlessly. A hard, angry, hammer of a pulse beat in his temples. Would The Man really throw him into the East River?

He drove through the Lincoln Tunnel and out of New York. The rain pounded the car as if it was trying to get in. The defroster of his ninety thousand dollar Mercedes didn't work, and he kept wiping the windshield with his sleeve. He was trapped, knew why, and made himself admit it. He'd invited something evil into his life, and he had to do the only thing he could: face Costanzo and hope for a miracle.

Grayson wheeled up to Costanzo's front gate in New Jersey's exclusive Short Hills Estates. The property served as both residence and office. Grayson rolled down his window and shouted through pelting rain into a metal box. Two minutes later, he stood before The Man, water dripping from his coat.

Costanzo sat at his desk, a muscle quivering in his jaw. Chauffeur occupied a side chair just behind Grayson's right shoulder.

"You want to explain?" Costanzo asked calmly. His face looked gray as rotten meat.

"Well—" Grayson cleared his throat noisily. "The jury—"

"Stop!" Costanzo slammed both palms on his desk, and the sound reverberated throughout the room. Absolute silence fell. From the way Costanzo's cheeks were moving, he was biting them on the inside. "Let's pretend," he said, eyes narrow, "that your balls are laying here on my desk, and I'm holding a hammer. Now, as you were saying."

Grayson heard Chauffeur stir and shot him a barbed glance over his shoulder. His eyes flitted around the wall of celebrity golf

photos behind Costanzo and out the window at leaves battered with rain. He drew in a long breath. "The verdict was mine." With no expression in his voice, he added, "That's it."

"You son of a bitch!" Costanzo bucked from his chair and threw his phone, striking Grayson's shoulder. Chauffeur sprang to his feet like an attack dog. Costanzo hand-signaled him down and stormed around his mammoth desk, nostrils flaring like sails.

Grayson stared ahead, contemplating the temperature of the East River.

"Did you think you were on that jury to serve justice? You were to serve me, you dumb fuck." After several long moments, a dangerous smile tipped his face. He drew in a long, hissing breath, then the smile began to pull in around the edges. He shook his finger and a little laugh spurted out of him. "You failed me. I relied on you, and you failed me." His voice became somber, like a chagrined father about to teach a willful child the errors of his ways before the walloping. "How long would I last if I tolerated failure? The people I depend on? I simply can't do it, regardless of the person or the cost. The whole system is based upon prompt reward and swift punishment."

"I understand," Grayson said. And feeling like an unrepentant child who masks his fear with defiance, he added, "But I'm not your people. We had a business agreement and we both delivered. No more IRS, no more Stockard."

"This goes beyond any business agreement." Costanzo strutted to the window and peered out. "I made it clear what I expected and you defied me."

"But the fact is—" Grayson knew it was foolish to say it. "—Washington never killed—"

"Enough!" Costanzo's voice cracked like a whip, and he whirled around, nostrils again flaring. He inhaled deeply, then lifted his chin and ambled back to his desk. His face told nothing of his thoughts. He whisked his hand in a brief gesture of finality.

Chauffeur was on his feet and at Grayson's side. His fingers clutched the front of Grayson's shirt, and the tendons on the back of his hand looked sharp. Gonzo rushed in through a side door, gripped Grayson's arm, and put a gun to his head. "Do you feel a sneeze coming on? A real loud sneeze?"

Chauffeur jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Let’s go.” The two footmen pinwheeled Grayson around and marched him to the door.

CHAPTER 19

Hold up,” Costanzo said.

Grayson stopped in the doorway. Goosebumps broke out on his arms, and a rush of relief swept through his mind and body.

“We’ll do this differently.”

They brought Grayson back into Costanzo’s office and pressed him into a chair facing the desk. He sat stiffly, gripped with apprehension. Chauffeur parked in his usual position, behind and right. Gonzo sat port side, gun in lap.

Costanzo sat supreme, perched in his high-back leather chair, hands folded on his desk. Solomon about to dispense justice. “I’m afraid you’re going to get it hard, Mr. Bolt.” Costanzo had that fatherly tone of *this will hurt me more than you*. “Did you ever stop to think that there’s only one way of being dead, but many ways of dying?”

Grayson felt something cold touch his spine, all the way down. “I don’t follow.”

“Take your man Stockard. He killed two of your beloved family members, wife and eldest son. Isn’t that right?”

