

The Phantom Harvester

A Novella

Steven M. Moore

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Preface

When I start a story, I never know whether it will become a short story, novella, or novel. This novella almost made it to novel status. Maybe it will become one at a later date, but I'm on to other stories for the time being. Readers will benefit because it enters into my list of free PDFs, which amount to samples of my writing free to the reading public (there are other PDFs in that list too).

Several readers have asked me about Detective Castilblanco's children. They were first mentioned in *Family Affairs*, #6 in the "Detectives Chen and Castilblanco Series," last mentioned in *Gaia and the Goliaths*, #7, but they aren't mentioned in *The Golden Years of Virginia Morgan* that served as a bridge between that series and the "Clones and Mutants Series." They're also not mentioned in the two spin-offs either, *Rembrandt's Angel* and *Son of Thunder*.

This novella is the first of two that will solve this problem. "The Phantom Harvester" can be considered contemporary with *The Golden Years* and fills the gap between Detective Castilblanco's adopted children's childhood while setting the stage for novels that come later in my fictional timeline (also a free PDF). The second novella—assuming I find time to write it—will link *The Golden Years of Virginia Morgan* and the first novella, completing that bridge that leads into *Full Medical*. I offer a small preview at the end of the present novella.

I hope you enjoy the story.

Steven M. Moore
Montclair, NJ
August 2019

Chapter One

The limo drove up to the entrance of a clinic in upstate New York. A wiry man that could pass for the ex-Russian dictator's brother got out, went around the back of the car, and leaned into the driver's window.

"I'll call you when I'm through. If I strike a deal, it might take a little longer; if I don't, I won't waste my time...or yours."

"I'll be at that diner we spotted on the way here, boss."

"Yes, I also spied that advertisement for homemade cherry pie. But just bring me a cup of coffee if it looks halfway decent."

"Will do. Good luck."

"I never count on luck, Sean. Successful people make their own luck."

The driver nodded. "He might not want to share his business."

"We will then drive it, and him, into the ground."

The wiry man watched his chauffeur leave. *Sean's a good man*, he thought. *We're almost like partners now*. He turned and headed for the entrance to the clinic.

The doctor's visitor hated to wait. *I probably know more about medicine than this quack*. He sat with his hands folded in his lap and stared at the receptionist. *Obvious office decoration*. She threw him a nervous smile a couple of times. He didn't smile back. He was too busy mentally stripping away all the plastic surgery that made her face look like Michael Jackson's. He liked a few of the singer's songs, though.

"The doctor will see you now," she finally said. "Through the door. His office door will be open."

He nodded and marched to the door with purposeful strides. *I might be wasting my time, but let's get into it*. He walked down a hall and stopped at the open office door.

"Mr. Kalinin?" the doctor said, looking up from his laptop. "Please sit down." He studied his visitor. "I see you've had plastic surgery before."

He half-stood and offered a hand. Kalinin ignored it.

"Good eye, but you're wrong. I have a healthy lifestyle. I'm here for opioids."

The doctor frowned. "So you have no pain? You don't look like the typical addict. Perhaps you should visit my Manhattan office."

"I wanted a nice ride in the countryside. I assume your Manhattan office is busier."

"I'm only here one day per week. About the opioids?"

Kalinin smiled. "I never touch the stuff. I want to go into business with you."

"I don't understand."

"My research tells me that you have a lucrative business writing prescriptions for people hooked on opioids. I could report you, you know. The DEA was once castrated by Congress, but after they finally got rid of that narcissistic incompetent who was president, they cracked down on distributors again. You participate in a distribution network that receives shipments from abroad and distributes here. In fact, I understand you're one of that network's directors." Kalinin raised a hand when he sensed the doctor was about to object. "Hear me out. I want to be

your sole provider of opioids. I can undercut any provider your network now uses, especially the American producers.”

The doctor thought a moment, but then he smiled. “Please stand, Mr. Kalinin. I need to check you for a wire.”

Kalinin frowned but complied. The doctor found Kalinin’s gun instead. He took it out of the holster and put it on the desk in front of his visitor.

“I’d rather keep that in view, if you don’t mind. It’s an H&K, so you’re probably not DEA, but it would be my word against yours anyway without the wire.”

“Don’t be stupid. There are other ways to record this conversation. But I respect a future partner-in-crime’s privacy when we’re trying to close a deal. There was once a president who wrote a book on how to do that, but he was an amateurish businessman compared to me.”

“There’s no crime. I write prescriptions for pain.”

“And many of them. That’s been going on for a long time. The DEA has gone after U.S. distributors. It’s slacked off on the medical establishment and can’t touch outside distributors.”

“A lot of my patients are in pain after one of my procedures.”

“And prescriptions for painkillers get them hooked, so you make even more money.” Kalinin snapped his fingers. “We’re wasting time. Do you want to hear the details of my offer?”

“I can’t make decisions for my network. They’ll need time to consider any offer you make.”

“Of course. But I’m not going to be your secretary and make the calls. You can make them once we have a tentative agreement.”

“All right, let’s hear what you’re offering.”

“How’d it go?” Kalinin’s driver said after his boss got into the limo.

“Very well. He was nervous at first, but he’s not stupid. His network will make more money by working with us.”

“You’re the true entrepreneur, boss,” said Sean Cassidy. “If fools get hooked on drugs, who are we to deny them their fix?”

“It will be a nice complement to our heroin business. And I won’t have to depend on those ragheads in Afghanistan for the pills.”

“Or those *diablos mexicanos*.”

“That too. I’m tired of them. They should have let that crazy president build his damn wall.”

“They sort of did, enough to satisfy his base. You know your history, boss.”

“I’ve lived that history. Back to the city, Sean. I think I’ll see that new Broadway play tonight.”

Chapter Two

Marty stood away from the crime scene just inside the NYPD's yellow tape. Boarded-up businesses seemed to eye her as an untrusty intruder into their squalid neighborhood as she stood on that deserted Manhattan street. Ceci walked toward her.

"Gruesome, right?" Marty said.

"The abdomen is sliced open and organs are missing, including her heart," said the CSI. "COD is obvious, but we still have to wait for the ME—harder to guess TOD. Damn, it's cold!"

"Any idea who she is?"

"There's a purse with a wallet. IDs, credit cards, and almost two hundred in cash. Not a robbery if you discount her organs. Her name's Shelly Resnick. Worked in TV. She doesn't live around here, so I suspect the killer dumped her body."

"I'm trying to get my head around how awful the crime is," said Marty.

"Me too. But there's a booming black market for organs, you know. Sick people with lots of money prefer to use that and bypass those long donor waiting lists."

"Or the killer could have cannibalistic tendencies."

Ceci shivered. "You would think of that. I suppose so. That's your problem." She glanced at where the corpse sprawled on the pavement. "Because she wasn't killed here, I don't know if we'll get much out of forensics."

"You might not anyway. If my theory is incorrect and yours is, the killer would almost need a sterile operating theater. I'll take anything, though. Fibers, shoe imprints, partials from her body or clothes—anything that will help us catch this monster."

Ceci watched the rest of her CSU go through their standard crime scene protocols for a moment. She decided to change the subject. "Pedro says he's ready to go back to work. What do you think?"

"Doesn't matter what you or I think. He has to satisfy the shrink. You must have an opinion."

"I'm ambivalent. I think working again could be beneficial, but I'm not sure he's ready. What's your opinion?"

Marty smiled. "I'll adopt some of your father's Zen philosophy. He's ready when he's ready. To hell with the shrink."

"Do you know why you're here, Peter?" said the shrink.

Funny way to start the session, Peter thought. He'd been through similar sessions before on numerous occasions. He decided to put the old girl in her place.

"Because I need to get my psych eval signed?" he said, smiling.

Dr. Wells leaned back in her chair, sighed, and then shook her head. "Detective Castilblanco, you were involved in a firefight and took a bullet in the neck. Somehow you managed to squeeze off a shot and injure the shooter, putting him out of commission, but you nearly died. It's normal to be affected by something like that. At the worst, it's PTSD, and it can make you crazy."

Who me? Normal? He thought for a moment. *With my background and chosen profession, about as normal as Dad.* But he decided maybe she was right. Sure, he was

affected, but not in a way that he needed help from her. *Only in the sense that I'm thankful to be alive.*

He touched the small bandage on his neck, the only physical reminder that the perp had almost ended his life. Everything had gone dark, and he woke up a few hours later in the ICU with his Mom and Dad, his Dad's partner Auntie Dao-Ming, and her husband Uncle Eric standing at the side of the gurney. Mom was holding his paw. She then brought in his sister Ceci who had left for a moment to get a caffeine fix. Marty was also there. *Yes, thankful to be alive and among family and friends.*

"The only effect remaining is being thankful I survived, Dr. Wells. I know cops can have PTSD just like soldiers, especially now with the lax gun control laws where perps can arm themselves to the teeth with military-style weapons. My Dad confronted those devils long ago. All I feel is gratitude that his great Buddha is still smiling at me."

"How's that going by the way?"

Here we go. Had to answer. Not every NYPD homicide cop was looking for enlightenment, especially not an oversized Puerto Rican with a big family who were mostly Catholic, except for his Dad, who had converted.

"Doing a lot better with his guru-mentor than I am with you. The guru'd probably sign my eval because he knows I need to get back to work."

She smiled. "Okay, detective, you can go back to work." She pulled some paperwork from a folder that had been atop the stack on her desk, signed all three copies with a flourish, and then handed him a copy. "Just don't advertise your Dad's guru-mentor too much. They'd fire me and give him my job."

"Uh, I doubt he'd accept the offer."

He walked out of the shrink's office feeling a bit like he imagined O.J. had felt when walking out of that prison so long ago. Being idle for Peter Castilblanco was like being in a mental prison.

As Peter took the stairs to street level, he thought more about the gunfight. *Does Dr. Wells know?* He decided that she had no idea how he'd lost it. The mix of emotions he'd had far surpassed anything he'd experienced in Afghanistan.

First, there was the irony that he might die in a cockroach- and rat-infested basement in New York City, not the Middle East. He'd have to talk to Dad about that one. A domestic argument had gone south, and a man had killed his estranged wife and her new boyfriend. Marty and Peter were only a block away. *Had the SOB wanted to commit suicide by cop?* Peter would like to know but probably never would. The husband was now receiving treatment in a facility for the criminally insane; he was in a straitjacket most of the time.

Second, the neighborhood was so rundown that it had seemed he was back in Afghanistan stalking terrorists in a ruined city. Maybe the construction materials were different, but the threat seemed to be the same. The difference was that in Afghanistan he'd been carrying a military-style automatic rifle with a large magazine, not a toy Glock. He'd also had a helmet and vest. Neither Marty nor he had them going into that building, while the perp had a legally purchased AR-15.

That was the third point. He'd made a mistake. Marty had argued that they should wait for backup. He'd figured the perp was going to get away while they waited. Renters in the

building had called after hearing shots, afraid for their lives. They were sequestered in their apartments, so he'd also been afraid the shooter would take hostages.

And then there was item number four, his anger. An intense anger at the animal inside masquerading as a human being, an intense anger at an uncaring city who would put its cops in such dangerous situations ill-equipped and maybe ill-prepared, and an intense anger at a society who didn't take care of its mentally ill except for allowing them to have arms so they could kill. He was thinking all that even before they went in; what happened only confirmed it.

The memories were still raw. *Dr. Wells can't begin to know! It isn't PTSD—it's lingering anger and frustration.*

At least he was still alive and had been able to file away at his residual anger's sharp edges and think about lessons learned. If his job didn't kill him, those lessons would make him a better cop.

He took the subway home to continue pondering those lessons. *My last day of R&R.* He smiled. The first R was ruminating; the second regrets. That evening he'd start laying off the liquor.

Chapter Three

“What’s new?” Peter said to Marty after she came in the next morning, sat behind her desk, and logged on to her old laptop that only had one serviceable hinge.

“You’re here early. Too much rest in the hospital and at home?”

“I needed some. Just not that much. And Mom and Dad started getting on my nerves. Especially Mom at first. Kept muttering “My darling little boy.” Not like her at all. Dad, he’d just shake his head most of the time, wondering about my funk. The shrink was in a good mood, I guess. She signed the paperwork.”

He’d known Martyna Janowska since they attended John Jay and later the police academy. She’d been a beat cop in Queens; he’d worked the Bronx beat. She’d also been in the counterterrorism group for a while; he’d done his counterterrorism stint in Afghanistan, years after his Dad was there. The two young cops came together in a new Manhattan precinct as detectives, partnering with older cops. After a few years and a few retirements, they’d become partners.

Her mother was a retired cop; his father was still active. His Mom and Dad had adopted his sister Ceci and him; Marty’s mother was a single parent who’d raised three kids. He found it interesting how policing ran in families—always had and always will, he guessed. *This damn dreary city needs all the cops it can get. The Big rotten Apple.* His stories about horrendous crimes in the city weren’t as numerous as his Dad’s, but he already had a few. The percentage of those committing crimes was small, but, with so many city dwellers, that still meant lots of crime. *Job security!*

Marty took a file from the pile on her desk and handed it to him. “Three murders in one night, all with the same MO. Each victim had different body parts missing. Boss says it’s top priority.”

“Then you and the boss need to give me at least fifteen to come up to speed on the case.”

“I’ll get us some coffee while you do that. I’ve only begun, so most of the file is background on the victims along with CSU and ME reports.”

He read through the ME’s report first. “Death from surgical complications” seemed a poor description, so he read farther and confirmed his opinion. The perp had removed various organs from each victim with surgical precision like they were organ donations from accident victims who had passed on. Only problem: they were alive when all that was done!

That crazy cannibal from an old classic movie entered his thoughts. *Hadn’t he removed slices from an FBI agent’s brain and eaten them?* Pedro knew a few agents who didn’t require such a procedure to demonstrate their stupidity, but he also knew many more who were dedicated federal cops just doing their jobs for an ungrateful society.

Every year there seemed to be some new psychopath doing his shtick in the Big Apple. He always felt sorry for cops who got those cases. He guessed Marty and he were now new members of that club, taking their turn at trying to find a serial killer, if one night’s work made the perp one. He’d never had that kind of case before. Didn’t think she’d ever had one either, but they’d both had to deal with drug-crazed addicts and dealers when they were in uniform.

By the time Marty returned, Peter had perused all there was in the slim folder.

"Where the body was dumped wasn't the scene of the crime," he said, voicing his conclusions from reading the CSU's report. *Ceci and her cohorts are thorough!* "And the victims were all healthy people between twenty- and thirty-years-old. That's the only thing they have in common, as far as we can tell."

She nodded. "Two were married, one was single. I think they were random targets."

"Targets of opportunity. A woman who worked in a television studio, a man who was an accountant, and another woman who was an EMT. We need to talk to friends of the first one and the family and friends of the second two."

"And determine where they were killed. It must take place in a doctor's office, clinic, or hospital."

He shook his head. "Too visible. I'm betting it's some vacant shop or warehouse turned into a makeshift OR. With a kitchen attached?"

She shivered. "Don't go there."

He guessed she'd seen that classic movie too. She rummaged around on her desk, and then handed him a three-page report summary. "Read it. There's quite a black market for body parts. Rich people will pay any sum these days to skip the official government donor waiting list and stay alive. Their illegal supplemental insurance plan for 'Medicare for All.'"

He read the title of the article: "Estimates on the Occurrence of Illegal Harvesting of Body Parts—Summary." *How can you estimate something that's so hidden?* It was like people estimating how much of the internet was dark. Or how many politicians are on the take.

The report was written by an investigative reporter. He thought of the debate about "fake news" years ago when he was a kid. Now it all seemed fake, but even before that, Mom and Dad never trusted the media much, even though it was her job to find and report on the news. Mom had been an honest reporter and reported only on things that happened where there was enough information available to support the story. He felt the internet had changed all that. *Those lovable Russian hackers are still pleasing their masters, for example. 'Course we've gone through a bunch of our own politicians who have lied and done criminal things too. Brave new world.*

"Let's maintain our objectivity. Can you snoop around and see who the friends of the television woman are and interview them? I'll interview the EMT's family. We'll go out to Montclair together for the third guy."

"Works for me. We can meet back here and get a car. I know a good place for lunch in Montclair."

