

The Whistleblower

A Novella

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Chapter One

Greg Jackson had become a New Yorker. Mickey hit him up for the usual five—Greg figured his homeless friend would spend it on beer, but there was a McDonald's a block away, so there was hope he might go for a hot meal. Mickey had come back from the Middle East crippled in mind and spirit. *There for the grace of God go I.*

Pretty Darlin—he didn't know her real name—flashed some leg and smiled. He took her off the street for a while when the SVU got the goods on her pimp, but she returned there exploited by yet another pimp after only a few days. *The eternal struggle to mend broken lives.* The flirting was just a joke between them. She knew he wouldn't nab her for soliciting. Like his narc buddies, he wanted the big fish. Pretty was just another victim.

He didn't live in the best neighborhood of the Big Apple. Its renters—meaning those who paid it the best they could—were poor families and pensioners mostly, people just getting by. This was the new America now, the gap between the residuals of the middle class and poor an ever widening one. A coming presidential election made no one happy except the media and wealthy elites who liked the way things were going. Either candidate suited them just fine. *The NYPD could have a policy prohibiting cops from voting for all I care. And to think that I fought overseas to protect this wonderful way of life.*

Parking in the city was never easy, but the walk from whatever space he found let him give a nod or hello to real people, the worker bees who, like him, kept the city going. The guys at the deli, the fellow at the newsstand, the woman who ran the massage parlor that was not a massage parlor, single mothers left to raise kids without any child support from their deadbeat fathers, elderly people trying to decide whether to eat or buy their meds or pay some rent—they were all good people like Mickey and Pretty Darlin who were victims of an uncaring society.

He made his nightly check of the building's elevator, found it still out of service, and headed up the three flight of stairs two risers at a time to his studio apartment. *Some night I'll be surprised and find the elevator repaired.* As usual, the broken elevator was only the last insult after a frustrating beat—another prostitute scarred for life by her pimp had refused to press charges. *I have to get out of SVU—no doubt about it.*

He was a black man dressed in black so the dark stairway would have swallowed him if a bit of neon light hadn't managed to dribble in through the small windows located on each landing. It helped that some windows were broken. He was used to it and kicked aside refuse out of habit. *I should have grabbed a sandwich at the bodega. Damned if I'll go out now!*

As he was about to step into the corridor at the third story, he heard a noise and stopped. As a cop, he had enemies. Usually the perverts he arrested were cowards, but more than one nasty pimp had threatened him. Reflexes learned overseas kicked in. He took out his gun, clicked off the safety, and held it along his thigh. He had learned long ago not to show a foe that he was armed.

"Don't shoot me!"

Greg tensed as he realized he could be seen but he could only hear his aggressor. A woman's voice. "Identify yourself."

"I'm Linda, Sheila's sister. Remember me?"

He thought a moment. *Sheila Richmond*. He remembered the woman who was beaten so badly that she became a paraplegic and ward of the state. A woman who couldn't testify against the man who beat her and raped her. *Thank God for DNA evidence*. That was another time he wished for the death penalty. Linda was Sheila's sister, a regular attendee at the trial that put the perp away for twenty-five years. *One of my successful cases*. He felt he didn't have enough of them.

He stepped into the corridor, saw her waiting in front of his apartment door, and tucked the gun away in the shoulder holster under his black windbreaker, feeling a bit foolish for his paranoia. "You almost got yourself shot, woman. What brings you here at this hour? This neighborhood isn't safe. How's Sheila?"

"The same. This isn't about her. Can-can we talk?" From her eyes, wide open and white, and the tremor in her voice, he knew Linda was afraid.

"Sure." He opened the door for her. "Don't worry. It's clean dirt. You sit on the bed. I'll grab the desk chair."

She looked around. "This is small. And messy. It needs a woman's touch."

He studied her as she walked to the bed and set. A younger version of Sheila. Rather, the woman Sheila once was. He remembered a bit of a connection with Linda when the sister's life had changed for the worse. He had written it off as empathy for a victim's relative. That happened a lot on his job.

"Not big enough for two people. Want a beer?"

"No, maybe just some water."

He went to the small fridge and found a bottle of water and carried it and the desk chair so he was sitting in front of her. "What's this about? You in trouble?" He handed her the bottle.

"No, maybe, I don't know. Not yet." She had been wringing her hands. "You're the only cop I know. You did good by Sheila, and I didn't want to go to the precinct. You never know who's involved."

Involved? "Wouldn't have found me. I'm off duty. Good you came here. What's up?"

She waved one of those solid-state portable drives he coveted for backing up his laptop. "It's all here. Secret campaign finance records showing Senator Ellison is receiving money from illegal sources."

Greg nodded. The Ellison campaign was now running an ad blitz in its desperate attempt to dethrone a sitting president who had waged war in the Middle East the last four years, among other things that weren't exactly popular. Historically incumbents had an advantage, but President Jepson had managed to squander it and was in trouble. Insults, conspiracy claims, firing and resignations in both campaigns, even the media criticizing the mudslinging, violence at rallies—it all seemed an exercise in futility. *Par for the course in 21st century American politics*.

"Where'd you get that? And what do you mean by illegal?"

"I worked in Ellison's New York office. Illegal means donations from underworld and terrorist groups."

"Whether illegal or not, I agree that would be damning if released to the press. But if you're working for the senator, why are you blowing the whistle?"

"Because what she's doing is wrong!"

"Maybe just some exuberant campaign staff members are doing it?"

"No, she's approved it. I have the evidence to prove that too. She's spending campaign funds right and left and is desperate for more. And it's a tight race, as you know."

“Agreed, but I could give a rat’s ass about this election because, no matter who wins, things will just stay the same.” He smiled at her shocked face. “That’s a summary of my political positions. But what can I do for you?”

“Protect me. I resigned today. They’ll wonder why and figure out what I’m doing.”