A strangling tightness gripped Grayson’s throat. “That—that’s right.”

“Wouldn’t you say a part of you died too?”

“What’s your *point*?” Grayson’s voice erupted in suppressed panic.

“You don’t have to die to feel dead. I’m going to kill your other son. That’ll be your punishment.”

Chauffeur let out a long sigh. “Aaah.”

The blood drained from Grayson’s face. Just like that. Most people held the basic principle that no man should be punished for the deed of another. Costanzo was not one of them. Grayson

would be cut right to the bone, and his son would be the sharpest knife Costanzo could use. Costanzo had spelled out the thought in invisible brushstrokes. It was there and Grayson had tried not to see it.

Costanzo continued as though his words had no great significance. "It'll be tough, I know. But look at it this way." His face twisted into a cruel grin. "You've already lost one son, so you know what to expect."

Chauffeur and Gonzo snickered.

"You can't!" Grayson could barely get the words out. "Kill me. Right now. End this whole business."

Costanzo shook his head and made a soft sound with his lips.

Grayson couldn't let this happen. Not Jim, too. He'd throw himself across the desk and tear at Costanzo's throat. Wait! Those golf pictures on the wall—Costanzo and John Weekly playing together. And that conversation between Gonzo and Chauffeur on the way to Stockard's house. They talked about how The Man bets on football.

And golf.

That flicker! That smoky flame in the back of his mind at the miniature golf course with Jim. Without knowing what he was going to say, he blurted, "If you kill my son, you'll throw away a fortune."

Costanzo cocked an eyebrow, leaned back and locked his hands behind his head. "Is that so?"

"My son, he's a golfer. A gifted golfer who will become the world's greatest." Grayson ran a hand through his hair. "You could make millions off his long career."

Costanzo studied him. "How old is he?"

"The kid's eight," Chauffeur put in.

Grayson shot him a hateful glance.

Leering back at him, Chauffeur added, "And he gets out of school at two-fifty."

Grayson's blood turned to ice.

Costanzo flapped a lazy wrist. "Get outta here, Bolt. You're puttin' me on."

"He's won every tournament he's entered." Another made-up story. Grayson glanced back at Chauffeur, who turned to The Man and shrugged.

The Man rubbed his knuckles. "So how am I supposed to make millions off this kid?"

"Bet on kiddy golf?" Chauffeur chimed in.

Costanzo rocked in his chair and howled.

"It's a long-term investment that costs you nothing," Grayson said, yanking out a handkerchief and dabbing his brow. "I continue to work with the boy, manage him, hire coaches, and of course, cover the entire overhead. In a few years, he'll be playing the Junior Amateur. People bet on that, and—and he'll win. After that, there's the US Amateur. He'll win that too." He stuffed the damp handkerchief back into his pocket. "That automatically qualifies him for the Global. And he'll win that too." The fearful strain had left him, and he felt a bizarre excitement. He stood, and Costanzo made an *it's okay* hand gesture to Chauffeur. "Look at it this way," Grayson went on, "Tiger Woods is finished. He was great in his time—" Grayson glanced up at the picture of Costanzo and John Weekly. "—and Weekly, of course. But look at the future. Golf is entering a new era, ready for an upstart, someone young and exciting." He didn't try to hide a smile. "Think of the sensation. A great-looking kid who's played golf since he was four, learned from his dad, able to cream a golf ball over three hundred yards, lands them perfectly on the green. Put a putter in his hands and—"

Costanzo raised his hands. "All right, I got it." He pressed a finger against his pursed lips, picked up a pen, clicked it several times, then dropped it on the desk, and got up. There was silence. He paced to the window and gazed out. The silence grew deeper.

"Shall we get to it, boss?" Chauffeur asked.

Grayson's stomach sank. *Don't kill Jim.*

Costanzo's fingers twitched behind his back. Did that mean yes or no?

The rain stopped. A strong sun broke through the clouds and streaked through the window. The Man turned, and his face gave off a yellowish sheen. He smiled. "I like that, a long-term investment. Like owning a racehorse. The kid does well, he may live longer than a racehorse." He chortled, rubbed his hands together, and strode back to his desk. "Okay, Mister Lucky, you've got a deal. The kid's got a temporary reprieve. Now get the fuck outta here."