He nodded. Marty now lived in an old garden apartment in Clifton. The buildings were dumpy but her digs beat his by a long shot. That had been one advantage of recovering at his parents' place. *And Mom's cooking!*

Chapter Four

Pam Stuart put down her phone and smiled. Her husband was always quoting Buddha now. She guessed that was better than the salty language he'd used at times in their first years together. He'd reassured her that Peter would be just fine back on the job.

She turned her attention again to the monitor. The reporter was standing in front of her son's precinct.

"The police are baffled by these three murders," the reporter said. "The mayor is encouraging New Yorkers not to walk on the street alone in Manhattan. The ex-police chief has told us what possibly might be occurring. Listen to what he says."

Audio cut to the retired police chief who earned consultant's fees now from both the local channel and the national network as an expert on crime and terrorism.

"This is clearly the work of a damn serial killer. Motivations for the killings aren't obvious and probably depend on what the harvested organs are used for. They could just be simple trophies from his kills. Or they could be used for some fucking devil or voodoo worship. What do I know? One thing is certain: the organs are harvested with surgical precision. I suspect the killer has some kind of medical training. This will all be settled when we arrest the person." The old man coughed. *Had he stopped smoking?* "NYPD will put their best homicide detectives on the case, I'm sure. The arrest will come sooner than later."

The pompous old bastard. She wasn't upset by the use of expletives. The media often didn't even bother to bleep them anymore, considered they added color to the descriptions, and maybe thought in this case that they'd make the ex-cop seem more authentic. No, there were other items that bothered her about the assumptions the man was making.

First, there were many cases where there would be serial killings and then the killer would take a hiatus, move to another part of the country, and begin again. Those were the most difficult. Second, many crimes became cold cases. She knew points one and two from personal experience—she'd been a crime reporter and her husband a homicide cop. *Third, Marty and Pedro will have this case. They're good but not as good as my husband. Will Pedro consult with Rollie?*

The reporter came on again. She stopped the video. "Cut out or bleep the two swear words and schedule it for the six o'clock news," she said to the technician. "Put the old bastard's pic in the upper right-hand corner so it's not all about the reporter."

"Tough day?" her husband said when she walked into the apartment.

"Not too bad. You?"

"Chen and I worked on the caseload. Cherry-picked some, reconsidered old cases, decided to send some older ones to the cold-case archives. You know the drill. Chen's kid threw a no-hitter against Ohio State. How 'bout that?"

"Think he'll go pro after graduation?"

"Maybe. Chen could donate her pension payments to us then."

"I don't think Eric would approve of that," she said with a laugh. She kissed him. "I'm not in the mood to cook tonight. Want to hit the deli and bring something back?"

“Sure. Get into your slippers and relax.”

“Nothing too spicy. You know how that will sit with you.” She knew that he would just pop two or three Tums in that case, but she needed a good night’s sleep.

Rolando Castilblanco made the rounds at the deli, picking out several dishes for a modest meal. He sat his choices on the counter. The young man there smiled at him.

“How are you doing this evening, detective?”

“Muddlin’ along, Joachim. How ‘bout you?”

“Waiting for my father to come in so I can go off to my first night class.”

“Hard to do that. I did, but can’t say I was a top student like you. Your father must be proud.”

“My father just wants me to marry a rich Jewish girl and give him more grandchildren. He’s a bit too traditional, you know.”

One way of saying it, thought Castilblanco. “A lot of Latino men are too.”

“Speaking of Latino men, how’s Peter? Has he recovered?”

“Knew about that, did you? He still might have some problems. Thanks for asking.”

“Peter and I dated a couple of times.”

Castilblanco shrugged. *I live with it*. “If it’d become serious, we’d have had all the major religions covered.”

“Meaning?”

“Peter and his mother and sister are Catholic, Ceci’s dating a Muslim, you’re Jewish, and I’m now a Buddhist.”

Joachim laughed. “We’re not Orthodox.”

“But you run a traditional deli. Can’t have everything, I guess.”

As he walked outside, his smart phone’s ringtone sounded. It was Pedro.

“We need to talk.”

“Not about your love life, I hope.”

“About this case I’m on.”

“That I can do. Just say when.”

“ASAP, but I’ll give you another call. Got to go.”

Chapter Five

Rhonda Delgado's family's emotions ran from deep sadness and anguish to a healthy desire for revenge. *Understandable*, Peter thought.

"You need to catch the person who did this and make him pay," said the husband who was a male nurse at NYU's Langone Hospital. "She was helping people every day. She didn't deserve this. And just so we're clear, please practice some street justice, Detective Castilblanco. Kill the bastard when you find him."

He nodded. "I understand your sentiments. You can call me Peter."

His real name was Pedro. His Mom and Dad had called him Pedrito before, and Pedro now. Marty had dubbed him Peter, and with all the anti-immigrant xenophobia still hanging around, he used that name professionally. "I understand, but I can't act on that. If it happens, okay. But what if we find out the perp is a woman?"

"I'm gender neutral about my desire for revenge." He indicated his kids. "They're without a mother now. Do you have any kids, detective?" Peter shook his head. "Okay, but how would you feel if your wife and their mother was killed?"

"Pissed to hell," he said. "That's a normal reaction."

He then ran through his usual list of questions: Any known threats, any harsh words spoken, any old and jealous boyfriends, and so forth. He left with a couple of good pics of Rhonda, much better than the one on her national ID card.

He wondered how the family would make out now. Especially the kids. Losing a parent was bad enough, but in these circumstances, it couldn't be much worse. Made a mental note to inform them when they found the perp and another to check up on them periodically. Knew that they had been a nice family. They deserved to know.

Marty had the harder problem. Shelly Resnick, the TV woman, had many friends. The last people to see her were a gay couple—the three women had met in a bar. Marty interviewed them and three more of the vic's friends, but still had most of her list to see when she met Peter at the motor pool.

She knew he didn't like the new "green cars," little electric bugs that began coming online in the NYPD motor pool years ago. At least they didn't add to the pollution if you discounted the chemical wastes from manufacturing and disposal of batteries. She already knew his opinion and started a lecture about taking care of the environment and climate change right after he began his ubiquitous mantra. Her spiel fell on deaf ears because he was also a believer in taking care of Gaia, much more so than most politicians in DC and Albany. His problem was that he didn't fit well into small cars. His Dad had the same problem, even worse. The eternal question: Why does "green car" have to imply "midget car"?

She drove.

"You're driving for the return trip," she said. "You can just drop me off at home when we're done. I have a hair appointment."

Unlike Peter's Mom or Dad's partner Dao-Ming Chen, Marty knew she was no beauty. She always struggled with her weight. She was a plain woman, but she tried to compensate with a cheery disposition and by helping others—a glass half-full outlook on life in spite of her job.

Peter was more doom and gloom, so she dated a lot more often than he did. His Mom was always pushing him and asking Marty to match him up. *Maybe she wants grandchildren?* Figured she'd be waiting for a while in Peter's case. While gay men had options, Peter didn't seem to have any inclinations in that direction. And her FBI agent from the NYC office seemed to be getting serious.

She thought that she'd have the easier drive. He'd be heading back to Brooklyn as the evening commute started. He'd just have to accept his fate, though.

Mrs. Connolly, the accountant's wife, was family-oriented like many of Peter's female relatives and other women in his life. From the pics scattered around the house, she seemed to be a good-natured woman who loved her husband and kids and was completely content to be a schoolteacher and live the American dream. That dream had shattered with her husband's death. She sobbed most of the time the two detectives interviewed her.

"I knew Bobby was the one when he transferred to my high school. We went to college together, detectives." Peter winked at Marty. "I just don't know what I'm going to do."

Peter had met Marty at John Jay. They'd dated twice, but stopped at that because Peter had found it confusing. Marty avoided discussing his hang-ups. She'd already decided he was too disorganized anyway, so they had just remained friends. She'd also encouraged him to figure things out. He had done that.

"Did he have any enemies?" said Marty.

"How could he? He was nice to everyone. He worked hard at his job in the city and often did pro bono tax work for old timers around here. Everyone loved my husband."

"I apologize for asking this," Peter said, "but men often have midlife crises. Do you know about any girlfriends?"

"I was expecting you to ask that, being a young Spanish man." Peter ignored that. At least once per week some ignorant person conflated Hispanics with Spanish. *The Spanish are in Spain; my roots are in Puerto Rico, and all Puerto Ricans are Americans.* He could see Marty caught it too; her wink at him had helped him overlook the woman's ignorance. *Or is it bigotry?* "He wasn't that old, you know. And we're so busy with the kids' activities, and he was so occupied with his work, that we haven't had a night out for ages. There wasn't any time for fooling around for either of us. He often worked late and would head for Port Authority to take the bus, although he'd sometimes take the train, when I'd go get him at the station. He must have been doing one or the other when that monster caught him. I saw the coroner's results. Who could do such a thing?"

"Probably a very mentally disturbed individual," Peter said. "Can you provide a list of his friends?"

"Of course. Some neighbors here and some colleagues at work. He had a few golf buddies too, although he didn't have time to play much. And we occasionally played bridge with couples here in the neighborhood. I'll make a list. You don't think one of them did it, do you?"

"Probably not," said Marty, "but they might know someone your husband had words with, for example."

Chapter Six

He'd singled out one particular woman in the group of six. *Office party*. But she's the cream of the crop. *Probably works out like that TV exec. If she lives around here and leaves alone, she's mine.*

The money he made from his harvesting was an added bonus to the high he got with the killing. His very Catholic wife Mary would have been aghast.

He often visited his wife's final resting place in his backyard. The cops had never suspected him. There hadn't been a large life insurance policy and no stocks and bonds outside their shared IRA. They'd been separated for almost two years. Her religion prevented her from asking for a divorce. And she'd made some good money as a real estate agent that fattened that IRA a little. Not enough to make murdering her profitable, though, according to the cops.

Good riddance to the old bag. But he diligently visited her in his backyard—it was the correct thing to do, after all. No one forced him to do it, but he'd been in love with her once upon a time. He smiled at the last thought. Many relationships generally started like a fairy tale and had a happy ending. Her ending had been an unhappy one. *But she'd felt no pain!*

His target left first, and the other five remained in the pub. *Time to rock and roll!*

At that hour, it was easy to follow her. *They're all easy to follow.* He couldn't figure out why New Yorkers were so gullible. Everyone said they weren't, but everyone was. It wasn't a gender thing. Men were just as gullible. But they'd fight back harder...and they just might win.

He loped around the block and came around to face her. *I've got to see their angelic faces! See the life in their eyes!* Ready to inject the syringe in his pocket, he stopped in front of her.

"Hello there. Can you tell me what time it is?" He swayed a bit to give the impression he was a bit tipsy.

When she glanced at her watch, he plunged the syringe into her neck.

"What the..." Her voice faded to nothing.

"Hell?" He felt compelled to finish the sentence for her. *Neither an avenging angel from above nor a Devil's minion from below, I'm just an ordinary businessman.* He caught her and eased her to the sidewalk so she wouldn't damage anything if she hit it too hard. *And I have to protect my merchandise!*

He'd worn his wool hat low and his coat collar high, which wasn't unusual on a cold night. Now he took a ski mask out of his coat pocket and put it on; the wool hat was folded and took its place.

He left her propped against a building's brick wall and fetched his car. She was a lot bulkier than he'd figured. *More muscle than most!* He had to lean her against the car frame and go around the car. Sliding across the back seat, he got on his knees and dragged her into the car.

As he got behind the steering wheel, he checked to see if there were any witnesses. Only when he arrived at the abandoned warehouse did he remove the ski mask.

The surgery wasn't hard. It was more like an autopsy. As a young man, he'd thought he might become a medical examiner for the police. After a few years of medical school, he decided that wouldn't work. He'd be seeing too many mangled and tortured bodies as an ME. He liked perfect bodies—the healthier the better.

Mary's had been perfect in the beginning. She let herself go. He knew it hadn't been her fault. People age differently. Early on Mary had needed a lot of calories because she was a runner. Her healthy life had started going downhill a few years after they were married. Later, after all the cookies at open houses, she looked awful. Not as bad as other old hags in real estate, but nothing like when she was young. She could still strut a bit at cocktail parties. He had enjoyed showing her off. He'd also held back the aging process a bit with his skills. *Time erodes everyone's body!*

When he finished and had the requested organs on ice, he had the usual problem of getting rid of the remains. *Maybe I'll drop her off in the park on my way home?* He thought it might be fun to drop her off at the zoo, but he wanted to go up the East Side and then cross through the park to the West. The zoo was too far south. *And I don't mind when the cops find the body. The family can give her a proper burial...minus a few parts, of course.*

As he drove, he wondered when the cops would start catching on. *They're so damn incompetent! No wonder the city's a criminal's stalking ground.*

Chapter Seven

Peter threw the keys on the counter of his studio apartment's galley kitchen, grabbed a beer from the fridge, and sat down to go through calls on his department-issued smart phone. He hated the damn things almost as much as his father and had turned it off all day. There was a voicemail from the lieutenant.

"Another body found in Central Park. Looks like another victim of your serial killer. The chief's chewin' my ass off because the mayor's chewin' on his. What have you got for me?"

Pecking order reestablished—the lieutenant was a slave to it. He thought a moment. On the basis of work done so far and this new murder, his first inclination was to hand the whole case over to the FBI. Maybe Marty's boyfriend could take it, or someone he recommended. *Don't they have special task forces to deal with serial psychos?*

But then he decided that wouldn't be fair to the victims or their families and friends. And Marty and he knew the Big Apple much better than any feebee, even knew the crappy areas where rents gone wild had made small companies leave their buildings and warehouses and head for the NJ burbs. Or overseas. Those abandoned areas were a dirt-bag's sanctuary—free living without any interruptions if they could break in. They could...and did.

He left a voicemail for the boss to the effect that Marty and he were just getting started but were making progress. In other words, he lied. He figured the lieutenant would know it was a lie, but he wouldn't care too much. The lieutenant was once a cop after all, knew they had just started their sleuthing, and had probably forgotten Peter had only been back to work just one day.

Peter also called Tony, the big Italian ME who had examined the first three bodies.

"You must be home," the ME said. His face was too close to the phone, so all Peter saw was his big bald head and goatee. "The noisy background is worse than Port Authority at 5:30."

"Just trucks farting, taxis squealing around corners, kids screaming in the streets playing soccer under the streetlights, and mothers screaming at them to finish their homework. Add el train sounds and car horns for percussion and brass. A few shots now and then from gunfights between gangs add the drum solos for this gig. All's normal here. If you have a moment, I wanted to pop a question about those three bodies."

"You should be the next Ginsberg. And the beat goes on! Or collaborating with Diamond, God bless his soul, on What a Beautiful Noise, Version 2.0.' Go ahead while I take a sip of my double-double whipped whatever-the-fuck ten-buck delight from the coffee bar next door."

Peter wondered how many of Tony's extra pounds could be attributed to his coffee habit where whipped cream and sugar dominated the coffee. His Dad had told him the old man had always voted for Bloomberg but never approved of that mayor's campaigns against sugar and fat in New Yorkers' food and drink. Peter also wondered whether the ME was going to retire before those extra pounds killed him. His Dad a similar friend who had died from a heart attack.

Doctors not practicing what they preach!

"The question is simple: Did you do a tox screen?"

Peter heard a few swallows, saw the white froth on the mustache and slobbers on the goatee, and then: "No drugs except Michael Jackson juice."

Peter thought a moment. Even though he'd been a kid, he remembered them talking about when the famous singer had done his final moonwalk. "Propofol? That's only semi-conscious sedation, not real anesthesia, and I don't think it's even used anymore. I was wondering before whether the anesthesia was always the same, like it came from the same hospital or something. Propofol's a new wrinkle."

More swallows. "Propofol in all cases. Part of the MO now, even for the fourth victim. I've concluded that the organs of all the victims were removed while they were still alive. The perv must work fast."

"One surgeon possibly, but skilled. Or maybe a team. Geez, that's a terrible way to go."

"We can only hope the vics didn't realize what was happening. Although Propofol has been replaced by similar if not better stuff, it's still sometimes used for day-surgeries in small clinics and doctors' offices. You don't need a hospital for that. Nothing wrong with it either. You can take a nice nap. My colonoscopy last year was done in a clinic, and they used Propofol."