Greg went to the fridge and found a beer. He began drinking it as he paced in front of Linda behind the chair. The old neon lights at the level of his apartment were lost in the brilliance of the computerized and changing LED holograms of supple maidens and muscled dudes with perfect abs touting the virtues of the latest hydrogen car, masculine and feminine products for sexual potency, and the best firearms and other weapons for self-protection. All the lights painted him as he paced, mostly incoherent until they found a clean spot in his windows. Because most of the muck was on the outside, cleaning was too much work.

He saw her studying the apartment while he pondered her situation. “This place is really a mess, but the building is in worst shape. Are my eyes deceiving me, or is that wall leaning in?”

He glanced at the wall. “Typical shoddy construction. They tear down an old building and put up a new one that looks good for a few years but soon starts falling apart. Seems like the worse the condition, the more rent they charge. But most of the people living here don’t even have the money to move.” He went to wall, eyed it, and decided she was right. He’s never noticed. He was never in the apartment long enough even to notice what a dump it was. “The tilt of the wall is just due to settling.”

“How old is this building?”

“They tore the old one down in 2017, so it’s ten-years-old or less. I don’t mind the mess or the shoddy construction. It’s a cheap place to eat and sleep—that’s all it is.” He turned to her. “I think you’re making a mistake. I applaud your altruism, but you’re just asking for a lot of grief. Since 2016, no one gives a damn about elections. Why should they? Things just keep getting worse.”

“Why do you do your job then?”

“I ask myself that every day. Number one reason: special victims are special to me and not many people care. That’s about it. I care. I don’t make much difference, but I try. I’m getting burned out, though. Your sister’s case was my last big success, but I was given desk duty while they figured out if I’d violated any of the perv’s constitutional rights. Victims are usually so scared, they don’t press charges.”

“You care. So do I.”

“As far as you know, President Jepson is taking illegal funds too, maybe from the same people. Wouldn’t put it past the old bastard.”

“I can’t prove that.”

“Damn right! That’s the problem. Politicians are corrupt as hell. Why cause yourself a load of grief trying to show how much they’re corrupt.” He sat in the chair again. “And what do you mean by protection? Do you think Ellison would do you harm?”

“Maybe not her, but someone supporting her? They’re not good people. There are precedents. Remember Blackstone?”

Jeff Blackstone had worked on Jepson’s first campaign and exposed the shady dealings of the candidate’s wife. He was found floating in the Potomac. A suicide note was found in his apartment.

“The press bought the story of Blackstone being guilty about being a child molester. I didn’t.”

“In my case, it might be the Hudson or East River.”

He nodded. “OK. You have a right to be paranoid, I suppose. If you plan to go public with what’s on that external drive, I’ll protect you the best I can. But you have to realize they might have a lot more resources than I do. Ellison might not be President Jepson, but she’s a powerful senator. And you’ll at least have to run the media gauntlet.”

“Not if I’m in hiding,” she said. “I plan to be an anonymous source.”

“Makes you less believable, but I remember someone doing something like that with a candidate’s tax return way back, so it could work.” Greg frowned. “After you give up this drive, I wouldn’t go back to your apartment. You’d have no peace because it would eventually get out who ‘anonymous’ is—never trust the media with state secrets, or your own—and you’d be a sitting duck if you were in danger.” He stood and went to his recycling bin where he dropped the beer bottle inside. “Where would you hide?”

“I’m still working on that. How ‘bout here? It would only be for a few days.” He frowned. “Guess that’s too much to ask.”

“It’s a studio, Linda, but OK. At least you’d have a bodyguard.”

Before Linda left, Greg put a copy of the entire external drive on his laptop. Because he only had some financial and personal data plus email correspondence, there was plenty of room.

“You should make some other copies too. I know you can’t afford it, but I’d leave a copy with a lawyer. Do you have one?”

“No. I can’t afford that, not living in New York City. But I’ll make more copies and stash them in various cubbyholes.”

Greg handed her two cards. “The first one’s mine, but you probably already have that, because you came here. The second is Dan O’Hara’s, my lawyer, sort of. I talked to him when I was assigned desk duty after your sister’s arrest. Tell him to store a copy in a safe place for me and bill me accordingly.”

“Do you trust him?”

“Sure. He’s not a politician and has defended a lot of cops who needed defending. Dan’s OK. He might frequent the bars more than he should, but he keeps lips sealed. Just tell him you’re a friend of mine.”

“O’Hara doesn’t sound black.”

“Is that a problem?”

“I suppose not, if you trust him.”

He nodded. “Keep me informed. I admire your guts, Linda, but you worry me.”

She stretched tall and kissed him on the cheek. He whiffed a nice scent, smiled, and followed her to the door. “I might barge in here on short notice,” she said.

“If I’m not here, knock on 3B. Mrs. Murphy will feed you pie if you fawn over her damn cat.”

“You can have cats in these apartments?”

“No, but I’m looking the other way. The cat’s a nice one.”

Chapter Two

Linda Richmond knew one less reporter than she did cops, meaning none, but it was easy to reach one. She put on a blond wig, tight sweater and push-up bra that augmented cleavage, and a very short skirt. She had watched the Times' building long enough to spot several messengers, ubiquitous in Manhattan because bicycles negotiated the heavy traffic faster than any other delivery service. The redheaded fellow with Mohawk and lots of ink she had picked out was a frequent client in Starbucks. She took a chair across from him.

"Want me to pay for this week's coffees?"

He looked her in the eyes—she batted her lashes—and then his eyes fell to her cleavage, dwelled for a few seconds, and then rose again. "That's a strange offer. What do I have to do?"

"You already had your bonus—they're real by the way. The rest might not be as much fun, but could you put this in Abe Hartmann's mailbox?" She handed him a computer drive. "Don't worry. It's clean of viruses and all those other nasty computer things. He'll know what to do with it."