A great wave of relief rolled over Grayson's body. He turned to leave, then stopped. *Temporary reprieve. That's no good.* "Mr.

Costanzo, my son's...shall we say?...commitment, ends when he wins the Global."

The corners of Costanzo's mouth drooped while he thought. "Fair enough. He gets one chance. He loses, or fails to play, by, say, his twenty-first birthday—" The Man pointed two fingers to his head and pressed his thumb down.

Chauffeur accompanied Grayson to the door. "You won't always be so lucky, fuck-face. You don't walk out of things like this more than once. Next time you're carried."



Chauffeur sank into a chair and patted the bulge under his coat. "You shoulda had me take him out."

"Business before pleasure," Costanzo replied. "First, I make money, if that's possible. But no matter, it'll be fun watching Bolt sweat it out for the next decade or more."

Chauffeur watched The Man's eyes fill with the same anticipation the cat must feel for the canary. "The dumb fuck has no more understanding of what's in for him than he has of the reason why. And puttin' him on that jury pissed him off royally."

"He'll be more than pissed when I finish with him. Too fucking good to take my business. I can still see that smirk of his." The Man's face hardened. "Made me grovel like I was scum."

A fate worse than death, if there ever was one. Chauffeur stood up to leave.

"Hey, get the midget to take out Washington. It's not the way I wanted it done, but fuck it."

"But he's supposed to return to LA tonight."

"LA can fuckin' wait. Give him whatever hardware he needs."

Chauffeur ambled downstairs to hunt for the midget. Misha wasn't a real midget, but he and The Man enjoyed calling him one. Especially to his face. He ran the outdated LA identity theft detail and, compared to what The Man was pulling in through his cyber-crime division, it barely made pocket change.

But Misha had been at it a long time, and it kept him busy between pulling takeout duty. He never balked at a job, had rust in his blood, and was crafty enough to steal the gold fillings out of your teeth while you slept.

Chauffeur found him stretched over the pool table trying to reach the cue ball—difficult, considering that, even wearing elevator shoes, his height only matched the length of the five-foot-long pool table.

“Hey, Misha, let’s go outside for some fresh air.”

Misha hit a banking shot that sank two balls. “And just when I was winning.”

“Of course, you’re winning. You’re playing with yourself, numb nuts.”

Misha climbed off the table and tossed his cue on top of it. He was whip-thin and in need of a haircut. He wore it slicked back, just off his high bony shoulders. He followed Chauffeur outside, and they strolled past the pool along a gravel path into the garden. Chauffeur pulled out smokes and offered the pack to Misha.

“You know I never touch those things.”

“That’s right, stunts your growth.”

Misha wrinkled his face like a hurt Chihuahua. “You know I don’t like those jokes, Chauffeur.”

Chauffeur chuckled. “Just bustin’ your nuggets a little.” He threw an arm over Misha’s shoulder. “The Man was impressed with your idea of adding hospitals to the operation. Hire people who can get personal information that makes us money.” Chauffeur rubbed his knuckles on Misha’s head. “You keep that Jew brain working.”

“I try to be creative. You know, always thinking.”

“Good, because the boss has something new for you to think about. It’s on the takeout menu.”

CHAPTER 20

A week after Costanzo granted Jim's reprieve, Grayson sat in the Florida sunshine, eating lunch at Disney World with Jim, and listening to a band across the street. He felt like his old self: invigorated, motivated, and determined. Life once again had purpose. He would make Jim into a world-class golfer who would win the Global by age twenty-one.

Grayson thought about how his dad had taken him there in 1965 for his tenth birthday, and he could almost smell the boundless flowers in bloom. He had rubbed shoulders with the world's best golfers and never forgot watching Jack Nicklaus clobber Arnold Palmer by nine shots. When Nicklaus dropped that final putt, Grayson had a mental vision from God. He turned to his dad. "Dad, God just told me that I'm coming back someday and winning this tournament."

Grayson never forgot that vision. He continued on to become a sub-par golfer. At age eighteen, he made it to the semifinals in the US Amateur but lacked the intestinal fortitude to become a professional. All his life, he suffered a nervous stomach, and although mentally he thrived under stress, he had the crippling habit of—when it really mattered—interrupting his back swing by heaving onto his golf shoes.