"You get colonoscopies?"

"I'm a medical doctor, remember. I take care of my health. When was your last one?"

What? I'm just over thirty. Maybe Tony was confusing him with his Dad. He knew his smart phone only announced him as Castilblanco. Different voice, though. "Thanks for the info."

Peter had another beer as he whipped up some stir fry—not a bad dish for an autumn night. He had to give his Mom credit. While Dad didn't much care what he ate—he'd just pop some Tums if it gave him acid reflux—Mom had taught Ceci and him to eat healthy. Those packages of cooked chicken strips and frozen vege mixes were faster than fast food. *'Course, I spice up my stir fries with sauces.* This time he had used a nice ginger teriyaki sauce. A home-cooked meal thanks to the bodega down the block.

He tried to pay attention to a Yankee's game, but it was like watching a snail climbing up a greasy window pane. Soccer had always been his sport, and he still played now and then. There were no soccer games on, though; not any basketball or hockey either. He found an old CSI rerun and finished his meal while watching it. Always smiled when they churned out DNA results in a few hours. *We do it faster now, but it still takes two days without bureaucracy, a week with.* He hadn't asked Tony about DNA because of that delay.

DNA, fingerprints, and other forensic evidence were only useful once you had the perp in custody; they didn't help anyone find the criminal unless they were already in a database somewhere, which usually wasn't the case. A lot of cold cases had been solved with those ancestry databases, though, comparisons even now often leading to the perp's family if not the perp.

They'd wanted to make DNA screening part of obtaining the national ID card. He'd been against that; so was his father. He'd never known what Mom and Aunt Dao-Ming thought about it. HIPPA had been watered down a lot, but it had saved the day. What was left of the ACLU had prevented GPS chips from being embedded in the ID cards as well. Unlike his father, he was willing to consider the pros as well as the cons on these issues. He still came up with the same conclusions.

He read a bit afterwards and fell asleep during the eleven o'clock news. Around midnight he woke up, got rid of some beer, and stumbled into bed.

Chapter Eight

Early next morning Peter had a call from a night-sergeant at his precinct. “We have a woman here who says she’s your serial killer.”

He glanced at his watch. Showed a bit after four a.m.

What the hell? Why would anyone admit to that? He still decided to go into Manhattan.

“I’ll be there as soon as possible. Could you call my partner too?” He gave the caller Marty’s number so he wouldn’t have to look it up. *Why should Marty get a good night’s sleep?*

You’d think that early in the morning subway trains *would* run smoothly. They did. There just weren’t that many yet. In lieu of making a change to a bus and then back to the train, necessary because of work on a station that went on until six a.m., he hopped into a cab once he was in Manhattan.

As he did so, he realized he’d forgotten about the “green car” parked on a Brooklyn street. *Will the transit cops tow one of their own?* He smiled. *They just might.* Could figure some teens had stolen it, gone on a joyride, and then abandoned it. Or maybe someone had used it to rob a bank—many were open until midnight now.

He decided to take his chances just to see what they’d do. No way was he heading back to Brooklyn.

He stopped in front of the precinct’s steps and looked up. *Home away from home.* The crappy old building, even though it was HQ for a new precinct, looked ready for demolition. Many buildings in the NYC area looked that way now. Years of weather and neglect had taken their toll, wearing down the facades and hiding any paint that might have been there with accumulations of smog and soot. *How bad would they be if the city wasn’t a role model for protecting the urban environment?*

The interiors weren’t much better. And those were the buildings still in use. The abandoned ones were usually in worse shape and havens for vermin, infestations so bad that not even the homeless sought refuge in them.

He noted the precinct sign was a bit askew. Years of budget cuts, federal, state, and local, many of the federal cuts stemming from congressional revenge campaigns for New York being forever a blue state and the Big Apple being a sanctuary city, had taken their toll too, although, to be fair, even red states weren’t in great shape anymore either—that was some consolation.

One candidate in the last presidential campaign had the slogan “Stand up for America!” while another had “Let’s get some respect in the world!” Pretty much the same idea, and both myopic—the second candidate had won, but Peter didn’t see any change in the level of respect. The world was pretty much a selfish shit pile all over, and ideologies were becoming as extinct as a lot of plant and animal species. It had started down that slippery slope years ago when Peter was a kid. He wondered how the construction of the dikes on the Hudson and East Rivers were going, if at all, due to the budget cuts.

Peter found the confessed killer in an interrogation room. Nodded to the uniform at the door, who left. *No perceived flight danger.*

He sat down across from her. She was dressed in a rumpled navy blue business-like power-suit. There was a matching blue wave in her otherwise black hair. He smelled liquor. *One too many?*

“Helen Ashton?”

She’d been staring at the coffee in her cup. She looked up at him and smiled. The twisted smile seemed to be an unwanted intruder on that pasty white face. “That’s me. Who are you?”

“Detective Castilblanco, NYPD homicide. I understand you’ve confessed to some murders.”

“Yeah, I committed them. I think I did, at least.” She looked around the interrogation room. “Your décor is a bit shabby. You need an interior decorator. I can hook you up with someone. They did my apartment on the West Side.”

He took notes on his PDA, that super-duper smart phone that had made laptops obsolete because they were just as powerful, if not more so, and more portable; the NYPD provided them now, along with the apps that made a cop’s life better...or worse, depending on your point of view.

To her credit, Marty still had an old laptop on her desk and color printer beside it. He had no use for either one. Not much use for the phone either, for that matter, but he had to use it. The phone made writing reports and seeing others’ easier, but there was hell to pay when it was stolen. It had become more important to a cop than a shield.

He began the interrogation, starting with the nth version of the Miranda rights, so weakened by SCOTUS that some people might as well just opt for jail time up front. He felt a bit uncomfortable. Usually, in these circumstances, Marty played the good cop and he was the bad one. *Where the hell is she?*

Peter received his father’s call during the interrogation. He let it go to voicemail.

Chapter Nine

Marty went out into the darkness of late fall to catch the first bus. Once the clocks changed, days were just too short in the Northeast. The cold winds on her street seemed to blow right through her coat, but when she turned right for the bus stop on the avenue, she felt less frigid.

She'd left her boyfriend in her bed snoring, took a shower, and was out the door in twenty minutes. She might even have to wait for the bus a bit. It was never on time. *I probably look like shit!*

A fancy car pulled up beside her. The driver opened the window, but she couldn't see the face—couldn't even tell if it was man or woman. "Can you direct me to the nearest Starbucks?" *Man. Tenor voice. A bit of tremor. Nerves?*

She admired the car for a moment. There had been no sound as it came up to her at the bus stop. It was either battery- or hydrogen-powered. She figured the latter because it was a big car, not one of those little "green cars" that Peter hated.

She was about to speak when the passenger door slammed into her. She staggered backwards. The car's driver jumped out and came around the car to grab her. *Ski mask!* He tried to wrestle her into the backseat. She fought him.

He decked her with a blow to the side of her head. From flat on the ground, she planted a foot in his privates, which he promptly grabbed, cursing at her. She struggled up and faced him. *Doctor's smock?* His uppercut almost broke her jaw. Another blow to the same side of her head put her down, but she kicked out and hit a knee. He howled.

"Not fucking worth it," he said. He rounded the car, got in, and drove off.

She tried to get up again, became nauseous, and collapsed.

"You okay, Miss?"

Oh shit! He's back! But she looked up at a concerned black face she thought she recognized. *Thank God!*

"I-I think I need an ambulance."

The man whipped out his phone and called 9-1-1. He then held her hand until the ambulance arrived. After they put her gurney into the back, the same man stuck his head in. That's when she remembered who he was, a nice neighbor who lived in her same apartment complex. They sometimes rode the bus together.

"You're going to be okay. They'll take care of you."

The ambulance headed for Mountainside Hospital in Montclair at her request. The ER wasn't busy. Nurses and doctors were soon fussing over her.

"I need to make a call."

They let her call her boyfriend.

"We're taking you out for X-rays," said the doctor after she finished. "The police will soon be here. Your neighbor told the ambulance drivers you were mugged. The police need to question you."

She sighed. "I am the police!"

After an X-ray and ultrasound, they took her back to the ER bay where she had plenty of time to gather her wits and nurse the mother of all headaches.

I should have used my gun! Every court in the land would have said the perp was using deadly force and deserved a shot in the gut.

She slid off the gurney to confirm the gun was among her belongings. Cellphone, shield, and gun in its shoulder holster were found in the plastic bag along with her clothes.

Who attacks a woman on the street in the wee hours of the morning? Possibilities started filling her brain. That's when she felt the headache increase and collapsed.

"You now know how a pro football quarterback feels when he's hit by two defensive linemen on each side," the ER doctor said when Marty came around.

"Big difference. I'm not as big as a quarterback, and I'm not paid enough to make taking a hit like that worth my while. Are you saying I have a concussion?"

"Looks like it. No swelling of the brain, though." He started to perform some eye tests. "Probably mild." He touched her chin. She flinched. "Big bruise there, but the one on the side of your head probably did it. Multiple contusions. You have bruises all over your body, by the way. He's probably regretting choosing you as victim, though. Good woman. You fought him off."

She thought about that. *Yes, I guess I did.* But she also remembered things about her attacker that were troubling her.

"Is my boyfriend here yet?"

"In the flesh. I'll tell him to come in. Hit the call button if you need anything. We're rather busy tonight. Not like when there's an ice storm, but busy. I'll be back in a little while. We're going to have you under observation for a bit."

Chapter Ten

Dr. Helen Ashton was a plastic surgeon. She was also a nut case. *Okay, maybe she just can't hold her liquor*, thought Peter, but after a half hour of interrogation, Peter had decided she couldn't possibly have committed all the murders—timelines didn't work for some—which meant that she couldn't have committed any of them, because all four had the same MO. He also decided she needed a psych evaluation.

Because he didn't know how to start that process, he decided to remand her to his shrink friend Dr. Wells who would know all about the necessary bureaucracy. That meant that Dr. Ashton would cool it in a cell until late morning.

He was straightening his desk a bit after deciding he could go home and sleep late after finally making it back to bed, using the excuse of the early morning interrogation, when his old landline phone rang. It was Juan Valderrama, Marty's boyfriend.

"Marty's here in Mountainside. Not in good shape, but she wants to talk to you."

"What happened?"

"She was mugged, but it doesn't sound like a simple mugging to me. And she says it's your guy."

"The serial killer?"

"That's what she says."

"I'll be right out. I presume Mountainside is a hospital. Can you give me directions?"

Marty had a concussion, bruises, two cracked ribs, and a broken arm. Valderrama had gone to get coffees because he didn't want to interfere with Peter's listening to Marty's story. Peter figured he also probably already knew it backwards and forwards. The Montclair police had heard it too, but they had passed the buck to the Clifton police.

"Slummin' a bit as a UFC wannabe?" Peter said, trying to lighten the mood some. He took her hand. "What the hell happened?"

"Some creep in a ski mask cut me off on the way to the bus. The night sergeant had called me, so I was going in."

"Asked him to. Any idea who the creep was?" He wasn't about to lead her using the intel Valderrama had given him. He wanted an unbiased version and not the anguished boyfriend's.

"He asked for directions to a Starbucks and then tried to wrestle me into the back seat of his car. I fought him off. Short guy, shorter than me but stocky build. White doctor's smock with suit and tie underneath. That's about all I have. Didn't say a word beyond the Starbucks request. Anyway, I started to fight him before he could close the car door. I think he got the worst of it, but he landed an uppercut to my chin and a few blows to the side of my head, so I went down. He then jumped into the car and took off."

"Could be our guy." She nodded. "But why you?" He thought a moment. "Some serial killers get off on following the cops who are after them. You're a lot healthier than I am, so maybe it was also about harvesting body parts to make a more powerful statement. Can you describe the car?"

“Late model silver or white Lincoln Continental, hydrogen model probably. It was dark, so I’m not sure about the color. Could even be gray. Couldn’t see the plate either. He was driving, although that’s a rich man’s car; you might expect a chauffeur or even AI-control.”

“Maybe he didn’t want any witnesses.” He was remembering a recent case where an AI had testified in court. Alan Turing had been mentioned in the courtroom. “How’d you wind up here?”

“A nice neighbor called an ambulance. I called Juan on my smart phone.”

“I’ve pretty much got what I need. Get better. I’ll go find Valderrama.”

“What about the person who confessed to the crimes?”

“Nut case. I remanded her over for psych eval.”

“How do you do that?”

“Dunno. Called Dr. Wells. She’ll know what to do.”

Peter found Valderrama in the waiting room. He told him to go talk to Marty.

“She’ll shake this off,” said the FBI agent. “She’s tough. How are you doing?”

Peter hadn’t seen him since the shooting. “Gettin’ by. The city’s becoming like a congested version of Afghanistan. Mostly good people just wanting to lead their lives in peace with a few violent shitheads. You know the drill.”

“How’s your old man? He and his partner showed us up a time or two.”

Peter nodded. Auntie Dao-Ming and his Dad had gone far beyond the city’s confines a few times in their crime-fighting adventures. They’d also had run-ins with feebies even within the city. They didn’t have many friends in the federal agencies as a consequence.

Auntie Dao-Ming’s husband was still with ATF, which no longer did the A or T, and there was their Aunt Ashley, a DHS agent who was a good friend too. Neither woman was really an aunt, but everyone considered them part of the extended Castilblaco family. His Dad said Ashley Scott was thinking about retirement. Peter thought his Dad should too.

“I need to get going. If Marty had a run-in with our psycho, we now have some clues about who he is. He shouldn’t have tangled with her.”

Valderrama nodded. “Go get ‘em, Pedrito. I want to see this guy either dead or behind bars for life.”

Because the death penalty had been reinstated by the Supreme Court nationwide, Peter thought Marty’s boyfriend might get his first wish. But Peter remembered what the other victim’s husband had said. Sometimes a cop ended up saving the state a lot of money and court time when a perp decided that suicide by cop was better than spending years in jail, even if he was on death row and going through futile appeals.

Peter decided he needed to get home and see what had happened to that “green car.”

Chapter Eleven

Sean Cassidy was puzzled. He'd been assigned the job of tailing the doctor. He had plenty of experience with shadowing and stakeouts, along with his bomb making for the IRA, so he hadn't expected any problems. But traffic in the Big Apple hadn't improved over the years, and the doctor knew the city better than he did.

It's almost as if he knows he might be tailed! Cassidy had no idea why his target might think that, but the burly Irishman kept losing him.

They already had lots of background information on the man, enough to blackmail him if they wanted to do so. And more was on the way. Cassidy wondered how much of his ill-gotten gains he spent on his nightclubbing. *Maybe the SOB is just lonely.* Cassidy knew he was a widower. He didn't see much evidence of woman-chasing, though.

Life was a lot more complicated now than it was when he was a young man in Belfast....

"Have those bombs ready?" O'Hara said. "Delours and Marian are ready and waiting, man!"

O'Hara was referring to Delours and Marian price who were headed for London to let the Queen know how serious the IRA was. Cassidy raised his jeweler's loupe and looked up at the brawny terrorist. "If ye rush me, this whole place can go boom!"

O'Hara raised his hands in the way of an apology. "Wouldn't want that, now would we, lad? But the others are getting a wee bit anxious for some action, they are."

Cassidy shrugged. He couldn't imagine how they felt. If the English coppers nabbed them, they'd be in prison for the rest o' their lives. "Take'em to a pub. I should be the nervous one, you know."

O'Hara slapped him on the back. "Never heard of my lad making a mistake."

"Would not be here if I had. Now get the hell out and let me finish."

"Any idea how long you need?"

"Another three hours at least. Don't ring me. I'll ring you."

Cassidy watched him go. *I wonder how many years I have left doing this?* The stress was getting to him, so mistakes became more probable, and the pay was bad. Like none. He turned on the radio and found a station playing traditional music, a group he didn't recognize, but relaxing all the same.

After he finished his wiring, he called O'Hara. His wife Maureen picked up the bombs and delivered them to the group led by the two women.

Cassidy decided to go to evening mass on the way back to his squalid apartment in a neighborhood on the city's Catholic side.