"Yeah, I carry stuff for him a lot. What if he asks who left it?"

"Anonymous. Don't even say male or female." She slid two twenties and a ten across to him.

The messenger picked up the bills. "And how 'bout a date?"

She smiled. "I'm way too expensive for you, Dave. You'd have to pay my Starbucks purchases for a year, and they're more expensive than yours." She stood, bent over to show a bit more cleavage, and kissed him on the forehead. "Now, be a good boy, and do what I told you."

She knew the green eyes were now on her swinging hips as she left the Starbucks. *He seems like a nice kid, though.* She wondered what future he had as a messenger. Maybe he was going to night school or something.

She thought of her own schooling, mostly a waste when considering employment opportunities in the current economy. *Bad choices can leave you in a bind.*

Linda became nervous when Ellison's New York campaign manager called her that evening. "Any particular reason you bailed on us, girlfriend?"

"Pay's lousy, and I'm tired of all the mudslinging." Linda found it hard to keep a straight face and maintain eye contact while looking at Minnie Hicks's face in the tiny screen of her phone. *I should have turned off the video. But that would be suspicious!*

"I agree that the pay's lousy for people working in the trenches, but mudslinging is required in today's politics. Something else eating you? Some jerk harassing you here? I know some of our guys just think the idealistic young gals working here are just meat for the taking. That's part of politics too, unfortunately, ever since you know who was in the White House. You have to have a tough skin."

"No, it's not that. I'm just tired and need to find a real job. I hardly get by. I have no medical coverage and pay the fine every year, even though they increase it."

"Ellison will change all that. One of her campaign issues is to repair the repair to Obamacare, you know."

“Won’t help me if I get hit by a bus tomorrow. And in one month I’d need to find a real job anyway. My bank account is already near zero and my credit cards are maxed.”

“Well, there’s that. A few of us will go back to DC as staff, no matter what, more if the senator wins, but the rest are on the street. Good luck, Linda. You’ve been a great help.”

Yes, I was, until I discovered what Tracy Ellison was up to. “Thank you for saying so, Minnie. I wish you luck on all your ventures.”

“Thanks. Same to you. You take care.”

After the campaign manager hung up, Linda smiled. She liked Minnie and guessed she had no idea about what was going on. *Will she be the one who figures out that I’m the whistleblower?*

She didn’t feel comfortable about lying to Minnie, but she had been truthful about looking for a job. She’d been a dual major—political science and English lit—so she didn’t expect to see employers pouncing on that resumé, although the first had piqued some interest in the Ellison campaign staff. *Working for that campaign hadn’t contributed much to reducing my college debt, though.*

She put on a cup of water into the micro for some tea and leaned heavily on the kitchen counter. *Maybe Greg Jackson is right? The system is so corrupt, no one can fix it.* If her sister’s plight were any indication, she knew the poor man had seen the nasty side of modern society. She had wanted to hug him and make it all better, as he had done with her after the trial.

She shivered and smiled. *Maybe I want to hug him for other reasons?* In spite of all that had occurred around her sister’s case, she couldn’t deny there were some vibes. *Right now, he’s someone to protect me if this whole thing goes south.*

She was ready to cry—about Sheila and her life, her uncertain future, her disappointment in Senator Ellison—but the tea made her feel better. *Maybe I can get some sleep tonight.*

The biggest headline in the Times’ late morning edition shouted out the scandal in bold font: UNDERWORLD AND TERRORIST ORGS BACK SENATOR TRACY ELLISON! Hartmann shared the byline with two other reporters. Linda picked up a copy and returned to her Queens apartment to read it.

Hartmann shared the byline with two other reporters. The front page article listed Linda as an anonymous source and continued on two inside pages. It was a fair summary of some documents on the hard disk, but not the most damning ones, and they focused on contributors to the Ellison family’s foundation, which voters knew as generally corrupt but didn’t seem to care. The Times was turning over a disk copy to the FBI, though.

Will Ellison’s campaign go down in flames? Maybe not, this late in the game. She knew there was much more content in the documents the Times had mentioned, and more documents too. *What will the FBI do?*

She considered her duty was done. Sheila would be proud of her baby sister. She stood and stared at the alley below, a sharp contrast to the busy street in front of her building. *I do need a new job.* It was time to float her resumé and knock on a few doors. Or maybe take the LSAT and become a lawyer, one of the fields where her double major would be of some value.

She hugged herself. She was mentally constructing a list of job possibilities when the SUV pulled into the alley and a silent alarm went off in her head. *That doesn’t belong there!* When six men dressed in black and gray business suits jumped out, her paranoia switched into

overdrive. She went to the closet and fished out the backpack she'd already packed for a quick escape. She knew she might just be imagining things, but in her circumstances she thought it wise to err on the side of caution. Sheila's present condition had been a lesson for her on how fickle fate can be.

She opened the window in her bedroom, crawled onto the fire escape's landing, closed the window, and used the heel of her shoe to hammer down nails she had placed in the lower part of the window frame not long before she had visited Greg Jackson. She cringed at the noise the fire escape ladder made on its way down, but continued on the escape route she had planned. When she passed the empty SUV, she stopped, opened the driver's door, reached under the dash, and ripped out wires. She then ran off down the alley to the cross street.

She knew Queens well. She had grown up there, which was an advantage. She made it to an F subway station and went into Manhattan. She tried to avoid contact with any man dressed in a gray or black suit and jumped when a teen tapped her on the shoulder so he could get his suitcase out the door at a stop on the way. A bus dropped her two blocks from Jackson's building. She went to his door and knocked. He wasn't home.