He cursed his condition until Troy was born, then he conferred his vision of winning the Global onto him. With that came exhilaration. The excitement he once held for himself, then for Troy, was now resuscitated by his deal with Costanzo. Jim's win would also be his win. Troy's win.

Grayson and Jim had spent Christmas with Grayson's mother in Palm Beach, and they took this Disney excursion before returning to New York.

Grayson set down his hamburger. “Jim, I was thinking. How about you and me playing some golf? You know, like Troy and I used to.”

“Gosh, I don’t know, Dad. What about my baseball? Hey, look! There’s the seven dwarfs. Are they real dwarfs, or just little kids?”

“That would be interesting to look up. But anyway, you can still play baseball. The thing is, I had a vision that—”

“What’s a vision?”

“A vision is like, uh...well, a vision is when God tells you something. My vision said that you’re going to become the world’s greatest golfer.”

“Wow! God said that?” Jim stuffed fries into his mouth.

“That’s right.” Grayson would count on God’s infinite flexibility regarding the script change. After all, He was the first to deviate.

Jim’s blue eyes sparkled with excitement. “What else did God say about me, Dad?”

“Well, that’s about it. Except maybe one other thing—”

“What’s that? What was the other thing, Dad?”

“It was pretty remarkable.”

“Better than saying I’m going to be the world’s greatest golfer?”

Grayson gripped Jim’s shoulders and looked him in the eye. “Son, you’re going to win the greatest golf tournament in the world—the Global.”

The son who had never played more than miniature golf was about to become a real golfer. Grayson knew that Jim had both the athletic and mental ability to succeed. But to compete in the professional ranks, to play in the Global—to win the Global—Jim had to take on a regimen of rigorous training and discipline.

Grayson would provide some of the training and all of the discipline. In time, Jim would develop other interests, become distracted by external influences, and perhaps lose sight of the goal. But like a football lineman clearing a path for the ball carrier, Grayson would block any and all distractions that might hinder that all-precious touchdown.

Step one: get Jim onto the driving range.

CHAPTER 21

It was early still. The sun had just cut itself on a sharp hill and bled into the valley. December was cold in New York, early mornings the coldest. The air assaulted like buckshot, ears become brittle, and grass crunched under footsteps.

Jim had trudged twenty yards from the car on his way to the practice tee when he slipped and fell. “It’s too damn early to play golf,” he whined.

“Get up,” Grayson said, “and stop swearing.”

Since losing his mother and brother, Jim had taken up swearing. Grayson tried not to scold him too severely.

Jim reached the tee box and dumped his clubs on the ground. They clinked like piano keys.

“We’ll start with a short iron,” Grayson said. “Pull out your wedge.”

“What’s a wedge?”

“It has an ‘S’ stamped on the bottom.”

Jim picked up his bag. “I want to use this one. It’s bigger.”

“That’s a driver. It comes later.”

“Which one hits the ball farther?”

“The driver, but—”

“I want to hit with the driver.” Jim started to pull it from the bag.

“Oh, for Christ sake.” Grayson yanked out the wedge. “Here, and no arguments.”

Jim looked at the ground, arms at his side.

“Goddammit, Jim, take the fucking wedge.”

Jim reached out and took it, eyes still on the ground.

“Okay,” Grayson said, trying to sound calm. This was not the way he wanted to start Jim’s golf experience. “Sorry about the swearing. Now go ahead and take a swing.”

“There’s no ball.”

“You’ll get it in a minute. Let’s see you swing.”

Jim swung.

“Very good.” Grayson moved Jim’s hands together, interlocking his little fingers. “There you go. Try again.”

“I don’t like holding the thing this way.”

“It’s not a baseball bat. You’ll get used to it.”

“I like my way better.”

Grayson exhaled. “Okay, let’s compromise. Hold it your way, but with your hands together.”

Jim made a couple more swings, and Grayson put a ball down. “Go ahead and hit it.”

“Why do I have to play golf?”

“Come on, keep your head down and take a big swing.”

Grayson stepped aside and watched Jim take a stance, looking every bit like a golfer. Jim placed the clubface behind the ball and swung it so far back it practically wrapped around his neck before whipping that great distance to the ball. It took off high and straight. Grayson’s heart soared to the races. “Not bad, not bad at all.”

“Can I go now?”

“Here, hit another one,” Grayson said eagerly. He couldn’t put a ball on the ground fast enough.

Jim just stood there.

“Come on, come on.”