He had no idea where Delours, Marian, and the rest would plant the bombs, but he prayed for the victims.

Vladimir Kalinin had saved Cassidy when the Brits were hot on his trail. By that time Delours and Marian were already on their hunger strike in a London prison and Thatcher was ready to let them die.

His life had changed, first as the man's chauffeur, a service he often still performed, and then to a willing accomplice in various business ventures, legal or otherwise, that made his boss richer and him wealthy as well. They had become a team. Cassidy was honored that Kalinin valued his opinion and his skills, those in bomb making not playing much of a role in their current enterprises.

Thanks to Kalinin's interest and investments in science and technology, they probably would have many more years together. The wiry Russian and the corpulent Irishman complemented each other, and neither one was above getting their hands dirty when the situation called for it.

Because the doctor was illusive, Cassidy became suspicious. *Is there more to the man than a redistributor of opioids, illegal or otherwise?* No matter the answer to that, though, the doctor was acting strangely. Cassidy was paranoid. He didn't like abnormal behavior, and the person he was tailing was doing some weird things for his age and position.

Chapter Twelve

The hospital wasn't that far from a train station for the Montclair-Boonton line. At Penn Station, Peter hopped on the subway to Brooklyn. He discovered the "green car" had been pelted by rotten eggs and whitewashed with a big swastika, but at least it was where he'd left it, and it still had all four of its little tires. He used the windshield cleaner to get most of the crud off so he could see to drive, and headed back into Manhattan.

"Heard about Marty," said the uniform at the motor pool. "She okay?"

"She'll be okay. Needs a few days. Sorry about the car."

"Probably kids. Or gangs. You're lucky. A good wash will make her green again." He smiled at his little joke. The NYPD had made a big deal when they started using them, the mayor touting how environmental they'd become.

Peter nodded and headed to the precinct and whatever fate the lieutenant had in store for him. He came out of his office just as Peter sat down at his desk. "You talked to her?" Peter nodded. "Any useful clues?"

The motor pool officer had at least asked how Marty was doing. "She's okay, thank you. What we have about our guy, if it is the same guy, is more than we had before."

"Then what are you waiting for? Get on it. I'd like to have something for the chief by COB. Got it?"

Peter nodded. The lieutenant wasn't a bad guy for someone all wrapped up in politics and bureaucracy. And he'd come down hard on the detective who started the rumor that Peter had made detective because of his father. That rumor was mostly ignored, of course, because Peter's old man had a bad rep for not being a team player and making some cops jealous about his success, so it was farfetched that he had anything to do with Peter's promotion. In fact, it could have delayed it, along with other things that weren't really the business of NYPD.

He dived into the databases to see who owned a late model hydrogen Continental, helped along a bit by the precinct's old AI. He correlated that list with the list of doctors in the area, although he knew the surgical precision in the crimes could have been learned outside the medical field.

The AI in the basement churned away and out popped the following: Arthur Gregg, a gastroenterologist; Rachel Ramos, a pediatrician; and Raymond Willis, a plastic surgeon. He rejected the female because Marty had identified her attacker as male, although he had to admit there could be a male-female team, the male doing the kidnapping and the female the cutting. Both Gregg and Willis also might have occasion to use semi-conscious sedation in their clinics, which might include Propofol.

He decided he'd remain alphabetical and try Gregg first. He had a clinic in Brooklyn and operating privileges in several hospitals on both sides of the East River. He'd have to track down his current whereabouts.

"The doctor will see you now," said the AI receptionist. "Second door on your left."

He walked back thinking of Tony's comment about colonoscopies. *When do you have to start getting them?* He knew Mom and Dad had done them, Mom on schedule and Dad with her prodding. Smiled. Dad could only lead Mom on the dance floor when it came to ordinary life

choices, but Peter guessed his Dad could also lead Mom in the extraordinary steps needed to take down criminals and terrorists.

He knocked on the door and entered without being acknowledged. Dr. Gregg was sitting at his desk but looked up. "Detective Castilblanco?"

Peter nodded and showed his shield. Gregg looked a bit like that old actor James Earl Jones; his voice was just as deep. He offered a hand, so Peter shook it and took a seat.

"You said you're a homicide detective. That means someone was murdered."

Duh! In spite of that stupid comment, Peter liked the man. "Multiple someones. Four to be precise. A serial killer. My partner was almost his fifth victim."

"I wish him well. But why are you here?"

Either he was very clever or the reference to "him" excluded the doctor as a suspect. "Propofol. Do you use it?"

"Propofol is still used, but a mix of midazolam and fentanyl is more common in my business nowadays. We have to adapt to each patient, of course."

"Fentanyl?"

"All drugs are dangerous if used improperly. Michael Jackson proved that with Propofol. But I'm not the only gastroenterologist that occasionally uses Propofol. So, I'll repeat my question: why are you here?"

"Do you own a hydrogen-powered white or silver Continental?"

"Silver dawn', I think they call the color, so the answer is yes. It's always at my house in Barnardsville."

"That in New Jersey?"

"You don't get out of the city much, do you?"

Peter shook his head. Gregg took the answer as a yes. "Far from Clifton?"

"Central Jersey. I commute on the train. I'm not following your line of questioning."

"My partner was attacked by a man in a doctor's smock driving a white or silver hydrogen-powered Continental. The other victims were sedated with Propofol and had several body organs removed."

Gregg looked shocked. He knew what conscious sedation meant, of course. "They were still alive at the time?" Peter guessed he wanted to be sure; he nodded. "And I'm a suspect because I satisfy all those conditions. That's absurd!"

"Not enough to stop me from asking you to take a lie detector test. It's the law now."

The latter was debatable. The law was ambivalent—it wasn't clear how much evidence you had to have to make a POI undergo a lie detector test. There'd been some lawsuits, some going against the cops, some for. Peter supposed SCOTUS would get a clear case someday, but for now they'd let a decision by a federal court stand in a case won by the NYPD. That had involved terrorism, though.

Is a serial killer a terrorist? The story hadn't broke yet, but he'd bet it would terrify a lot of people when it did.

"I'm a busy man. How 'bout just an old-fashioned alibi? I bet I can find one for each murder victim because I'm always busy. Or are you fellows so dependent on technology now that you don't do regular alibis?"

That hurt. Marty was more techno-savvy than he was. But the doctor had a point.

Peter went through the timelines for the cases. Gregg's alibis were all solid. Peter knew he'd have to check them all out, but for the moment he was satisfied that Dr. Gregg wasn't the killer. Peter apologized for taking his time.

“No need to apologize, son,” he said in that deep voice. “Maybe anyone who thinks I sound like Darth Vader might believe I’m a suspect.” He smiled.

“Actually I was thinking of that CNN guy. I used to watch it as a kid before the government put so many restrictions on all the cable news.”

Gregg smiled again. “Same guy, same voice. James Earl Jones. Morgan Freeman has a similar voice too. I’ll take either comparison as a compliment. I miss the old CNN.”

Peter hadn’t asked Dr. Gregg why someone would want to be a gastroenterologist, but he already knew the answer to that question for the plastic surgeon. Money. Dr. Raymond Willis’s digs were fancier than Dr. Gregg’s. Willis was also short and stocky, so he fit Marty’s description better than Gregg.

He also looked aghast when Peter described how the four victims had suffered. He too preferred the mix of midazolam and fentanyl. He also alibied out, so again Peter would have to check alibis. He’d reversed the order and never talked about a lie detector, but the doctor offered to take that test too.

Willis had the large hands and long, delicate fingers of a pianist. Peter guessed that plastic surgeons needed great hands to do their fine work. A lot of war buddies and firefighters Peter knew had some semblance of a normal life only because of plastic surgeons, so he had a better opinion of them than the average Joe, but probably not better than an aging Hollywood starlet’s.

Mom would get me for thinking the latter; she’d never needed plastic surgery, and I doubt that Dad wouldn’t have felt the need for her to have it either. Dad with his Buddhist shtick was more into the inner person anyway.

Peter then mentioned that his partner almost had been another victim.

“I hope she’s OK,” he said.

That set off a mental alarm. *I never said my partner was a woman.* In today’s NYPD, that was like flipping a coin. He’d also fought alongside female soldiers in Afghanistan. Bullets seemed gender neutral too, because he’d watched both gals and guys die.

Peter decided to focus on Dr. Willis’s alibis first. *They’d better check out!*

Chapter Thirteen

Sean Cassidy turned off the police scanner. His boss put down his book and removed his noise-cancelling headphones.

"You waste too much time with that."

"Just trying to keep us up to date. There was a mugging in Clifton."

"I don't know where that is, and I don't want to know. It's not the city, that's for sure."

"New Jersey. Just outside the city. But maybe you'd like to know who the mugging victim is?"

"So tell me so I can get back to my book."

"Martyna Janowska."

"Never heard of her. Sounds Polish, not Russian."

"Wouldn't know about that. She's Pedro Castilblanco's partner."

Kalinin came out of his reading slouch and sat up straight. "There are only two cops who interest me. Is this Pedro related to our intrepid detective?"

Cassidy nodded. "His adopted son. He's now a detective too."

"That kind of partner. A modern version of Chen and Castilblanco? How interesting!"

"So...police scanners are useful?"

"Occasionally. Especially when you're trying to get away from the police." Kalinin shrugged. "I'm definitely not interested in a mugging, and especially not one in Clifton. If I had a dime for every mugging in the tri-state area, I'd be a billionaire."

"You are a billionaire."

"All the more reason I'm not interested." Kalinin thought a moment. "But maybe we can get at the father through the son. Get more information about this Pedro Castilblanco and Martyna Janowska. We could have some fun." He looked at his watch. "But leave it for tomorrow. I have a meeting with that fat-ass doctor then. If you're going to drive me, we both need to get some sleep."

Vladimir Kalinin didn't go to sleep right away. Cassidy's discovery had jolted him out of the relaxed mood he'd obtained from reading his book. That meant plans were forming and were being rejected. Sleep wouldn't come easily.

He liked to call himself the Raven now. He had a few more normal names ready as aliases in case he had to disappear for a while into the underworld to avoid authorities, but so far only Russia's SVR was serious about tracking him down. He had ruined a few oligarch's plans in past years as part of his revenge campaign against the Russian government.

Authorities in Europe, the U.S., and elsewhere would like to pin something on him, though—he had a rep for walking the tightrope between legal and illegal. Detectives Chen and Castilblanco were active members in that exclusive club of pursuers. Their problem was that they didn't have a lot of evidence. He was careful about that.

He admired the two detectives in a way, but more in the sense that they were worthy opponents and targets for revenge. They had upset his plans a number of times, sometimes without even knowing it. *My beautiful plans!* He was always surprised that anyone could outthink him, so he had convinced himself their successes were accidents. Still.....

Cops the world over weren't paid to think; they reacted to crimes, didn't prevent them, and weren't much good at planning anything. *Sean, though, is a valued collaborator.*

He had no surefire way yet to seek revenge against the two NYPD detectives, but studying Pedro Castilblanco might lead to a good plan for what had long been delayed. He'd already had enough revenge against the Russian oligarchs. Now it was time to go after the two detectives.

Cassidy woke him. Kalinin smelled bacon.

"Those Irish-style breakfasts are going to kill you," he said, throwing on a bathrobe and following the ex-terrorist to the kitchen.

"My desires for bacon are understandable. I couldn't eat what I do now when I was a kid. A bit of rasher scramble won't hurt you now and then, boss. I made enough for two."

"And that's enough for three because you eat for two." He took a sip of his coffee. He insisted on pure Colombian, and Cassidy knew how to prepare it. Kalinin had taught him. "Is there toast?"

Cassidy put a plate in front of him. "You need a maid. You can certainly afford one."

"I couldn't trust a maid or butler like I trust you. Besides, you're a jack of many trades, from those old bomb-making skills to rasher scrambles. My brother in crime, because it is a crime to eat bacon, even with our excellent medical care."

"Yeah, I suppose." Cassidy thought a moment. "I guess there's a lot of salt."

Cassidy drove him to his meeting and found a chair in the building's lobby. He waved a newspaper. "I'll read the NY Times while I wait."

"Don't get too comfy. I might have to kill the bastard and leave quickly."

"Fat chance. You buy people. You rarely kill them."

"Correct. They aren't much use to me after they're dead. And he's 90% on the way to being bought." He went to the elevator area and punched in the floor.

Remembering his first meeting with the doctor, he carried nothing that would make such a threat in jest a reality. Just his bare hands. But they were lethal enough when it came to a fat-ass doctor. The receptionist was friendlier this time; she showed him into an office.

It occurred to him that with all the AI technology, the doctor could do away with the woman. She had to be an advertisement for the legal service he offered. *A receptionist with benefits? She does get around!*

"The doctor will be right with you."

He nodded and took a chair. He was used to luxury, so the doctor's Manhattan office didn't impress him. *The view of the Freedom Tower is partially blocked.* The Manhattan skyline changed fast these days, but the doctor could have changed offices. *That building catches the sun and shines as a monument not only to the fallen on 9/11 but also as evidence that the greatest nation on the planet was still great.* He wouldn't have it any other way—his businesses depended on it

A side entrance to the office swished open. He remained sitting and looking at the skyline.

"Mr. Kalinin, so good to see you again."

Kalinin turned his head. "Skip the ceremony. Shall we get down to business?"

Chapter Fourteen

For his age, Dr. Willis was a man about town—bars, jazz clubs, stand-up comedy shows, and other functions without big crowds. Some of Willis's alibis checked out, some didn't, because the people involved couldn't remember when he'd left the nighttime hangouts. Not surprising, because a small crowd is still a crowd. Most remembered his arrival—he always made a flamboyant entry, it seemed—but they said he tended to take off early and made an effort not to be a distraction. Because Peter didn't have exact TODs, it was impossible to do a hundred percent check on the alibis.

That was Peter's morning. In the afternoon, he started with Dr. Gregg's alibis. Three were easy. He was performing surgery at the time of three of the murders, and the hospitals confirmed that. For the other two, he was performing colonoscopies in one of his clinics; that was confirmed too. The chances that all of those health facilities were lying were slim, so again Peter ended up liking Willis more for the crimes.

He went back to the precinct and discovered a familiar face.

"I wasn't shot like you, Peter," Marty said. "Want to bring me up to speed?"

She still looked like hell, but he figured she was more motivated than ever to nab the serial killer.

After bouncing ideas around, they spent some time on the phone. They were about ready to pack up and call it a day when Peter's landline buzzed.

"You're a hard man to find," said his sister Ceci.

"Guess that's why I'm still single. What's your excuse?"

"Mom and Dad want us to attend a wedding this weekend. Dad forgot to tell us and wants us to save his butt."

"Do we know the happy couple?"

"Probably not. Mom says they were involved in an international case a few years back. Greek guy and some Slavic girl, I believe. One of those on-again-off-again romances that finally solidified."

"I'd go for even that. Marty will be a grandmother before I find someone." He winked at his partner. "I suppose the function's Saturday night. There goes my date night."

"Oh, please. You never have dates."

"Too busy. I don't know how Mom and Dad got together. They were both working long hours and seven-day weeks when they met."

"Guess you got that from Mom. Dad doesn't talk much about his past."

"Maybe because too much of it's painful. Not with Mom, of course." He thought a bit. *Yeah, Dad's successes have to be tempered with the realization that those successes were hard won.* "Okay, text me the details. I'll go if you go."

"Hassan is at a convention in Chicago. For once I have a free Saturday night. You'll be my escort."

Ceci had met Dr. Hassan Ayoubi, a medical internist, when they both testified at a trial. Peter didn't think their relationship was as far along as Marty and Juan's, but it had the potential of quickly getting more serious.

Ceci was the vivacious one—smart and bubbly like Marty. He'd always been too serious. Their early years seemed to affect him more than Ceci even though he was the younger sibling. *Maybe just personalities?* Neither of them remembered much about their biological mother who'd died of cancer, and they'd both tried to forget their scurrilous biological father.

Marty left. Peter was still staring out the window and rubbing the scar on his neck when the lieutenant approached his desk.

"Daydreaming or reminiscing?" said the Lieutenant, plopping down into the battered old desk chair for guests that Marty and Peter shared.

"Neither," said Peter. "Thinking that my Dad and I never talk about our experiences overseas that much."