She wandered the streets a bit, saw a deli, and ate a pastrami sub as an early lunch. Afterwards she window-shopped and bought a can of mace in a drugstore. That gave her enough courage to sit on a stoop and consider her options. *Am I being silly? Who would go after me?* Because the whole hard disk was now potentially public, the only reason could be revenge. Considering the damning evidence, that would only compound Tracy Ellison's problems. She nodded. *Yes, Ellison will be too busy with damage control to even think about revenge, especially if the FBI gets involved.*

Her internal conversation made her feel better. And honed her resolve. *No one is going to do to me what was done to Sheila.*

Just after three, she checked Greg's apartment again. The cop still wasn't home, so she knocked on the door to 3B.

Chapter Three

Joe Hill hated his job. He had survived gang warfare in the Chicago suburbs, put in a tour in Afghanistan, and tried to make some money as a mercenary in Africa. It wasn't like any of that would give him a decent pension or 401(k), so he had listened carefully to the fat man with the bulldog jowls who represented a group of gun traffickers in London.

Guns and violence were about all the small, wiry man knew. He was smart enough to speak four languages and read a few more, but he didn't figure a university language department would be hiring him anytime soon. The bulldog's offer was too good to pass up, although he found the tobacco-smelling sleazebag despicable.

His little group was called "The Cleanup Crew." They were all men with a shady past but now they were well dressed professionals, just like the assholes who took the train from Connecticut into Wall Street every day. Guns for hire, mostly operating in the U.S.—wet work abroad would cost you extra in per diem and hazard pay.

He didn't mind the killing per se. People got in the way of other people and had to be eliminated. That was a fact of life he had learned in Chicago. He minded the victims, though. Instead of a battlefield or general military-type excursion, eliminating them was often close-up and personal, and the killing often followed torture sessions, because those who hired him and his colleagues often wanted information too.

He was on just such a mission. They had a name and apartment address. He happened to know how to get there, but it wouldn't have mattered—GPS was an important tool for him. Google Maps even showed the alley.

The authorities don't have a monopoly on technology. Of course, it helped him that "the authorities" were often involved in his business ventures in some way.

"Stop here," Hill told his driver.

He turned to the rest of the team in the rear seats of the SUV and went through their assignments. They split up, entering the building through the front, rear, and underground garage, even though they knew their target, like many New Yorkers, didn't own a car. They met in front of the target apartment with guns drawn. Any witnesses would be eliminated as collateral damage. *SOP. Maybe since the Roman Empire?*

Rawlings, the closest to the door, also noted it was slightly ajar and turned to Hill with eyebrows raised. Hill shrugged and nodded to all five. They moved inside, guns ready at their thighs.

"That you, girl?" A black woman came out of the kitchen and came to a full stop. "Oh, shit!"

Rawlings fired the taser. Three of them dragged the woman to the threadbare couch.

Hill compared the face he saw to his black-and-white photo that was followed by a word description. "It's her, I guess. Bit older looking than the photo. Toss this place. Look everywhere for anything that can store computer files—laptops, external drives, old-fashioned stick memories, whatever. Rawlings, you put the zip ties on. I'll get some water."

He stared at the woman a moment with glass ready. A familiar tug in his loins irked him. Some of their African assignments involved rape of black women to make it look like the opposing tribe had gone wild. He had to admit it had been fun—absolute power over a defenseless woman. *Must be an evolutionary thing.* He shrugged. *And this black bitch ain't bad lookin' either, not like some of those darkies with the huge lips.*

He found his stash and snorted some coke. For some reason, it always calmed him. Others said it had the opposite effect. *I'm special, I guess.* He then tossed the full glass of water on the twitching woman's face. She came too and started screaming, so he slapped her.

"Honey, let's make this quick. Where do you have the files on Ellison?"

He hadn't argued much with his employers when they came up with the theory that they could mount a media blitz that made it appear the Times had fabricated all the dirt about the campaign. He thought the theory didn't make much sense, but agreed it was possible that they could at least turn it into a sophisticated version of mudslinging politics. Gathering up other copies of the files was also futile, he thought. They could be all over the internet or in the various clouds the big IT companies maintained. Bottom line: he didn't much care if the theory was correct or their gig was successful, as long as he and his men were paid. He had a job to do.

Let the torture begin!

There passed a frustrating fifteen minutes for Hill and his men. Their victim clammed up like a KGB spy. Hill had once tortured an SVR agent, SVR being the foreign-operating successor to the KGB. The agent had not talked and ended his life by biting on an old-fashioned cyanide tooth. *Tradition!*

The woman didn't have that escape. She just lay there, moaning and groaning, passing out only when Rawlings did his trick with a cigarette—puff, puff, apply—or pounded her face. She passed out several times.

"OK, it's over," said Hill. He took out his gun, pointed at her forehead, and shot twice.

No information, no computer files. The bosses won't be pleased. But they can go to hell.

"Shall we tidy up a bit?"

"What for? Just don't toss your gloves anywhere near this building. Can we confirm this bitch was alone here?"

"Living alone or not entertaining?"

"Either one."

"If there was a boyfriend here, he slipped by us."

"What's that burning?"

"Something in the oven," said one of his men from the kitchen. "I'll turn it off. Say, it's gas. We could cover up everything with an explosion."

"That would be tidying up too much," said Hill with a smile. "Just turn the damn oven off and let's get out of here."

They left the building by the three different routes again.

"What's wrong?" said Hill to the driver.

"Won't start. Let me check."

"Never mind," said Hill, eying the dangling wires under the dash. "Maybe someone did get by us. Or we have a meddlesome kid who needs a good whipping."

Chapter Four

"You must be Linda," said Mrs. Murphy after inspecting Linda through her peephole and opening the door. "Greg said you might come around when he was out. Pretty black girl with cornrows and pigtails, he said. Please come in and meet Mr. Tom. He gets along with Greg, but he likes women a lot more."

"Thank-thank you so much. I-I don't want to be a bother."

"Why, you're out of breath child! Is something the matter?"

"I think so. I don't know for sure. Someone is chasing me maybe? I've been waiting on the street."