“Do I have to?”

“Yes. Hit away.”

Jim set up as before, took that big swing, and hit a grounder to the right. Before Grayson could say “four,” Jim threw his club on to the ground.

“I hate golf!” he yelled and ran toward home.

“Jim, come back here!” Grayson called, but Jim kept running. Grayson chased after him, easily catching up on his longer legs. He grabbed Jim’s arm and jerked him to a stop. Jim tried to pull away, but Grayson held firm. “What’s gotten into you?”

“I told you, I hate golf!” Jim yelled.

“You never used to,” Grayson said, trying to keep his voice calm. “You liked playing miniature golf with Troy.”

“That’s not the same!” Jim’s eyes filled with tears. “Besides, I’m different than Troy, so you can stop trying to make me be like him.”

Grief stabbed through Grayson’s heart. “Be like Troy?” He sank to his knees and grasped the boy’s shoulders firmly. “Jim, listen to me. I loved Troy the way he was, and I love you the way you are.”

“You guys always played golf together,” Jim said. His voice softer, he added, “I thought I wasn’t—wasn’t good enough.”

“That’s not true. I just felt you weren’t interested until God spoke to me.”

Jim’s face brightened. “Oh, yeah, that I’d win the Global. Okay, I guess I’ll play golf. But I still hate playing in the cold.”

CHAPTER 22

Nine years had slipped off the calendar when Grayson stepped from the cab at the Knickerbocker Club. He was meeting Chief Foley for dinner and felt nervous about what he was going to ask of him.

“Hey, you old fart, I hardly recognize you,” Grayson said, entering the lobby and grasping the chief’s hand. “I’ll bet there’s not a strand of hair under that Yankee cap.” He tugged the bill. “Let’s have a drink in the lounge.”

“It doesn’t have to be only one.”

They sat at a back table and Grayson ordered. “What are you doing in LA besides chasing starlets?”

“Playing poker. Do pretty well at it too.”

“And I thought you were just lucky.”

“I plan to take a crack at the World Series of Poker Tournament. Pick up some cash and win a fancy gold bracelet.” Foley shook his head. “I do miss police work, though. Tell me how Jim’s doing. I read he captured the Junior Amateur title and was voted Golf Digest Amateur Player of the Year. And hey, what’s this I hear of him putting with his eyes closed?”

The chief’s interest warmed Grayson’s heart. “He shows off sometimes. Claims he has the image locked in his mind like a photograph. The US Amateur is up next. He wins that, he qualifies for the Global.”

Their drinks arrived, and the chief raised a toast. “To Jim’s success.”

“Hear, hear.”

They clinked glasses.

“Jim was just getting into golf when I retired. As I recall, he hated it.”

Grayson chuckled. The old man even remembered way back then. “Our first day of practice was at dawn, and he hated the cold. I agreed to later practice times and winters in Florida. I also threw in a horse for motivation.”

“A horse?”

“And last year, a car.”

The chief sipped and ran a finger across his lips. “You’ve done a hell of a lot to get that boy to love golf and to keep him motivated.”

Grayson picked up his scotch and shrugged.

“Don’t be modest. From what I’ve read, you’ve spent a great deal of time coaching him.”

“A personal coach does the heavy lifting, but Jim’s the workhorse.” Grayson sipped his scotch and put the glass down. “I don’t know if Jim was born with his special talent, or God saw fit to save his life and bestow it upon him later.”

The chief cocked his head. “Save his life?”

“There’s more to Jim’s golf than you know.” Grayson had never told Foley about his deal with Costanzo, but to gain his favor, he had to be upfront with him.

After hearing Grayson out, the chief sat quietly, fingers stroking the side of his glass. “I’m going to be blunt. What you’re saying sounds off the wall. I’m supposed to believe that Costanzo’s going to kill Jim if he loses the Global?”

“I’m not making this up. Every word’s the truth.”

“You made up seeing Sandra and Troy at their funeral.”

Grayson *saw* them in their coffins. “That was a delusion brought on by guilt. The doctor even said so. Besides, that was a long time ago. You can’t compare it to this.”

The chief picked up his glass and peered into it. “I could understand Costanzo killing Jim to punish you. It’s like him to play you as the reluctant virgin, but putting it off doesn’t...well, it just doesn’t make sense.” He threw down his drink.

“We made a deal, that’s why.”