The lieutenant shrugged. "So talk to him. Or are you two already in that place where the father-son relationship becomes sports, beers, and the occasional slap on the back?"

"He's not really my father, you know."

"Of course I know. What difference does that make? Your biological father is doing time and your biological mother is dead. Considering the circumstances, you're probably a lot better off."

"How's your relationship with your parents?"

"Dad's a tough ex-Marine colonel; Mom's a schoolteacher. She's just glad he's home, alive and well. They lived apart for so long that it seemed he was a stranger when he resigned his commission and retired. It was kind of cute to see them rekindle their romance. My relationship with Mom's always been good. The one with my Dad is a little tense. I think I disappoint him."

Peter frowned. "You're a lieutenant running an NYPD precinct. How does that disappoint him?"

"Hell if I know. But let's change the subject. How's the case going?"

Peter brought another person up to speed on the case.

The lieutenant digested that a moment after Peter finished. "Both POI docs look like a long shot. I'm betting it's someone else. A lot of people have surgical skills. Even a mortician or a veterinarian. Maybe we need an FBI profile?"

"I hate to bring them in. We'll lose control."

"Understood. Get Becky or one of the other shrinks involved. Whoever it is, tell them I suggested it."

"And what if that person blows me off and tells me to go to the FBI?"

"I can't twist her or his arm, but you can flatter them a bit. Tell them you think they're better than any FBI profiler."

"Maybe that's not true."

The lieutenant rolled his eyes, looked at the ceiling, and then back at Peter. "Hey, you're the one who doesn't want to involve the FBI."

Peter decided to change the topic. "What about the attack on Marty?"

"I'd write that off as a warning to the cops handling the case."

"Meaning I should be cautious?"

"Some paranoia can be a healthy thing to have for both of you right now." He clasped the arms on the old desk chair as if he were going to push himself up. "There are several turns this can take, Peter. Some serial killers start taunting the cops the more they get away with it. But the attack on Marty seems to go beyond that. Both of you should be careful."

When Peter left the station that evening, he had a prickling sensation in his neck as he walked toward the subway entrance. He remembered that sensation from walking through bombed-out villages in Afghanistan where one never knew if Taliban or ISIS militants were lurking inside the remains of a house. *Someone is watching me.*

His father had taught him a little about detecting surveillance. That had been useful in Afghanistan; it was still useful now. Instead of going all the way to the subway entrance, he turned a corner into a side street, and stepped into the shadows of the entranceway to a clothing store. The security mesh was up, but the building's shadows almost covered the fractured and pitted sidewalk.

Sure enough, a car turned into the side street too. It wasn't a silver or gray luxury model, though. He watched the limo go by and then speed up and disappear around another corner. The windows had been tinted, but just as the car sped by a streetlamp, he could see that there was a driver and a passenger in the back.

Peter smelled mob. Dad and Auntie Dao-Ming had long been at war with the Grasso family. In fact, the old man had put a contract out on her once. *Did I inherit the wrath of whoever runs that mob now? Or is this just another wrinkle to our present case?*

He took out his smart phone and saved the plate number. It might not do any good because the limo would probably have different plates the next day, but there was always a chance.

He walked back to the subway station, kicking some garbage into the gutter on the way. *Gotham is becoming one big slum. There is decay and rot all over America now.* He wondered when it would get better. He also wondered who might make it better.

Society had the veneer of affluence: all kinds of electronic gizmos, streaming videos, inexpensive but unhealthy food, and the best health system in world history that few could afford. It provided enough that most everyone could see over the edge of their misery what they were missing. The gap between the rich and the rest of the humanity had its ups and downs, but the trend was a widening that spelled chaos for most of humanity. Most people just shrugged and accepted their lot.

He was basically apolitical because he too was accepting, but he liked a Congress woman, a representative from Nebraska, who seemed to combine all the qualities he might want in a politician. Sheila Remington was a fence-sitter like him, but she was a vocal advocate for protecting the environment and discouraged the bigotry and hatred that had often reared its ugly head in twenty-first century politics. The world was morphing into something he didn't like, and that Congress woman seemed to think along those same lines.

He stood on the platform and watched super-rats sift through the garbage on the tracks until he caught the next train home.

Chapter Fifteen

Dr. Willis imagined the scat singer under his knife. She made the quartet a quintet. He especially liked the way she and the alto sax played against each other. When she finished, he raised his glass to her, and then turned around to face the bar once again.

He visited a lot of night places to drink and watch people, performers and servers as well as customers. Every human being was different, from head to toe. Some had big heads, some small; some were muscular and bulky, others frail and as thin as a miserly man's soup; some were ebony black like the scat singer; others were so white they could pass as the old-fashioned porcelain dolls his wife had collected and put into a dollhouse. All bodies intrigued him. He didn't care much about the minds controlling those bodies. *Hell, you can build a computer to do that.*

He'd made a mistake with the woman cop. He'd known that she and Pedro Castilblanco were working the case. He'd wanted her under his knife too when he had the good fortune of spotting her at the bus stop. He'd gone to see if the accountant's family was still in their little Montclair house and lost his way back to Route 3. *Teaches me not to get emotional about my work!*

He'd decided to sleep in his downtown office, allowing a longer sleep to deal with the Russian. He paid his bill, left a tip, and headed for the door, smiling at the scat singer as he passed by the small stage. She had four strong black males protecting her. *Tough crowd!* He didn't want to take chances. He still ached a bit from the fight with the detective, especially in his privates.

Willis had found his visitor creepy. There was something about the wiry man that was a bit spooky. Not quite like a mob capo—he'd dealt with some of those—but still threatening. More so now that this Vladimir Kalinin would now be a partner in one of his lucrative business ventures. He saw no way to avoid it, and there would be benefits.

On the surface at least, it seemed to be a good deal for their network. Kalinin could make them all a bit richer. The opioid business had suffered its ups and downs as do-gooders and bleeding hearts came and went in DC and the state legislatures, but people still got hooked in many ways and needed their pain drugs to stay sane. He smiled. *Of course, they're insane to get hooked in the first place, but that's not my problem.*

But some of it was, in a sense. He never worried about the addictive properties of the drugs he prescribed for patients' pains. After some minor surgery, or even a major one like butt or breast enlargements, they'd have pain, so he'd make them feel better. That was mostly women, but vain men were now doing a lot of cosmetic surgery too. His legit business depended on people's vanity and was gender neutral. The close nexus it had with one of his illegal businesses was just a simple consequence. People would get their pain pills from someone. *Why not me?*

He now had four sources of income. There was his wife's fortune that he'd inherited, which he'd invested to accrue dividends and interest. There was his plastic surgery practice. He also had his drug-dispensing network—that had been a learning experience, and he was still learning as he continued his participation in the black market of body parts. *Does Kalinin know*

about that? Probably not. It was more like a hobby. It hardly challenged him anymore—any battlefield butcher could do the surgeries—but it was a lucrative sideline. He also got a kick out of driving cops crazy. He smiled. *All the donuts and coffee addle their brains!*

But he had important business to attend to.

Before returning to his office to sleep, he visited one of his favorite places. He wasn't sleepy yet, so there was no reason to put off the chore any longer.

The building used to be a slaughterhouse serving the Jewish community. Rabbis would come in at night and offer their blessings so kosher meats could be distributed the next morning. Its current use was a step up in his mind, but still related in a sense, especially when, like that evening, he had a few special orders to fill. They corresponded to a culinary sideline to his usual practice of selling body parts on the black market.

Before he began the surgery, he would make three calls, one to a chef in Westchester, another to a Wall Street banker in upstate New York, and a third to a dog breeder in central New Jersey. He had performed plastic surgery on all three. They had all asked what he did with the remains. One thing led to another.

The patient awoke when he turned on the light. Even with the restraints, he was able to turn his head enough to glare at the doctor.

"I'm afraid it's time for me to use the tools of my trade," Willis told the man.

"What the hell does that mean? Are you some kind of sadist?"

Willis thought a moment. "I suppose I have been somewhat influenced by the old Marquis, but in many respects he was amateurish, you know. There's nothing sexual about the experience you will have either." He began to put his tools into several sterilizing pans. "I'm not sure why I bother with sterilizing my instruments. Habit, I guess." He showed his victim a scalpel. "One of my best. It's German. I bought a few used instruments when I visited Berlin. I believe this one belonged to some Nazi doctor. Fine quality. Quite a prize."

"You're going to cut into me?"

"Oh, much more than that. Don't worry. You'll feel no pain."

Willis began to prepare the IV to administer the Propofol. When it was all over, he placed the man's organs in different picnic iceboxes filled with ice. He then cleaned up and sat down to wait.

Within two hours his three special clients had picked up their special purchases and delivered their cashier checks to him. *Aliases, of course. We wouldn't want the police to have too many clues.*

Chapter Sixteen

Ceci watched her brother kneel to examine the body. Peter had waited patiently while she and her fellow CSIs did their jobs.

"In this condition, it's hard to tell whether the vic has all his body parts or not. I'm not probing around in those wounds. Let Tony do it."

"I'd venture the torso is filled with water," said Ceci. "But the medical forensics might be able to determine where along the Hudson he was dumped."

"How? From the salinity?"

Ceci nodded. "Maybe." She knew the river waters salinity changed a bit with the distance from the ocean and the tides. But even the microbes could tell a story too. "I'm not enough of a scientist to know what they can determine, but I know enough that you shouldn't contaminate the body, inside or out. Tony's our man."

Peter smiled at her. "I guess we were lucky. This victim got tangled in the weeds. These sure look like surgical incisions even with the skin all gray and wrinkled." He stood. "Who suspected that he's another victim of the Phantom Harvester?"

"Is that what you're calling him?"

"Good as name as any. I can't see any telltale signs. These could be knife wounds for all I know."

"An eyewitness saw a silver or gray luxury car parked in the breakdown lane. He stopped, couldn't find a driver, and called 9-1-1."

"Where's the witness now? Or the car he found, for that matter?"

"She. An appointment in the city. Couldn't wait. By the time the state police arrived here four hours later, the car was gone, but a cop with a sharp eye spotted the body."

"Four hours? Guess they're spread pretty thin out here in the boonies." He thought a moment. "But they were able to match Marty's description of the car. That's pretty efficient, I guess. My question is: how many cars do you think fit that description? I only looked at doctors."

"Are you going after me because I got you out of bed?"

"Sort of. How come you're here anyway?"

"Same reason as you. The other CSIs are state police. I'm only here out of curiosity, but they asked me to help because I'm familiar with the case."

"You couldn't sleep?"

"I don't sleep well when Hassan isn't here. I saw the bulletin on my phone and acted on a hunch."

"That famous woman's intuition, maybe? So you decided to create a partner in pain, namely me. Or is tomorrow your day off? It's not for me."

"Don't be a jerk. If this is your guy, you've got to stop him, damn it!"

"Let's assume it's our guy. Why the hell does he dump a victim way up here beyond the G.W. Bridge?"

"Maybe he lives up here?"

Peter raised an eyebrow. "There's an idea. A predator from the countryside who preys on city dwellers. Sounds like a gothic novel."

But not something to discount.

“Our vic’s name is Joey Parker. He managed a gym in TriBeCa.” Marty sent the photo to Peter’s cellphone. “ME says it’s the same MO. The organs harvested were a bit different, though.”

“Read me the list.” She did. “Interesting. Tongue’s not exactly an organ, but if the vic were a steer, these parts are all edible.”

“He didn’t take the heart. And I wouldn’t even eat this stuff if the parts came from a cow.”

“My point is that the MO is the same, but the details are different. We’ll have to check out Mr. Parker’s history. I assume no one reported him missing.”

“He doesn’t work weekends or Mondays. And his girlfriend is still out of town. We’ll have to interview her later.”

“Ceci mentioned something we should check. See if you can make a list of friends and relatives to interview while I do so.”

While Marty started calling, Peter reviewed the material he had on Doctors Gregg and Willis. The first man lived in Barnardsville but had a summer home on the Jersey shore. The second had an apartment on the East Side but his principal residence was near Sleepy Hollow. The irony of the latter made Peter smile...and also matched Ceci’s theory.

“Maybe we’ve got him,” he said to Marty when she put down her cellphone. “Dr. Willis lives in upstate New York. And he owns the requisite Lincoln. He’s a plastic surgeon and has offices here in the city.”

“I thought you said he had alibis?”

“I haven’t had time to confirm them completely. Shall we see if he has one for last night?”

“I’d rather split up. Go talk to your Dr. Willis. I’ll start working on this list. Give me a call when you finish up, and we’ll split the remaining names. We need to make some progress on this case or the lieutenant will shit a brick.”

As if he had heard Marty’s comment, the lieutenant opened his office door and crooked a finger. “You’ll want to hear this.”

They went into the Lieutenant’s office and saw that he had a local news station on his laptop.

The TV reporter was standing in front of their precinct. “Police are baffled by the serial killer called the Phantom Harvester. The number of victims is five now, so he definitely qualifies as a serial killer. One of the homicide detectives working on the case was attacked by a man believed to be the Harvester, but she escaped.” The reporter then went through the list of victims. “Apparently none of the victims knew any of the others. The police are asking that anyone with information about this case call them. Back to you, Angela.”

“Someone leaked information,” said Marty.

“You think?” said the lieutenant. “Who have you two talked to?”

“Many people,” said Peter, “but there’s no way they’d know the other victims.” He then remembered the call from his father. “I haven’t even talked to my parents about the case.”

The lieutenant thought a moment. "When I last talked to the chief, there were two aides with him. I don't know why they'd want to embarrass us, but you never know."

"How about the chief?" said Marty.

"Oh, please. If he were going to talk to the media, he'd call a press conference and do it in the open. Of course, he'd really be talking to the mayor...or strutting for him, I should say. It's hard to keep something like this quiet."

"We might benefit from tips from the public," said Peter.

"Probably numbering several thousand by the end of the week," said the lieutenant.

"Someone will have to check them all out. I don't want you two doing that. We'll get uniforms to help."

"Thank you for that," said Peter. "We have some legwork to do, in fact, relative to the last vic."

"Get to it, then."

Chapter Seventeen

"I don't know if I like your idea of fun," said Cassidy.

He was sitting with Kalinin in a rear booth at a watering hole in Hoboken. Kalinin loved to stroll along Frank Sinatra Way that paralleled the mighty Hudson. The Central Park view from his penthouse in Manhattan was also spectacular when the air was clear, but there was something eternal about the river as it flowed into the harbor, indifferent to human beings and all their foibles, especially when it sported a glassy surface, reflecting the city skyline.

"You gave me the idea with your damn scanner," said Kalinin. "I'm curious to know who this guy is. Phantom Harvester indeed. Seems like a complete psychotic. But it's fun to whip the public and cops into a frenzy. I'd like to pin the crimes on Chen or Castilblanco, but that seems out of the question. Peter, the son, seems a bit elusive, though. I guess his old man taught him a thing or two."

"The word elusive is appropriate," said Cassidy. He eyed his boss. "You're not thinking about getting into that business, are you?"

"What business?"

"Black market for body parts."

The Raven thought a moment. "First, no one's sure that's what's going on. Second, it's illegal and nastier than all our other activities. I have scruples, you know. But rich and powerful people pay big money for them, so I'll keep it in mind. Great blackmail potential too because now no one pays attention to sexual scandals. And we'll certainly need some replacements in the future."

"Count me out," said Cassidy. "That's a ghastly business."

"Blowing up Protestants in Ireland wasn't?"

"Not the same thing, and I didn't pick the targets. Besides, the blokes had thrown in their lot with the Brits. William of the Deranged and all that."

"That's rationalization. But I agree with you in principle about the body parts. I can imagine less gruesome ways to go about doing it too. We'd have to somehow create a herd of human beings. But I'm not launching into a new enterprise right now. We have to move beyond just you and me and the mercenaries we hire who aren't always trustworthy. We need to find honest crooks. And return to the good old days when I could trust people to run our businesses."

"We've certainly had our ups and downs."

"And some of the downs were caused by those two cops." He lifted his vodka shot glass as a toast. "To us, Sean, and our future."

Cassidy and Kalinin had burgers, drinking local ale instead of vodka and Irish whiskey, and continued their discussion at the end of their quick meal.