"Mother Mary, child, why didn't you come here sooner? We must call the police if someone is chasing you." Mrs. Murphy went to her purse and pulled out a cellphone. "I only use my smart phone now. Those landlines are going the way of the dinosaurs. Why pay twice for something, right?"

"Please don't call. I want to wait for Greg."

The old woman frowned but put the phone away. "All right, but I need to settle you down, you poor thing. You can tell me all about it over coffee and pie. I just brewed a pot—" She wrinkled her brow. "—just after lunch, I think. Yes, I did. I generally do two pots per day. We need to keep those Spanish in Colombia employed or they'll all be coming here, right? Sugar and cream?"

"Yes, that's fine. The pie sounds good too."

"Apple-rhubarb. Straight from our neighborhood deli this very morning. I don't do much baking anymore. It's hard to cook for just one person. When Jim Junior moved out to live with his slutty girlfriend and Jim Senior, my husband passed, I sort of lost motivation, I did."

When Mrs. Murphy served the coffee, Linda noticed her eyes. "You have the new implants, don't you?"

"You're not supposed to be able to tell," the old woman said, shoveling a quarter of a pie onto Linda's plate. "Course, Mr. Tom noticed right away, but he got used to it. I think he's hiding, by the way. My purr baby is shy sometimes. Takes a while to warm up to strangers." She blinked her eyes, showing Linda how the implants' pupil constricted, mimicking normal iris movement. "Me, I say, we got all this new technology, why not take advantage of it? Cost me a fortune even with Medicare, but what the hell? You only live once. That's why I like my smart phone so much. At night in bed, when the streaming video gets boring, I watch male strippers. I atone for it all in confession, mind you, but a woman can dream, can't she now?"

Linda smiled. "You remind me of Mama."

"You're a mulatto then?"

"No, not in that way. In personality. She was a lovely old lady too. My sister's tragedy hastened her death, I'm afraid. She sort of lost the will to live."

"I can understand that. When my Jim passed, I was really depressed. Didn't care about losing Jimmy Junior to his slut, though. Good riddance, I say. What happened to your sister?"

"She was beaten and raped and left in a coma. Now she's a paraplegic and a mental case."

Mrs. Murphy's jaw dropped. "Oh my, that is tragic! This city contains a lot of evil, you know. Now tell me who you're running from."

"I'd rather not get you involved, Mrs. Murphy. It's enough that Greg is involved. He was the only cop I knew."

"Poor Greg sees the underbelly of this city all the time, I'm afraid, just like my Jim did. It's hard to deal with it day in, day out, I imagine. I'm a shoulder to cry on if needed, child. I don't need to know about your troubles, but I can still offer an old arthritic shoulder."

"Thank you."

Some hours later, after Linda had heard most of Mrs. Murphy's life story, the old woman said, "I hear Greg now on the stairs. That's the cochlear implants. I can hear a flea farting a block away. I can hardly make it up those stairs anymore, but they won't fix the damn elevator. Let me call him." She didn't use her cellphone. She stuck her head out the door. "Linda's here."

Greg put away his keys and joined them. "What's up?" Linda looked at Mrs. Murphy, shrugged, and summarized for the cop what had happened. "You could be imagining things. Might be Feds looking for someone else."

"Now aren't you the innocent one," said Mrs. Murphy. "They sound menacing enough. Linda here was smart to run."

Greg nodded. "I can understand you're scared. I saw the Times article. Did they get everything right?"

"They whitewashed things a little. It's much worse than what they portrayed."

"All the media has a political slant these days, one way or the other," said Mrs. Murphy. "My Jim used to say that one should read both *L'Osservatore Romano* and *Izvestia* to get the full spectrum."

Greg nodded. "Smart man, your Jim." He nodded toward the dining room table—one-bedroom apartments in the building had no eat-in kitchen, while his had a galley kitchen on one side. "Has the pie calmed Linda down a bit?"

Linda smiled.

"She didn't eat the crust, only the insides," said Mrs. Murphy. "No wonder she's skinny and frail."

"She'd have to lose a few pounds to be a model," said Greg. Now Linda frowned. "That's meant as a compliment. Now the unhealthy, anorexic look is what designers want on their runways."

Mrs. Murphy hefted her breasts. "My Jim did just fine with these." The laughter broke the tension. "There's pie left, Greg."

"Let's order pizza first," he said. "It's early, but I'm hungry. It will take them thirty or forty minutes. I'll go get some beers from my apartment."

After the early dinner, Mrs. Murphy put on the news. A breaking story made Linda's hand shake so much she spilled some of her coffee. She put down the mug and rushed to the bathroom.

"What just happened?" said their host.

"I think I know."

They heard a thump! Greg ran to the bathroom and opened the door. Linda was on the floor unconscious. The toilet was filled with vomit; some had spattered on the old tile.

"Pull her out and sit her up against the wall. Make sure she can still breathe. Sometimes vomit gets stuck in the windpipe." After inspecting her bathroom, Mrs. Murphy stepped out, eyed Linda, and shook her head. "Poor thing. I hope it wasn't the pie. Some people have strange allergies, you know." She studied Greg for a second as he loosened the collar of her blouse. "Or morning sickness in the afternoon?"

"It wasn't the pie," said Greg. "And she's not pregnant. Let me clean up some of the mess."

"Just some spatter. A good flush will get most of it."

"I'll get her some water."

"Splash a bit in her face." Mrs. Murphy went into the bathroom and started to tidy up. He heard the hiss of air freshener.

When Greg returned from the small kitchen with a large glass of water, he found Mr. Tom licking Linda's face. She came to with a start, and the cat stepped back and hissed. She held out a hand to him; the cat sniffed it and decided she was harmless. He started to purr and rub her legs.

"He's a true friend if he can get past the barf residue and smell. It was your building, correct?"