“Well, okay, if you say so.” The chief swirled the ice cubes in his empty glass. “You’ve always had a thing about the Global.”

And Grayson had a damn good reason. “Listen, Chief, I swear, everything I’ve told you is true. And believe me, Jim *will* win the Global.”

The chief held up his glass and looked around. “We need a refill. I remember once saying that you’d jumped into a dark hole. It turns out to be deep, too.”

Grayson puffed up his cheeks and blew out. “When Jim wins the Global, this nightmare’s over. I hope I can trust Costanzo to keep his word and not—um—”

“If that was the agreement, he’ll stick to it. He’s pretty well known for that, and proud of it.”

A waiter appeared, placed two drinks down and left.

“Jim graduates from high school soon. He’ll compete in the US Amateur, then start college at Berkeley.”

“Why there?”

“Because Berkeley has the best hard-ass golf coach in the country. If Jim wins the Amateur, he’ll need someone of that caliber to keep his head on straight and prepare him for the Global.”

“No telling what mischief he could get into. Berkeley students are known to be independent.”

“I have people to handle that. But here’s the thing, if anything happens to me, I’d like you to, um...” He looked down, embarrassed. This was the hard part. He’d already asked the chief for so much.

“To care for Jim? Hey.” Foley gently shook Grayson’s arm. “Be careful and you’ll be fine.” He raised his drink to his lips. “But just the same, you can count on me.” He sipped and winked. “Even from the grave.”

CHAPTER 23

Grayson sat on a bench, shielding his eyes against the sky's yellow haze, and watched his seventeen-year-old son prepare for work.

Jim finished stretching, then tossed off his warm-up jacket. He yanked a club from his bag like a plumber grabs a wrench. His sinewy six-foot-two-inch frame straightened tall, legs spread. A towering figure, looking to clobber the ball to Timbuktu—maybe into orbit. The club moved so fast it became a blur, and the ball shot like a missile to parts so distant you'd pack a lunch to walk there.

"Hey, Dad, come here," Jim called. Grayson paced over. "After this, I want to putt for an hour, then how about you and me going to Glen Creek and playing a round? Winner picks the restaurant for dinner. You can play from the senior tees."

"I'll senior tee you, wise guy. You're on, but I get two strokes a side."

Grayson returned to the bench. No sooner had he sat down than he felt a hard tap on his shoulder. He turned to see Chauffeur but didn't bother to act surprised, though, in fact, he was.

The henchman looked mousier, but mean as ever. "The Man wants you to join him for a beer on the patio."

It had been several years since Grayson had seen either Chauffeur or Costanzo. But just to let Grayson know he was still in The Man's heart and mind, every June first—Jim's birthday—Grayson opened his mail to find the joker playing card. The Man had kept tabs on Jim's tournaments and bet heavily on them. Detective Wilson had informed Grayson long ago that Costanzo had one weakness that twice nearly ruined him: seven-figure gambling. He once had to mortgage his house to pay more than four million dollars he lost betting on one of Super Bowl's biggest upsets. With thirty-

five seconds left in the game, Eli Manning, of the twelve-point underdog New York Giants, lofted a touchdown pass that stole the game from the New England Patriots and put Costanzo into a three-day rage.

Grayson trudged to the patio to talk to a man he despised. More than despised—hated. Costanzo was watching golfers hit off the first tee. He looked older, grayer, a little hunched. He also had a suspicious line at the corner of his mouth.

“Sit down, Bolt. I ordered you a beer.” The suspicious line became an unsettling smile.

Grayson remembered the days when it was Mr. Bolt. “Good morning, Mr. Costanzo.” They shook hands.

“My mother needed a break from the old folks home, so I thought a field trip out to Long Island might be nice.”

“I’m sure she appreciates the outing.”

“She’s sleeping right now.” Costanzo took a swig of beer. “I’ve got to hand it to you, Bolt. You’ve done a hell of a job with that kid of yours. I thought you were blowin’ smoke up my ass about all those tournaments he was going to win.” Grayson’s beer arrived. Costanzo picked his up and nodded. “To Jim. May he continue to—” He double-clicked his tongue. “—make me money.”

The toast didn’t settle well for Grayson. Tension knotted his stomach, and he wondered what Costanzo’s real purpose was in coming out to Long Island. “You have something you want to talk about?”