"Maybe the daughter isn't as clever as the son," Kalinin said.

"That sounds sexist. But she might not be as skillful at detecting a tail. She's a CSI, not a cop, after all. Plenty of smarts, but different ones."

Kalinin nodded. *Not unlike Castilblanco and his wife.* He'd heard about their adventures in Europe. Pam Stuart had handled herself well enough, considering she was a reporter. He couldn't understand what she saw in Castilblanco, but they'd been together quite a while. He'd

never had much of a serious relationship and went out of his way to avoid them. Sean and the little Russian waif he'd recently adopted were the nearest emotional ties he had.

His cellphone's ringtone sounded. He held up an index finger. "Hold those thoughts."

Kalinin watched Cassidy zone out while he conversed in French. He was a polyglot and prided himself at being a master of several languages along with several of their dialects.

"We're about to buy out that little Swiss pharmaceutical company," he said after the call.

"Do we need that to distribute?"

"It might make things a bit easier. It's also a good investment." Kalinin smiled. "The Swiss tend to look the other way as long as you pay their horrendous taxes. And Zurich is close to the waif."

His cellphone rang again. This time Kalinin spoke English. He smiled at Sean as he disconnected. "Looks like Dr. Willis is ready to do business with us. I'm not absolutely certain about him, but his network looks solid. I need to return to my Manhattan office and make some calls. I think I'll take the ferry. You can try to tail Ceci Castilblanco instead of Peter."

Cassidy nodded, realizing that Kalinin was determined to have his revenge.

Kalinin allowed Cassidy a lot of leeway. He used the police scanner to trace Ceci Castilblanco's CSU to its next crime scene. He'd have to go over the G. W. Bridge and then down 11th, but it was doable at that time of day. Fortunately they'd come to Hoboken in his Chevy Malibu, not the limo. They often did that now—the limo was too visible and memorable.

He arrived at the crime scene a bit after the CSU had started gathering their evidence. He parked the Chevy a few blocks away and walked over to join the crowd behind the yellow tape watching the CSIs do their thing.

Peter resembles his adopted father more than Ceci. He'd always wondered about genetics. Ceci and Peter were distant relatives, of course, so it seemed odd that there'd be any resemblance at all. *Maybe Ceci is a lot smaller just because she's a woman? Not a bad-looking one, either.*

He thought he might be wasting his time. *There isn't much chance in catching the woman alone if she rides in the CSU van back to wherever they're based.* With Peter, the problem was to find him. With Ceci, the problem was to find her alone.

But he was lucky. After they finished, she chatted a bit with her State Trooper colleagues, waved a goodbye, and walked away from the crime scene. He looked at his watch. 4:42 PM. *She was taking off early. Subway?*

He decided to follow her. He caught up with her in a block and wrestled her kicking and screaming into an alley. He put her in a chokehold until she lost consciousness, put her behind a dumpster, and went to get the car. From its trunk, he took out duct tape and bound her wrists and ankles, finishing with a small piece of tape across her mouth. He loaded her into the trunk and slammed it shut.

Castilblanco will surely come to us in order to save his stepdaughter.

Chapter Eighteen

Pam Stuart, Roland Castilblanco's wife, tried Ceci's cellphone first. It went to voicemail. She left a message and then tried her apartment's landline. *Answer, honey. We need to talk about the wedding plans.*

With no answer at either phone, she called her husband. His phone went to voicemail too.

"Rollie, I can't contact Ceci. Can you find out if she's at a crime scene? It's late and she should be home."

Some ten minutes later, her husband returned the call. "A bit of a hassle to find out where she'd been. There's been another killing in that Phantom Harvester case. Talked to a CSI from the state cops who said they finished up early, and she decided to take the subway home. That was almost three hours ago."

"Something's wrong."

"She's a grown woman. She's probably out on the town with Hassan. That kid spends money like it's going out of style."

"Hassan's out of town. Peter's her date at the wedding."

"Right. Okay, I'll drop by her place on the way to my appointment with my mentor. Maybe she's sleeping. She's been putting in some twelve-hour days."

Another fifteen minutes passed before Castilblanco called Stuart again. "Bad news. I'm heading to the FBI office. Ceci's been kidnapped. I just got the message from the kidnapper."

"What!" Stuart had to sit down. "We're not rich. How much do they want?"

"Me. They just want me."

"I don't understand."

"Me neither. That's why I'm getting the FBI involved."

Stuart had reported on several kidnappings. "The kidnappers usually don't make that kind of demand. But bringing the FBI in could be dangerous."

"They'll have no way of knowing, unless the FBI leaks it to the media. If they do, I'll throttle the leaker."

"Keep me informed."

"Sit tight. I'll handle this."

Fifteen minutes later, Castilblanco was taking the elevator up to the NYC FBI offices. As expected, the receptionist was an AI. "State your business."

"I'm here to see Richard Marston."

"Who shall I say would like to see him?"

"NYPD Detective Rolando Castilblanco."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"No, but he'll talk to me."

"I don't think so. He's very busy."

"So am I, and you're fucking wasting my time."

"Foul language isn't appropriate, sir. One moment please." Castilblanco decided it wasn't calling Agent Marston, but assessing databases for references to him. "Place your credentials face

down on my scanner, please.” Castilblanco complied. Waited. Patience was no longer one of his virtues, especially with a dumb machine. “I see you have a previous relationship with Agent Marston. I’m ringing his office to see if he’ll receive you.” More wait. Just when Castilblanco was ready to rip the AI unit off its base and fling it against the wall, it spoke again. “The agent is sending an aide to guide you to his office.”

When the aide showed up, Castilblanco wondered how long he’d been out of diapers.

“We didn’t end on great terms,” said Jowls, waving to a chair in front of his desk. “What the hell do you want, Castilblanco?”

“I realize that I don’t have the Captain in DC as leverage anymore, but I’m here to ask for help. My kid’s been kidnapped.”

Castilblanco had called the man Jowls long ago when working on another case where the feebies had tried to smack him around. The nickname was descriptive; Agent Richard Marston looked like a bulldog and often growled like one.

“I’m sorry to hear that. I’m still working on cases involving art thievery and illegal art sales. I can point you to someone with experience in kidnappings, though. Hold on a second.” He made a quick call to another agent named Betancourt. “I’ll walk you to him, detective. You can’t wander unaccompanied in here, you understand.”

“Sure. I might be from the White House.” Castilblanco didn’t know if Jowls would get the reference, but it should make him recall times when many people in DC didn’t like the FBI, a president included. He leaned across the desk, offering his hand. “Thanks. I’m desperate.”

“At least this time you understand who the pros are.”

“We’ll see.” Castilblanco followed Marston through the rat maze of corridors. “How long have you had that receptionist?”

“We hate it,” said Marston with a laugh, “especially old-timers like me. The Gnat’s been demoted, by the way. Part of that crazy administration’s attack on the Justice Department and the FBI. It’s made our work at least twice as difficult.”

He did get the reference. “Most of you guys are as conservative as hell. Seemed idiotic to me.”

“Agents might be conservative, but they don’t think anyone is above the law. And we don’t let politics interfere with doing our jobs.”

“So our confrontation wasn’t political?”

“No. You were horning in on our show. Nothing political about it, Castilblanco. Here we are.” Marston rapped on a door.

A voice inside the office labeled Special Agent Betancourt called out, “Come in!”

Marston pushed the door opened and waved Castilblanco inside. “Don’t keep in touch. Nothing political. I just can’t stand you.”

Castilblanco decided his macho Latino background had betrayed him. Agent Julia Betancourt was a large Hispanic woman with a ready smile. *My Buddhist mentor might be upset with me, but that ancient religion was sexist too; they all were, and Catholicism is one of the*

worst: many people still think the Magdalene was a whore and priests had to be men, as determined by the good old boys leading the Church back in the second or third centuries.

"Have a seat, Mr. Castilblanco. How can I help you?"

Her voice was a nice contralto. *I like her attitude better than Jowls'*. Castilblanco took out his cellphone and played back the kidnapper's message. He then gave the agent some background about Ceci. "You have to keep this off the air and away from the media. But I do need your help."

"There's no mention of ransom. You're just supposed to go to a certain place, call the number they gave, and wait for further instructions. I don't advise that. It's likely someone who wants to kill you. Have you pissed any people off?"

"Lots." Castilblanco explained what he did for a living. He didn't mention FBI agents like Jowls who he'd pissed off. Presumably they wouldn't go as far as to kill him. "I'd find it hard to guess which one might want to get rid of me, presumably out of revenge."

She nodded. "Okay. I'm going to make a suggestion. Plan A, if you will. You don't have to follow it. We might need plans B, C, and so forth, especially if you're killed."

Let's stick with plan A. "Please understand. I'm willing to trade my life for Ceci's."

"Are you married?" Castilblanco nodded. "I suspect that your wife would rather have both of you safe and sound."

"So what's your plan A to accomplish that?"

Castilblanco liked plan A. Both the FBI and NYPD would put out BOLOs for Ceci Castilblanco as if it came from her precinct. That would provide a cover for Castilblanco. He would show up alone at the first site, but the FBI would be there ready to intercede, at his insistence their priority keeping Ceci safe, and only saving his butt if it was true that the kidnappers were after him.

He made the call from the first site, knowing a spotter probably had him under observation and checking to make sure he was alone. He was to go to an abandoned warehouse not far from the old Javits Center. He had bad memories about abandoned warehouses from previous cases, but he'd do anything to save his daughter.

"The SWAT will be ready to move at a second's notice," said Betancourt, looking like a Wakanda warrior in her vest and helmet as they rode along in the old model car. She pointed to his chest. "Just push the button."

"A swat for the SWAT," said Castilblanco with a nervous smile. "I'm getting too old for this shit."

"You'll do fine. Keep your cool, detective."

She let him out, and he walked the two blocks to the warehouse, oblivious to the dystopian landscape of garbage, crumbling buildings, and boarded up businesses. He did pay attention to a rat the size of a cat. He didn't like rats, either the human kind or animal kind.

He pounded on the metal sliding door. No answer. He walked over to a window and peered into the dim interior through a broken windowpane. *Empty. What the hell?*

"It looks empty," he said into the mic.

Chapter Nineteen

Ceci didn't recognize her captors' voices. They both wore ski masks. One was dressed in a sharp business suit. The man who had brought her to the warehouse was more informally dressed. He sat her in a chair where he removed the duct tape around her ankles but didn't free her wrists and left the small strip across her mouth.

The man in the business suit disappeared into a small office located toward the warehouse's rear. Ten minutes later, he returned.

"There's a BOLO out for her," he told his companion. "You showed good initiative, but this might be a mistake. That old cop isn't dumb. The BOLO is cover to avoid our 'come alone' requirement, I'm afraid."

The bulkier man waved his gun toward Ceci. "He'll still have to come alone, even though he has backup not far away. He'll be here within a wee bit, or I'll pop her, boss."

"Let's not be too hasty. I'm not sure that's a good idea. If he calls our bluff and doesn't show, I'd release her. The sins of the fathers aren't inherited by their offspring."

"He probably wouldn't call them sins."

"They are for me because they were prejudicial to my business interests. At least most of the time."

Ceci thought, *Pecking order established. One guy has a bit of brogue—maybe Irish or Scotch—and the other enunciates words carefully, which is the mark of an educated man who learned English as a second language.*

Between her surveillance of the warehouse for possible escape routes and going through memories of her father's old enemies, she registered all that was said for possible future use. She'd already decided that her father was the target, not her. Her only activity toward putting perps away had been a few expert testimonies in a court setting where her testimony only collaborated what they already knew about a perp's guilt. None of those defendants matched the builds or voices of these two. And she hadn't even been on the job long enough to develop enemies with a thirst for revenge.

"Let me take a peek outside," said the boss man. "It's almost time. If I see him, we'll wait. If I don't, we might want to leave revenge for another day. The Malibu's out back, right?" His subordinate nodded. "We'll take that and get the limo later. I can always wait for revenge. I've had the patience to do so for years."

The bigger man shrugged.

The corpulent man who'd brought Ceci to the warehouse had guarded her most of the night until the boss man made his appearance. She was exhausted, so she knew he had to be tired. She pretended to be nodding off, hoping the man would subconsciously be inclined to do the same. Sure enough, the gun hand dropped to his side, although it still grasped the weapon, and he began to nod off.

She tried to remember some of the self-defense techniques Peter had showed her. It wasn't a large repertoire, but she remembered his advice: disarm your adversary first, then go hand-to-hand.

She watched the eyes. When sleep seemed to be winning, she jumped up and kicked the gun out of his hand. He then smashed both fists into the man's throat, wiping the surprise off his face and replacing it with pain. She then pushed his chair over, turned, and dashed to the warehouse's far side that was in shadows, although the outline of a window showed. Placing her arms to cover her torso and hands over her face, she went through the window and tucked into a roll.

She stood. *Alleyway. Run!*

Ignoring her cuts and bruises, she burst out of the alley onto the sidewalk, took in her surroundings, and headed east, getting rid of the duct tape as she went.

"*Papito!*"

"Ceci, where are you?"

Ceci started to cry. "Are you OK?"

"I was going to say the same thing. What happened?"

"I escaped and flagged a patrol car. They insisted on taking me to Bellevue."

"The ER?"

"Yes. But I'm okay."

"I'll be right there."

Her father showed up with a black woman who looked concerned at first but then smiled as Castilblanco hugged his daughter. She was dressed in SWAT gear.

"They were after you, *papito*."

"We figured as much," said the woman. "I'm FBI agent Julia Betancourt. I'll go talk to the ER doctor and leave you two alone. But I also need to talk to you about your captors. Between you and your father, maybe we can figure out who they are." She nodded to Castilblanco. "Call me when you're ready."

Castilblanco soon called the agent to the little outpatient nook of the ER facility. "Ceci seems to be okay."

"Cuts and bruises, the doctor said." Betancourt frowned. "And maybe a bit traumatized?"

"It was awful," said Ceci.

"Let's hear your story," said Betancourt.

Ceci gave a longer version than what she'd given her father. Her mother and brother interrupted her twice, drawing out the ordeal.

Betancourt would frown and nod at times while Castilblanco was stone-faced.

Ceci finished and said, "Any ideas, *papito*, about who they might be?"

"Yeah. I've never mentioned them to you because they've been out of my life a while." He frowned, looked at Betancourt, and then back at Ceci. "Your description of them, including your observations about language, bring to mind Vladimir Kalinin and his chauffeur, Sean Cassidy."

"Did you put them in jail?" said Ceci.

"I wish. They've been causing trouble for Auntie Dao-Ming and me for a long time."

"Do we have a file on them?" said Betancourt.

"Maybe. DHS, CIA, and others certainly do. They're POIs in a number of cases, all the way back to an attack on a president we helped prevent, and most recently to a case where an

environmental activist was murdered—that one had international repercussions. That all occurred when Ceci was a kid. I haven't heard of them since.”

“I'll check in our databases,” said Betancourt. “Do you think those two would want to kill you?”

“Maybe.” Castilblanco thought a moment. “No, not likely. That's a long time to hold a grudge. So long that it must be connected to something else.”

“Peter's partner Marty was almost kidnapped by the Phantom Harvester,” Ceci said with a shudder.

Her father scanned her petite frame. “I don't know much about that case, but it could be so. I'll talk to Peter about that at the wedding if we have a moment to ourselves. You're a very healthy specimen, and, from what I know from media reports, the Harvester goes for healthy people.”

“Why involve you?” said Betancourt.

“Good question. I'm going to check the list of recent parolees to get a list of perps I've put away. Maybe someone with surgical experience. I don't know where else to start.”

“Meanwhile, I'd better learn about Kalinin and his chauffeur as well as this Phantom Harvester,” said Betancourt. “There might be some old profiles for the first two, and we need to make one for the Phantom.”

“Talk to Peter about the last. Maybe the NYPD has their own profile.”

Chapter Twenty

"Come in, Mrs. Ford," Willis said. The woman entered the exam room. Two months ago he'd done a face lift on her. "How's the pain?"

She rubbed her face. "Everything's stiff. It hurts more when I chew food."

"Let me take a look. Just sit on the edge of the exam table, please." Willis made a show of examining his work. "I see nothing wrong. I never do. However, some patients take a little bit longer to recover. Do you have any pain pills left?"