"Kit Turner, my neighbor. She looks a bit like me. She lives two doors down and has a key. I let her use my oven. Hers is on the blink. They must have mistook her for me."

"You OK for the moment? I want to make a call."

She nodded. It took more than one call to get details. Kit Turner was tortured and killed. Linda's apartment was a shambles. He returned and kneeled beside her.

"This is not on you, Linda, but you were right. They were looking for something."

"But why? The Times has the disk copy and in the article they said they were giving one to the FBI."

"They're probably not Feds or cops, that's why. They want to know what files are on that disk. Plus, did you read all the files?"

"Some were encrypted. Why? There was enough readable stuff to sink Ellison."

"There might be things in those files her donors don't want made public. And maybe they're in the encrypted files. Who knows? Criminal elements can be more paranoid than the average citizen."

She thought a moment. "Won't whoever you called put two and two together and figure you're involved in my whistleblowing?"

"Maybe. They're certainly going to start wondering about Kit Turner being in Linda Richmond's apartment. As soon as we can, we need to leave Mrs. Murphy in peace. She already knows too much. I don't want her more involved."

She stroked Mr. Tom. "Or this cat."

Greg nodded.

Chapter Five

Hill closed his laptop.

"New order?" said Rawlings, stubbing out his cigarette in the ash tray.

"Continuation," said Hill. "Our employers are a bit pissed. Sent me more info about the victim. They think she had a boyfriend, and he has copies of the files. Jives with the damage to the SUV. The info about the victim says she was friendly with a cop when someone beat and raped her sister."

"Geez, what shitass would do that?" said one of the Cleanup Crew who was playing poker.

"A shitass like you, maybe?" said Hill with a growl.

"We do that as part of our jobs," said Rawlings. "Lay off him."

Hill shrugged. "We should find this cop. Might be the car mechanic, you know."

"What kind of cop?" said the poker player.

"SVU. They deal with rapes."

"We know that," said Rawlings. "Let's go question the bastard."

"We need an address and description first. I'm waiting on that. I'm going for a walk."

The old house in Brooklyn they were renting was in a diverse and run-down neighborhood. Many people wouldn't attempt a walk in the early morning hours, but Hill wasn't most people. He figured that he could take care of anyone who confronted him, whether cops or muggers, so he felt safe.

A cop might do more than rip out some wires. Maybe it's someone else...a boyfriend. He wished he knew more about their victim. Why was the door ajar? Was she expecting someone? He cursed and slapped his forehead. We never asked the woman that! Thought of that old jingle: somethin' lovin' from the oven...or something. Maybe the boyfriend hadn't arrived yet, saw us, and fled. Saw the SUV, jerked out the wires. That was a possible scenario and maybe meant the boyfriend was keeping the backups for the Ellison files. He smiled. Or their victim was just too stupid to keep backups, thinking that giving everything to the Times ended her participation? He would have to mention that alternative theory to their employers.

Maybe I'm getting too old for this!

Their recent victim wasn't the first black woman he had shot. The first was a revenge killing, shooting a black gang leader's girlfriend in a deadly turf war. His gang acquired a few more blocks of clients, drug addicts hooked on a wide range of product. The weirdest ones were suburbanites, many of them white collar workers whose kids were often gang recruits. For most of his teen years, Hill had considered selling drugs just another version of a corrupt free enterprise system. He stopped his dealing in the Army and eventually discovered that killing alone was profitable. *Now I'm just another buyer like all the other moms and dads in suburban America.* He chuckled.

A whore on a corner gazed at him. He walked up to her and handed her a c-note. She examined it.

"I'm not doing it here, old man." *Old man? Does she have ESP?*

“Not asking you to do it here, shit-face. Go buy some product and get high. Better, go have a good breakfast. I can get free pussy without the risk of getting anything you might have.”

“Asshole.” She turned and walked off.

That pretty much describes it. I am an asshole. He watched the receding figure, took out his gun, and aimed. He had never taken the safety off, though. He’d seen the scar on her face as she turned under the streetlight. *But sometimes I’m a compassionate asshole.*

He put the gun away, walked a few more blocks, and circled back to the house.

There was a message on Hill’s laptop when he returned.

“We have the cop’s name and a pic,” he told the Crew. “Get ready to move out.”

He knew they would be lucky to find the cop at home. *We might have to corral him as he leaves his precinct.*

This time he had two men stay with the new SUV while the other four of them rendezvoused on the third-level stair landing of the building.

“Don’t break the door down,” said Hill in a whisper. “We’ll be stealthy. Corky, do you have your tools?”

“Always,” said a small man. He put his gun away, took out burglar tools, and examined the locks on the door. “Two deadbolts and the door knob. Stupid cop thinks that makes him safe.”

“Stupid cop probably has a stupid gun,” said Hill. “Keep it quiet.”

“Give me five.” They waited, two watching the stairs while Hill watched Corky. “Piece of cake.”

The door swung open. The cop wasn’t inside.

“Toss the place but don’t make too much noise.”

Chapter Six

"I'm curious about why you were looking for information on that homicide," said Sid Chessman, making Greg's visitor's chair protest when he sat down in it. Sid wasn't overweight, but he was a huge man who looked like a retired NFL nose tackle.

"Sheila Richmond case," said Greg. "Thought the victim was her sister."

"And you know she wasn't how?" said Sid, eyeing him.

Greg thought fast. *Come on! Make something up.* "Dunno. Guess someone else told me. Linda Richmond took her sister's beating and rape hard. It would have been a cruel irony."

Sid studied Greg for a moment more. "The victim's Kit Turner, a next-door neighbor. We'll want to talk to Linda Richmond. Know where she is?"

"Not since after the trial. Why are you on the case? Your beat isn't Queens either."

"Your friend Linda was last seen in Queens at an F train stop. Our friends there think she maybe went to Manhattan."

"What time?"

"Not long after the murder. Get my point?"