Costanzo’s face darkened. “Right to the point, isn’t that right, Bolt?”

Grayson smiled with tight lips.

“You won’t like what I’m going to say.” Costanzo looked at him and raised an eyebrow. “But you’re going to follow my advice, anyway.”

Grayson’s grip tightened around his icy mug.

“Next week’s the US Amateur, and I don’t, repeat, don’t, want Jim to win.” Costanzo took a long drink of beer, as though to allow time for the message to jolt Grayson’s nervous system.

Grayson stiffened so hard he could feel muscles strain throughout his body. “Why would you want him to lose that all-important tournament? For Christ’s sake, that’s the one he must win to qualify for the Global.”

“I have my reasons,” Costanzo said with a sly grin. “Don’t worry. He can win next year.” He raised the beer to his lips and added, “I promise.” Beer sluiced over his lower lip and he swallowed. He put the mug down with a clank, dabbed a napkin to his lips, and broke into a satisfied grin.

Grayson opened his mouth. Chauffeur, sitting near, reached over and clutched Grayson’s shirt, yanked him close enough to kiss, and hissed, “The Man isn’t talking to exercise his lungs. He insists.”

Grayson jerked away. “Fuck off!” He turned to Costanzo. “You can’t expect my son to do *that*.”

Costanzo’s grin faded like a blind date at the door. His face took on a purplish poisoned color and his voice dripped with contempt. “Bolt, never tell me what I can or can’t expect. And remember, fucking up has consequences.” He pushed his chair back, stood, and strode off.

Chauffeur reached for his mug and drained it, got up, and scrubbed his lips with the back of his hand. He threw some bills on the table and bent down into Grayson’s face. “Go ahead, asshole, fuck up. The earth’s full of losers,” he said in a thick, clogged voice.

Grayson pushed his chair back and leaped to his feet. He juted his chin into Chauffeur’s long face. “And there’s plenty of room for flunkies and yes men.”

Chauffeur grabbed him by his collar and dragged him in close. “Tough talk from a guy whose son is on the line,” he hissed.

Grayson’s breath caught.

“That’s what I thought.” Chauffeur shoved him back. “Remember that next time you think about giving me lip.” He turned and left.

Seething, Grayson watched him go. But he didn’t dare reply. Too much was at stake.



Chauffeur caught up with The Man as he ambled toward the car while smiling to himself. The Man loved giving Bolt the screws. “The fuck doesn’t know whether to piss standing or sitting down. He needs to get used to the kid losing.”

“Don’t count on it,” Costanzo said. “The twisted fuck’s gonna go through hell and come out the other side as stubborn as he’s always been. Just watch.”

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About the Author



Bill A. Brier grew up in California and went to Hollywood High School. After serving in the air force as a combat cameraman, he hired on at Disney Studios as a film loader and advanced from there.

He earned a master's degree in psychology—a big help when working with *Trumpish* Hollywood producers—you're fired! During his more-than-twenty-five years in the movie business as a cameraman, film editor, and general manager, Brier worked on everything from the hilarious, *The Love Bug*, to the creepy, *The Exorcist*, to the far out, *Star Trek* and *Battle Star Galactica*.

Eight years ago, Brier switched from reading scripts to writing mysteries and driving racecars. After completing three award-winning novels, he signed with Black Opal Books. His first novel, *The Devil Orders Takeout*, is a standalone mystery/thriller about a devoted father and husband who makes a deal with a real-life devil to protect his golf-prodigy son—after his wife and older son are killed in a mysterious accident—and pays hell for it.

Brier's second mystery, *The Killer Who Hated Soup*, launches in July, 2017: The Internet? Never heard of it. Smart phones? Who you kiddin'? It's the 1950s. Energetic and eager to make his mark on what *Time Magazine* called the next great boom town, Bucky Ontario leaves his daddy and little sister in Louisiana and rides a bus to Defiance, Oklahoma, a town not particularly adverse to murders, just the embarrassment of them when committed by high officials.

Brier lives in Southern California with his wife, dogs and chickens. He writes every day and golfs infrequently (that damn right knee!). His five children and eight grandchildren keep him busy going to birthday parties, and he never misses a one!

The Brier Patch, Brier's humorous and engaging blog about his wild and woolly early days in Hollywood, is on his website, bill-brier.com, along with contests, which will award grand prizewinners \$1,000.