"Down to a half dozen, doctor."

"I can prescribe some more. They will help you get over the pain and heal. Just a moment please."

Willis left her and went to his office to print out a new script. When he returned, he said, "The pharmacist I recommended will help you out. Anything else I can do for you?"

"Find me a husband. I did the plastic surgery to be more attractive, you know. No suitors so far."

"I'm afraid I can't do anything about that. Have you tried a dating service that specializes in older people? Fifty-five and over?"

"Me? A dating service? What's wrong with barhopping?"

Nothing, I suppose, he thought. Except, my dear, the rest of you isn't as attractive as your artistic face I sculpted. And you're addicted to my pain meds! "Depends on the bar, I suppose. Or night club. Good luck. Come back when you need a new script."

Willis had no more clients for the day, so he turned on the TV and decided to watch the continuous newsfeed. From weather, it went to sports, and then started all over again with local. It would go to state, national, and then international. No commercials, but pop-up ads sprouted all the time. He'd learned to tune them out.

The mayor was holding his weekly news conference. Willis watched without much interest until a reporter asked him about the Phantom Harvester.

"Mayor, any progress on apprehending that psycho serial killer, the Phantom Harvester?"

"It's high priority for the NYPD," said the mayor. "It's also a tough case, but we have more to go on now. The failed kidnapping of Detective Martyna Janowska provided us with some description of his physical characteristics and his car. Of course, we ask anyone who has information on who this person might be to contact their nearest precinct or our general switchboard, 1-800-577-TIPS."

"There was no video of that kidnapping attempt?" said another reporter.

"You know the answer to that question, Bill. The attempt occurred in Clifton. In the burbs you won't find a lot of videocams except in shopping malls and the like. But this person will continue to make mistakes, and we'll get our man."

We? Willis smiled. The mayor was hated by the Police Union. Of course, for a long time, the policy had been that cops were guilty until proven innocent for any interaction with the public. He knew that wasn't true. He admired cops. They generally kept him safe.

He also liked reporters. The free press kept politicians like the mayor on their toes, exposing even the hint of graft or corruption, not that anyone seemed to care anymore. Some politicians had talked about government-issued press passes for all reporters, not just the ones

covering them. He was fine with the current system, except for wanting to ban CNN and MSNBC. *Next thing they'll do is to go after the Times and Post. That just wasn't right.*

He rather enjoyed the publicity too. If the government completely dominated the press, there would be no information about the Phantom Harvester. First, they wouldn't care. Second, they'd not want people to think the government couldn't keep them safe. Third, he rather enjoyed the publicity.

But he was studying the man who'd asked the second question about the Phantom Harvester. *Strapping young fellow. Maybe twenty-five to thirty. Looks like he works out.* He jotted down the name to add to his target list. *Could be a win-win: body parts as well as expensive hors d'oeuvres.*

Willis decided he was a bit tired of the city and went home to Sleepy Hollow. As he turned into his lane, he spotted State Police cars and CSU vehicles at his home. He pulled over to the side of the road to think. *How did they find me? Where did I slip up?*

A Chevy Malibu drove up beside him. The passenger's window rolled down. "Get in, Doc," the driver said in a raspy voice that was hard to understand. "The boss has this under control."

"Who are you?"

"Kalinin's right-hand man. You need to lay low for a bit until the boss can frame someone else. He's already playing the 'unknown informant' role to make out that someone else is the culprit. We just need a wee bit of distraction, that's all."

"What am I a culprit of?"

"Harvesting body parts. Ain't that rich? Here you've got a lucrative business and they think you're doing that!"

Willis smiled. "Who is he framing?"

"Some butcher in the Village. We'll plant a fresh corpse in his meat locker. Guess we should start charging you for protection, right? Get in and we'll take a little ride back to the city. You're going to be in Atlantis, by the way. Left today right after your last patient."

Willis thought a moment. "The Caribbean? I hate the Caribbean."

"Fool! You're not actually going there. Now get in!"

Willis did so, Cassidy made a U in the narrow lane with ease, and sped off.

Chapter Twenty-One

Luka was running low on ribeyes, so he went to his meat locker. The old man couldn't remember if he had a side of beef in there. He had to check to make sure. If not, he would have to order one.

When he opened the freezer door, he had to rub his eyes. *Where'd that come from?* He'd seen hanging, dead bodies before. Most of them had been hanging from trees, lonely sentinels to warn others that they would join their compatriots in the mass graves. This body was on one of his meat hooks.

He backed out, slammed the door, and called 9-1-1. Within minutes, the police arrived. He went out to greet them. "That was fast," he said. He'd expected a slower response. He knew the city cops were spread thin.

The lead cop Tazed him. Another handcuffed him after he fell to the sidewalk.

"Check out the freezer," said the first.

Peter Castilblanco entered the interrogation room. The butcher glared at him. "And here I thought we could live in peace in the U.S.!" He spit at Peter. "You're no better than the fascist assholes in my homeland."

"Take it easy, fellow. I'll ignore the spit, but only because you didn't hit me." Peter sat in front of Luka and began searching through a file. "Looks like you graduated to butchering humans, Luka. You'd think you had enough of that back in your home country. I think you're one smart devil and an amateur surgeon." He handed Luka some photos. "Your previous victims."

"What victims? What are you accusing me of? I'm innocent!"

"That's what they all say. And our system of laws says you're innocent until proven guilty. But that body in your freezer is pretty solid evidence that you're our Phantom Harvester. A good Samaritan called in the tip."

"What tip? I called 9-1-1 when I found the body. I thought the police were there in response to my call, and then they zap me."

Peter raised his eyebrows. "I can check for that 9-1-1 call."

"Go ahead. It was no tip. I reported finding the body and asked for the police. Believe it or not, I don't like to find human bodies in my freezer."

"Have you been watching the local news?"

"I only watch PBS, even though the government has castrated it in America's own turn to fascism. The local stations just focus on all the criminal activity in the city, which, when you consider all the people here, isn't too bad. I'm more worried about how national events can affect international ones...and vice versa."

Peter took the photos back and closed the file. "We have to hold you until we clear this up."

"What about my butcher shop?"

"Shop's closed for now. You'll be in Holding for a bit. Believe it or not, you are innocent until proven guilty. I'll get right on this."

“He lives in Queens,” said Sally Ernst, Ceci’s CSU member who had replaced her while Peter’s sister was recovering. “We tossed the apartment and found nothing. He owns a fancy silver car, though. A Cadillac hybrid. His shop is popular.”

“And everyone seems to like the guy,” Peter shrugged. “I’m not liking this guy for the Phantom Harvester’s crimes. He did call 9-1-1. But we now think the Harvester has accomplices, given Ceci’s kidnappings, so the clean apartment might not mean anything. This case is getting complicated. Can we trace the tipster’s call?”

“That’s a problem. Looks like it came from a burn phone that’s no longer online. Certainly not your usual snitch looking for money.”

“Maybe more like a SWATter. Maybe a competitor of the butcher? We’ll keep him locked up as long as we can. It will take some time to track down his background a bit more and study his finances.”

“Because he’s a butcher, I’m having bad thoughts if he’s really the Harvester.”

“You and me both.”

Peter had a gut feeling that the butcher had been framed. *For what reason? Was the Phantom Harvester jerking NYPD’s chains?* No matter whether the butcher was innocent or guilty, Marty and he would be spending a lot of time. And, if he was innocent, the real serial killer would be laughing his head off while they were doing it.

They needed a break in the case. Marty’s mugging and Ceci’s kidnapping might have no relation, but he also had a gut feeling that they were connected somehow.

He remembered what his Dad always said: follow your gut feelings, if only to prove them wrong. He smiled. His Dad’s gut feelings sometimes required Tums! He would have to ask him how many times he’d felt frustrated as a detective on a case. For Peter, it seemed to occur all too often. *The perps have all the advantage because we’re generally reactive, not proactive.* He knew his father’s first case with Auntie Dao-Ming as a partner had been proactive enough to save a president, though. That was something.

Chapter Twenty-Two

The Raven entered his safe-room and sat down at his desk. The house on Long Island Sound was large and comfortable. He had turned one of the six bedrooms into the safe-room, a hide-away that disappeared behind a sliding bookcase and was usually sealed with a bank vault's door. He also had escape routes planned and vehicles available for them, including a speedboat tied up at the estate's dock.

Kalinin stared at the opposite wall where the whiteboard showing the Castilblanco family tree hung. *Maybe we're going about this wrong?* First, the detective might care more about his wife than his daughter. And eliminating Castilblanco might be harder than eliminating Chen. Of course, to have complete revenge, he'd have to kill both.

The whole damn family is hard to kidnap. The daughter proved her mettle, the son had learned from the father to detect a tail, and the wife was rarely out on the street now as a reporter—even before, there was always a cameraman with her. Chen would be hard to kidnap, and her ATF husband was often on assignment. Their kid was already in college. *A conundrum.*

Cassidy entered the safe-room. "Doctor's installed in the guest house," he said in his raspy voice. "Do you think he might actually be the Harvester?"

"What did they find at his house?"

"Nothing. Like you thought, they got distracted with the butcher. Good plan, boss."

"Yes. I almost had to do everything myself. How's it feel to be bested by that little slut?"

"Ceci Castilblanco might be small, but she knows a thing or two. Papa probably taught her. Or her breath. I'll be more hoarse than usual for a month."

"You're lucky. If she were really good at martial arts like me, you'd be dead. You let your guard down."

"It'd been a long day. I'm not getting any younger. Neither are you."

"Yes. That's a problem. We'll have to see about doing something to halt that. I have some ideas—" The cellphone on Kalinin's desk rang. He listened and then hung up. "Sheila Remington's participating in a discussion about science's future at SUNY. I might just go."

"Who's Sheila Remington?"

"An up-and-coming politician."

"Curious name. She should run the NRA."

"I used to like the R-15 Predator, so I understand your joke. She's a politician who thinks gun ownership is a privilege and not a right—unusual, considering where she's from, but, for that same reason, she would be the last one to use an automatic or semi-automatic rifle with a high-capacity magazine for hunting. And I agree with her there. No hunter needs that kind of firepower. And I think target ranges should rent the weapons their customers use, and not allow them to bring their own." Kalinin leaned back in his chair, tossing a pen into the air and catching it. "She's complex. I'm wondering if she's malleable. I'm thinking she might run for president one of these days. It would be nice to have some leverage with her."

"Always looking for that, aren't you?"

"Leverage is important, especially these days. Keep your eyes on our guest. I'll drive myself in the limo. I want to keep your Chevy in the barn a bit longer."

Kalinin was familiar with the SUNY campus and the area around it. He often caught the Port Jefferson ferry when traveling between Connecticut and Long Island, and he had made several donations to the school. The town meeting was scheduled for one of the large lecture halls the university used for beginning classes.

The head of the political science department immediately recognized him.

"Mr. Simpson. How good to see you again."

Kalinin shook Professor Moshe Goldman's hand. For him, Kalinin was Leonard Simpson, their rich donor from Long Island. That was the name he used almost everywhere, except with Willis. *Maybe that's a mistake?* But he'd expected the doctor to check up on him, so the alias wouldn't have been appropriate.

"I saw the announcement and decided to drop in. I'd like to meet Representative Remington if possible."

Goldman looked at his watch. "Not much time for that now. Why don't you come to the cocktail reception we're having afterward for all the dignitaries?"

"Thank you for the invitation. If things are about to start, I should probably find a seat."

Kalinin found one on the end of the third row back.

Goldman welcomed the audience and introduced them to the discussion's participants. The topic was dirty politics. Kalinin found that amusing. *What's the opposite of an oxymoron?*

Along with Sheila Remington, there was a reporter from the NY Times, a Jesuit priest from Fordham, and the current DHS Assistant Secretary.

Kalinin had prepared to be bored, but the questions from the mostly student audience were surprisingly good and the answers from the panel often led to more discussion. The Jesuit was the one with the sharper wit; he was humorous as well. Kalinin was sad to see it end. *I need to do more of this. Stretches my mind.*

At the cocktail party, Kalinin approached Sheila Remington with vodka tonic in hand. He offered the other hand to the representative.

"Leonard Simpson, at your service," he said with a smile. "Welcome to SUNY."

She was taller than he was, eyed him up and down, and then shook his hand. "You already know who I am. Are you a professor here?"

"Simply a fan. A donor to the school, to be specific, and a follower of science policy discussions. I thought your idea for diverting some Pentagon money toward more space exploration was interesting. I don't imagine the Pentagon will like that idea, though. Of course, you seem to have a penchant for ruffling feathers. Knocking the legacy of that idiot, preening rooster who called global warming a hoax was a bit bold too, considering that many in the House and Senate still think that way. I might have to help finance a dike for the East River to protect some of my properties in Manhattan."

"Many people think that the Pentagon budget is bloated and that the money would be better spent elsewhere," she said. "There's nothing original in what I said."

"But you seem to have given quite some thought to those issues."

"I give a lot of thought to a lot of issues. While working for my constituents, I still think I have a broader perspective than most of my colleagues. Many of them also think that China's fascist capitalism would be good for our country. I'll have none of that."

"I'll agree that the great democracies have already lost something." Kalinin had had enough of fascism in Russia—the oligarchs there were the worst kind of fascists, more like an old-style mafia. Even the old Politburo was that way. His business ventures couldn't thrive in an authoritarian environment. He took a sip from his vodka and eyed her over the glass rim. *Let's see if she'll bite the hook when I cast it into the waters.* "I've been watching your career. You should run for higher offices, you know."

Remington nodded. "I'm still learning about politics, Mr. Simpson. Where I come from, we speak our minds. You have to be careful about that in Washington, and lobbyists and special interests want to make politicians into ventriloquist dummies. There's a long tradition of prevarication, to say the least. But don't worry. I have ambitions to do what you suggest."

He handed her a card. "And you're already working and studying issues that might serve you well in future campaigns. Keep me in mind. I can help. I know others who can help too."

She examined the card. "Interesting. It's just a name and telephone number."

"Cellphone. I don't stay in one spot very long. In fact, I just bought a Swiss pharmaceutical company and have to fly to Zurich soon to sign all the papers. Bureaucracy, you know. Give me a call when you're thinking about making your move."

"Move?" Kalinin jerked a thumb toward the ceiling. "Oh, understood. Have you ever been to Wyoming?"

"A few times. It's too cold in the winter."

"So is New York. 'Global warming' doesn't begin to describe what the greenhouse effect has done to our climate. And yet we adapt and survive. For now, at least."

"Yes, we do. Pleased to meet you, Congresswoman."

Oh, great. Another activist. Kalinin's thoughts immediately returned to the last confrontation he'd had with Chen and Castilblanco. *We were almost on the same side then!* He spun on his heels and walked out of the hall, giving a little wave to Goldman on his way out. The latter beamed a smile toward him.

Kalinin found his limo and drove off, thinking that buying Sheila Remington might be difficult compared to other politicians. But it just might be worth it. She had charisma.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Ceci and Peter almost showed up late for the wedding. They joined their father and mother, Aunt Dao-Ming and Uncle Eric, and Aunt Ashley to fill a complete pew.

“A bit ostentatious,” Peter whispered to his Dad.

“Greek Orthodox,” said the old detective. “Don’t make a scene. Roman Catholics are almost as bad. We can talk about your current case at the cocktail hour afterward. Unless you’re not staying.”

“I’m Ceci’s ride.”

“How’s she doing?”

Peter shrugged. “Probably better than the other guy, from what I heard.”

The music began. Peter watched the groom come in accompanied by his best man. After a fashionable wait, the bride entered. “Say, isn’t she that Broadway actress?”

“Yes. Nicoleta Petrescu. His name is Alessandro Michelakis and works in environmental stuff. Long story. *Ahora, silencio.*”

Through the ceremony, Peter noticed that Ceci was smiling. *Good lord, she wants this. Poor Hassan.* He thought if he ever found the right significant other, he would make the ceremony as simple as possible. No church, certainly not Catholic considering his sexual preferences, just a justice at Town Hall. Or they could just live together, although that would surely piss off their parents.