"Yeah, she's a POI at least. Anybody's prints in her apartment besides Linda and Kit's?"

"Unusable smudges on a window pane. Window goes to the fire escape, but it was nailed shut from outside. The lock on the door was destroyed, big footprint above it, maybe EEE size 13. All the clothes are still in the closet."

"Shoe size doesn't match Linda's, I'm sure of that. The clothes indicates she didn't plan on going anywhere. Ever think she might be kidnapped?"

"That would be too much of a coincidence," said Sid.

"Because?"

"She stopped working on Ellison's campaign a few days ago. The Ellison scandal breaks yesterday morning. She's kidnapped right after that. Three coincidences, in fact."

"Find her and you'll probably discover that's all they are."

"That would be nice to know. And, to answer your question, she's both a POI for the killing and a possible kidnapping victim. I'm involved for the homicide and looking for her here. FBI's being called in about the possible kidnapping. In any case, we have a missing person we'd sure like to talk to."

"I wouldn't discount other possibilities."

"We're not. We know what we're doing. People are viewing F-train surveillance videos as we speak, for example."

"I'm more worried about what the FBI is doing. Kidnapping victims have high mortality rates."

Sid shrugged. "Out of my hands, bro. Agent-in-charge says kidnapping's a long shot."

Greg smiled. *I've probably distracted him enough.* "What do you think?"

"I think if you see her, you should let us know."

When Greg entered his apartment, he saw the mess. His orderly chaos had morphed into a junkyard. He slid a reprint of a Monet aside and saw the winking red light, the silent alarm

telling him of the invasion. *I didn't check my cellphone.* He knew that was stupid. *Why have an alarm system if I don't use it?*

He made a quick survey. Nothing was missing. Two of his Dave Brubeck LPs lay in pieces on the floor; the other LPs were OK, as well as his stereo system. That was the only thing of real value besides his laptop. He reached in under the sink and found it.

He reset the alarm, locked up the apartment again, and went down the hall to knock on 3B. Mrs. Murphy opened.

She had become part of the team, but Greg knew she hadn't caught on to the whole story. *Neither have I.* The old woman had become an old mother bear protecting her cubs.

"I heard you come up. Were you here earlier?"

"Must have been Dolores," he said. The woman on the first floor attempted to clean his apartment once per month. Mrs. Murphy wouldn't remember the last time was only a week ago. "Linda here?"

"It's Greg!" Linda came out of the bedroom and stretched. "Did you learn anything?"

"I talked to Sid Chessman. I'll tell you about it on the way."

"On the way where?" said Mrs. Murphy. "She's safe here, you know."

"Maybe, maybe not." Greg kissed the old woman on the cheek. "If they connect her to me, you might be in danger too, and you live next door, which could double the danger. I'm not chancing it."

"Can you tell me what to expect? I don't have a gun, you know." Greg nodded to Linda, who found her purse and took out Greg's spare gun. Mrs. Murphy's eyes opened wide when Linda offered it to her. "I was kidding. I don't know how to shoot."

Greg smiled. "What about relatives?"

"My brother and sister-in-law live in Astoria. Everyone else has scattered to the wind."

He took five twenties from his wallet and handed the bills to her. "Pack a suitcase and take a taxi. Tell them your apartment is being fumigated."

"I can't show up unannounced like that."

"Then call them and tell them that's what you're doing. Say you can't afford a hotel."

She smiled. "I can't. I'm sure Lacey will be so happy to see me. We don't get along, you see."

Greg shrugged. "That often happens. Try to be nice. Maybe she'll reciprocate."

"I'll repeat Mrs. Murphy's question," said Linda, trying to keep up with Greg on the stairs. "Where are we going?"

"Someone tossed my apartment," Greg said over his shoulder. "It's not safe here. We need to find a motel."

"I don't do quickies."

He laughed, appreciating her humor lightening their situation. "A hideout for you. Cops are looking for you; some bad guys too. I don't want to sound melodramatic, but you're in danger, Linda Richmond, so work with me."

"OK, but treat me with some respect. And please realize I'm not in great physical shape like you are."

He slowed down at street level. "Sorry. I'm anxious to get out of here. My car's around the corner."

Greg threw her backpack in the backseat and took the wheel. He wound his way to the Lincoln Tunnel. As usual the traffic was heavy, so he had plenty of time to tell Linda about what Sid Chessman had said.

"He must suspect something, but I had to make those calls to see where we stand." He turned into the motel on Route 3 and drove around to the rear parking lot. "This is a temporary measure. We need to find someplace more secure."

After checking in—Linda smiled at the aliases, Jennifer and Jonathan Hart—they agreed they weren't too hungry, so they ordered a small pizza and salads.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to sleep tonight," she said as he turned on the old TV.

"Pizza that bad?"

"Not indigestion, you fool! You say someone's after me."

"I'll do sentry duty and sit in this chair all night. But I'm not worried about tonight. This place is pretty quiet except for the lunch hour and now."

"Quickies?"

He nodded. "The girls bring their johns here, and the neighborhood bosses hump their secretaries too. That determines the hours and the permanent pot odor."

"There are other odors too. I don't like the stains on the carpet."

"Yeah. You might want to take the sheets and bed pad off. The mattress might be cleaner. Let's see if WLNY has anything about your case. I wonder what the senator is doing tonight."

Chapter Seven

Senator Ellison stared across the bay at the dim lights of Boston. *Talk about shit storm!* The Boston Globe and NY Times' scattered sections were the only items on her desk. She'd thrown a decorative pencil container at her aide. She tossed down the rest of her single malt. *I can understand how people become alcoholics.*

In spite of her small size, she was an imposing figure. Her eyes went from that Boston shoreline to her empty glass and back. She pounded the desk and papers with balled fists. *Damn! Damn! Damn! It's all my fault! I threw caution to the wind.* Her image, complete with disheveled red hair contrasting with her green bathrobe, stared back at her from the French doors.