He noticed that the couple looked old, older than the two siblings. *They’ve waited a while too.* People were often waiting longer to tie the knot, if they ever did. With so many uncertainties, from economics to politics and environment, even people older than Peter’s generation were nervous about long-term commitments.

That wasn’t new, of course, but it was getting worse. The country was spiraling down the drain. One look at the city—his city—would tell anyone with common sense that the situation was dire and probably not sustainable for long.

The U.S. was really two countries at least, one formed from the East and West Coasts and a small strip along part of the Canadian border, the other by the Midwest and South. People entrenched in their religious and political beliefs didn’t listen to one another, and the politicians took advantage of that and even made it worse.

He’d gone down that rat hole before and wondered why the glitzy religious ceremony made him go there again. He forced his mind to think about something else. *Like, what kind of person could I ever meet who might become a lifelong companion?* That was depressing too.

Most people in their pew didn’t exit to take communion—only Aunt Dao-Ming and Uncle Eric. *And they shouldn’t. They’re not Orthodox!* All the rest skipped it. *Had the actress become Orthodox? Does any of it have any meaning?*

He couldn’t wait for the cocktail hour, a preamble to the reception.

“Are you friends of the bride or the groom?”

Peter had been staring into his glass of white wine, mulling over his case, but he looked up to see who owned the rich baritone voice. A black man with a radiant smile was waiting for him to respond.

“My father knew both of them. I’m here with my sister. Her significant other is out of town.”

“Alan Sutter,” the fellow said, offering his hand. “I’m in finance.”

Peter shook hands after shifting his wineglass. “Peter Castilblanco. I’m a cop.”

Sutter raised his eyebrows. “You don’t look like a cop. You look bored.”

“Weddings bore me. Funerals are worse, of course. Got any stock tips?”

“How much do you want to invest?”

Peter smiled. “I’d need a loan. Cops aren’t well paid these days, you know. It beats Afghanistan, though.”

“Ah. A brother in arms. I did two tours. Figured I’d paid enough back to my country that doesn’t give a shit about us. My uncle thought that way too, and encouraged me to study economics. Field’s changed a lot. All the old models are irrelevant now.”

“Do you work for him?”

“No, I have my own trading firm. In a sense, I compete with my uncle now.” He smiled.

“Sounds complicated.”

“Not as much as solving crimes, I suspect. Even with all the volatility, both here and abroad, you don’t often have to think outside the box. Just steady as you go.” Sutter eyed Peter. “Too bad about the money. I have a lot of gay clients.”

“It’s that obvious?”

“60-40 guess. Maybe 70-30 if I factor in that you’re not flirting with all the available babes.”

“I talk to women.”

“Talking is not flirting. We’re flirting.”

“We are?” Peter was surprised. “I never thought of it like that.”

“I know. It’s different. I bet your father and mother don’t even understand. Mine don’t. They accept it, but they don’t understand.”

“Same here.” Peter saw his sister waving at him. “I think I’m supposed to escort her into the grand ballroom. These formal functions suck.” He whipped out a holocard that made his NYPD info appear to float in air just beneath his head shot. “Call me if you want to go out for a drink some time.”

“How do you know I’m not seeing someone?”

“You said it. We’re flirting and both uncomfortable about doing it.”

“Who was that?” Ceci said as she took his arm.

“A nice guy I met. Am I going to hate this?”

“I suppose. Grin and bear it for *papito*.”

“This is the first time I’ve met the newlyweds.”

“Me too. Free food and free bar, though, so get with the program.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

"They found a grave," Marty said the following morning.

Peter, who had been resting his head on his folded arms, looked up from his desk.

"Who's 'they,' and whose grave?"

"The State Police found a grave at that upstate place close to Sleepy Hollow. It's the skeleton of a female. They think it might be the doctor's missing wife."

"The plot thickens. Any news on the whereabouts of the doctor?"

"He's supposedly on vacation in Atlantis. No one has seen him there, though."

Peter thought a moment. "If he killed his wife, he could kill again. He could be the Harvester. We need more evidence to accuse him of the serial murders, though. Now it's just coincidence and circumstantial evidence."

"If we get him for his wife's murder and the serial killings stop, we'll know."

"Just another piece of circumstantial evidence. One of us should liaison with the State Police."

"I'll do that. There's still more background checks to do about Willis too. Maybe we can build a case."

"I'll continue doing that. He's definitely our major suspect. Maybe we can get the victims' families and friends some closure."

At breakfast, Cassidy mentioned that the State Police had found Willis's wife's remains. "I'm thinking this doctor is the Harvester." He looked with distaste at his rasher scramble.

"Takes the old appetite away."

Kalinin smiled. "I wouldn't recommend that kind of news as a new way of dieting. He killed his wife? So what? Illegal opioid business? We're in that too. But the way the Phantom Harvester collects his body parts is a bit over the top, I must say." He thought a moment. "I think it's time to pay our good doctor a visit. I have a few questions for him."

Willis was stretched out in a recliner watching an old Rifleman episode. Kalinin glared at the widescreen TV with distaste. "Turn it off, Dr. Willis."

"Hey, chill. You guys were the ones who brought me here. They might still be looking for me."

"Indeed. They found your wife's remains behind your house. That's enough to put you away for a long time, or to receive a lethal injection. You neglected to mention that little episode in your life. That doesn't work well for our business agreement. I like to keep a low profile."

Willis shrugged. "She was a nag. She let her body go. I helped her face a bit, but I couldn't do much for the rest. Not a good body part in her either."

Kalinin smiled and winked at Cassidy. "Confession is good for the soul, they say. We don't even need the truth serum, Sean." He took out a gun and waved it at Willis. "Let's get you out of those pajamas and dressed. It will hardly do to take a ride in the country in them."

"Plan A, boss?"

"No, B. There's some justice in Plan B."

"What are you two talking about?" said Willis, looking from one to the other.

“Consider it this way: the network has just elected a new leader. They have no use for the old one.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You will. All in good time.”

The State Police had tried to save the car-crash victim. They’d pulled him out alive before the silver grey vehicle had burst into flames. The conflagration from a wrecked hydrogen vehicle was like an incendiary bomb exploding.

The EMT could do nothing for the crash victim, though. He looked at his ID. “He’s a doctor.” The State Trooper nodded, still watching the hot blue fire from a safe distance. “Dr. Raymond Willis. The driver’s license says he’s an organ donor. I guess he’s in good enough shape. I’ll see if the local hospitals have any patients in need. We’ll have to act fast on that.”

“If that’s possible, we can provide an escort. Anything to save a few people. Hopefully they don’t inherit this asshole’s stupid genes.”

The EMT laughed. “Good point. Never heard of that happening. This fellow could save some lives.”

“All free too, instead of black market.”

The EMT made a face. “Don’t get me started.”

Epilogue

“Wine or beer?”

Peter smiled at his father. “Whatever you’re having, *papito*.”

“What do you want to talk about?” his father asked Peter as he handed him white wine and sat down opposite him. “We should start getting dressed for the wedding.” He took a sip. “I seem to go to more family funerals than weddings these days. Ceci will even the score a bit.”

Peter nodded. “Nothing in particular to talk about. And everything.” He also took a sip. “Have you been frustrated when you didn’t get complete closure on a case?”

The old detective thought a moment. “Many times. My first case with Auntie Dao-Ming was frustrating. I think the guys who kidnapped Ceci were involved in that case. I suspect they were also involved in the case related to the attack on the French nuclear reactors. You’ll have cases that become cold, you’ll have some not resolved to your satisfaction, and you’ll have enough where you hit the home run to keep you in police work. All you can do is do your best and get the family and friends of the victims some closure.” He raised his glass in a salute. “The Phantom Harvester was brought to justice, even if it occurred via a traffic accident. That’s my take.”

“I wish I was sure about that. If so, it’s ironic that he was an organ donor.”

“Irony is better than doubt that you got the wrong guy. I think justice was served. I’d call it karma. He killed his wife, after all.” Peter’s father took another sip of his wine and contemplated the wine glass. “How are you doing personally?”

Peter looked around the place where he’d grown up and then smiled at his Dad. “I’ve met someone.”

“A fellow, I suppose.” Peter nodded. “I’ll live with it. I just want you to be happy. Tell me about him.”

The Raven lifted his vodka shot glass in a toast to Cassidy. “You know, Sean, that psycho had good business acumen when he decided to sell body parts to rich people. I think I can go one better, though. Soon very few people will be able to afford adequate medical care. And they’ll be so unhealthy that their body parts won’t be worth anything. We should set up a business where we can just grow them. I have a few ideas for doing that. Ever heard of Dolly?”

“I never liked her singing, but she looked good. Say, how did it go with Sheila Remington?”

“I predict she’s on her way to become the first female president. I wonder if I can tempt her with some financing.”

“Many politicians take money in exchange for favors and campaign contributions.”

“The way of the world, old friend. It would be nice to have someone malleable in the White House, though, not just our usual corrupt Congress people whom you cannot trust. Too bad my old countrymen hate me now. They have such good hackers who are definitely useful in a close election.”

“You’re always scheming, boss.”

He tossed down the shot of vodka in one gulp. “Life wouldn’t be any fun otherwise.”

Ceci and Hassan's wedding brought a lot of families together: her father gave the bride away; Marta and Ceci's other friends were the bridesmaids; and Peter, Juan, and Alan were the groom's group. The large audience, made up of family and friends of the bride and groom, was noisy enough that no one heard the various rites uttered by the magistrate who was officiating.

"She always wanted this," Peter told Juan and Alan later.

"Seems like your father did too," said Juan.

"When's it your turn?" Peter said to Juan.

Juan blushed. "Don't give Marty any ideas. I'm not quite ready."

"It takes time," said Alan with a nod, winking at Peter.

A Preview of "The Candidate"

Bob Nash took one of the guest chair's in front of Peter Castilblanco's desk. "I thought we were going to work together?"

Peter eyed him. "Did I slip up somewhere?"

"We need more lead time," Bob said.

"I give you as much as she gives me. She likes to be out among the people, listening to their problems."

"You do know she's already had one assassination attempt, correct?"

"I have inside information on that. I know the person who thwarted it."

Bob nodded. "*Wunderbar*. So you should be able to understand my concern."

Peter leaned back in his chair and studied the slim, rangy man for a moment. "Sheila Remington is the most interesting and controversial candidate in years. She's made both the far left and the far right angry with her." He pointed to a pile of papers on his desk. "Death threats, Bob. We get at least five per day."

Bob frowned. "I've never seen that many."

"We send you only the most believable and threatening. The Service would go crazy trying to track them all down. They're mostly nut jobs. I have staff that launches internet campaigns against them, showing social media exactly who they are. I have staff that liaisons with local cops and the press to shut them down. Foreign operatives working against my candidate are open game too." He winked at the agent. "But, if you want, I can turn that all over to you."

"No, I know how modern campaigns work. A lot of nut cases come out of the woodwork. I just need some lead time. Your candidate is a bit more spontaneous than most."

"Maybe that's how she gets by without all the rich backers and still wins people's votes. She's spontaneous...and authentic. A moral choice in an immoral time."

"That sounds like a campaign slogan."

"We're tweaking that. I like the other one. 'Democracy for the People' says a lot. She knows she doesn't have all the solutions, but she's pointed out the problems. She knows she's running for president in a country where most voters are more concerned about the latest NFL or MLB stats. We've had a rash of narcissistic morons dominating U.S. politics far too long. While people aren't engaged as much as they should be, they do want change. They don't want to deal with politics or incompetent politicians; they just want a country that works for them."

Bob held up a hand. "Spare me the political chatter. Your job and mine are the same, but maybe yours is harder. You have to rein in her exuberance, and you have to inform me when she takes off."

Peter shrugged. "See you at the function. You have plenty of warning about that."

Bob nodded and pulled at his ear. "She doesn't stage her public appearances to cater to friendly crowds like some candidates. That picnic will have a crowd covering the whole political spectrum. They'll be too close to her, I just know it."

"Fried chicken and burgers. You can't beat it."

"Yeah, she also has an iron stomach. We can't protect her from indigestion, though. I'm not sure I can do a good job otherwise either."

"I'll be worried about protecting myself from the indigestion. And I can't have a beer while I'm working."

“Pedro!”

Peter sat on a collapsible chair outside the trailer. Sheila insisted on calling him Pedro and wanted him to be proud of his heritage. His father would like that.

He’d been looking through the NY Times for something about the function. That New York paper had made light of the Remington campaign ever since her announcement in the Barclays Center had been canceled. The assassin Ashley Scott had stopped had tried to make the kill at the rehearsal there.

He knew the paper ignored Remington at their peril. For them, the city was the center of the Universe. And, like most papers, sensationalist reporting now dominated as they tried to maintain a profitable enterprise by adding more and more scatological content, a lot of it digital. *Sign of the times*, Peter thought, enjoying the pun. He still preferred the old print form when he could get it.

“Right outside, Sheila. What do you need?”

“An opinion. Get your butt in here.”

He knocked on the trailer door and entered. Kathy had propped up her chin in a Penseur-like pose as she studied the outfit on her boss.

“It’s only a damn picnic,” he said.

“Sheila’s going to be on the jumbotron and both CNN and Fox will be covering her participation in the event.”

“So here I am the gay guy who’s supposed to be the fashion expert?”

“No, you’re the macho ex-homicide detective,” Sheila said, “who’s supposed to know if men at this picnic won’t think I’m too bold and women won’t think I’m unfashionable.”

“Okay.” He eyed his boss. She was dressed in half-sleeve pullover shirt with white and yellow stripes, white knee-length shorts, and sandals. Her long hair was done up in a bun. “You look like a nun who forgot her habit.”

“This is Middle America, Pedro,” Kathy said. “Women dress conservatively.”

“Women all over now dress the way New York and Paris fashionistas tell them to dress. And I repeat: it’s a damn picnic. Please don’t eat any fried butter on a stick, by the way. It grosses me out.”

“I think I’ll do the light pink blouse instead,” Sheila said. She ripped off the pullover and took the blouse from Kathy.

She’s comfortable in her own skin like Ceci, Peter thought, eyeing the cleavage revealed by the bra.

Sheila spun around, her head rotating as much as possible so she could see herself in the mirror.

“Lady-like but not nun-like,” she announced. “Better. Do you agree, Pedro?” He nodded. “Let’s get some burgers and beers.”

“AOK?” Pedro asked into his mic.

“The known extremists are behaving themselves,” Bob said into Pedro’s earbud. “I worry about the unknown ones.”

"I've spotted several known ones who are busy stuffing themselves. Damned if they haven't added pulled pork to the menu."

"And bacon for their burgers. Who's Sheila talking to?"

"Gus Wilson. He's the local mayor's aide."

"He has a gun."

"You can carry in this state. Gus ran the mayor's campaign. Sheila wants both the mayor and Gus to work for her, lead the effort here. But the mayor hasn't endorsed anyone yet."

"Shouldn't she be buttering up the mayor then?"

"He's off in negotiations with some city employees' union."

"And the union leaders are here?"

"Some of them. Proxies too. Everyone's here. It's a small town."

"So why bother?"

"Because Sheila believes that every voter should meet her and hear what she says."

"Yeah, I guess. I just wish I had her energy."

So do I, thought Peter.

Note from Steve: You have just finished “The Phantom Harvester,” a novella featuring Detective Castilblanco’s two children, Cecilia and Pedro. I hope you enjoyed it. Please tell your family and friends about it.

And, if you enjoyed reading this free PDF, please check out the list of other ones available—you’ll find it on the “Free Stuff & Contests” web page at my website <https://stevenmmoore.com>.

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**Bridge novels between series

Around the world and to the stars! In libris libertas

About the Author



Steven M. Moore was born in California and has lived in various parts of the U.S. and Colombia, South America. He always wanted to be a storyteller but had to postpone that dream to work in academia and R&D as a scientist. His travels around Europe, South America, and the U.S., for work or pleasure, taught him a lot about the human condition and our wonderful human diversity, a learning process that started during his childhood in California's San Joaquin Valley. He and his wife now live in Montclair, NJ, just thirteen miles west of the Lincoln Tunnel. For more details, visit him at his website <https://stevenmmoore.com> and follow him on Facebook, Twitter, and Goodreads where he participates in many discussions with readers and writers. Steve is a member of International Thriller Writers.