The den door opened a crack. Her aide stuck his head in. "Call for you on three. One of those sponsors."

She nodded and reached for the ornate receiver. "I've done my part. We'll hit the airwaves tomorrow. Have you done yours?"

"My hands are clean, Senator. But certain friends of mine are doing their best to clean things up. This needs to be delicately handled. We don't want to make things worse than they are."

"Your friends have already done that," she said, remembering the crime scene in Linda Richmond's apartment. "Cops are idiots, but it won't take them too long to make the connection."

"That's why your ads need to air tomorrow. Did any TV station give you some time?"

"All the major networks on their morning shows. Do you realize how early I'll have to get up tomorrow?"

"You should get your beauty sleep then and leave the rest to me. I'd lay off the single malt. It wouldn't do you any good to appear on those shows with an obvious hangover."

Ellison looked around the den at the CCTV cameras in each corner. *Is the bastard tapping into my security system?*

"The answer is yes, Senator. It's just good business acumen to track our investments carefully."

And that's all I am! She threw the heavy glass at one of the cameras.

"You haven't improved your aim since you threw out the first pitch at that Red Sox game," said her caller with a laugh. "You really should work on your anger management issues. Poor Charlie can't take much more, I'm guessing." There was a click! and the line went dead.

"Charles!" she said—an unintelligible scream that shook the French doors' glass panes a little. "Bring me a fresh bottle!"

Ellison started out the first interview with some of her usual campaign rhetoric—how her opponent was going to ruin America, how she pandered to some minorities and left others high and dry, how she was the darling of many special interests, and so forth. Her interviewer was patient, biding his time.

"We've heard a lot of that before, Senator Ellison," he said when she stopped to take a breath. Her hangover headache wasn't helping. Drops had taken the red out of her eyes, but her hair was still too unruly and gave credence to her opponent's calling her a witch. "What America

wants to hear is your response to that article in the Times. Do you deny the charges in that article?"

She leaned back and thought some before answering. "Those charges are completely contrary to my sterling record of service to my constituencies in the Senate. I have served the state of Massachusetts and this country with all the energies I could muster. I'm surprised the NY Times and other media would stoop so low. Their campaign attacking my exemplary service record with deceitful lies to further the contemptible ambitions of my opponent are beyond the pale. They offer no evidence whatsoever that anything they've said isn't a lie."

"Are you saying these campaign files are fakes?"

"I'm saying they don't exist. Their famous whistleblower is a myth. They might as well publish science fiction or fantasy. They have a long history of biased reporting. This is just another example."

She honed her presentation at the next shows.

"A busy day," Charles, her aide, said to Ellison in midflight to Hyannis. "Sorry about the delay at La Guardia."

"Why? You didn't cause it. If I win, I'll close that damn airport and build a new one right over the LIE and two in New Jersey."

"Congratulations on the interviews," Charles said, ignoring the mini-tantrum. "They went well."

"They're all anyone will remember if we can find the damn whistleblower and get her or him to admit everything is a lie."

"I thought that our standard position was that the Times made it all up."

"Yes, the whistleblower might be imaginary, but they might have perused lists from recent staff shakeups and picked a name. We need to know that name." *I squirmed out of that one.*

The senator had done exactly that, not only considering people fired in recent shakeups who might have a grudge, but anyone who had resigned from the campaign, the most recent one being Linda Richmond. She didn't even know whether the Richmond girl was guilty, but her sponsor's accomplices had botched any chance of determining that by killing her neighbor and making Richmond run.

"Your problem is that there isn't much time left to turn this around," said Charles.

"I know, I know. The best I can do is to keep doing what I did today. You can bet Lloyd Jepson will try to skewer me with this shit during the next two debates. We'll have to waste time and come up with some parries, and go on the attack too, not just be defensive. And that will take time away from the issues, where I can slap that old bastard around a bit."

"You do that pretty effectively on the Senate floor."

"I do, don't I? But the ultimate slap in the face will be winning the presidency and dethroning a sitting president."

Chapter Eight

Three-one-two. Soft knocks on a motel room's door. Eye in a peephole as a response. *Damn, I should have warned her!* The door opened a bit. The chain was still on.

"I'm going nuts in here," said Linda, removing the chain. Greg stepped inside and shut the door, locking up tight. *I could break this door down with one good kick.* "They're talking about Kit as much as about Ellison."

"Both top stories," he said with a nod. "I forgot to warn you about peepholes. Shooter can point his gun right at your eye." He went to the window beside the door and moved the old curtains aside a bit. "Use a quick look from here instead."

"Lot of good that would do me. There's no rear exit."

"Slider, sundeck, and fence jump. That's your exit. That's why you're on the first level."

"You honestly think I can jump a six-foot fence and cross a freeway?"

"All right, climb it. Edge along it until you arrive at the off-ramp."

"I haven't had much upper-body strength since I got tits. I need a ladder."

"The perps could then use the ladder too, if they came in from the off-ramp. Let's not waste time discussing this. NYPD is looking for you as a POI in a homicide. FBI is looking for you as a possible kidnapping victim. New Jersey is too obvious as a hiding place. We need to move. Any suggestions?"

She went and sat on the edge of the bed. "Why don't I just turn myself in to the FBI?"

"Because then the other guys would know where you are."

"I'd avoid causing more deaths like Kit Turner's."

"That's not on you, Linda, any more than your sister's death was your fault."

"She went out jogging after our argument to work off steam. Roberto said it was all my fault."

"Her hubby was out of his mind at the time. I'd wager he's cooled off by now."

"Maybe. But I don't want any more people to die where I might be the cause. Wouldn't the FBI put me in witness protection or something?"

"To protect you from Ellison's funding people? Or as a whistleblower? Either one's a stretch. The agents studying the disk are probably completely different from the ones looking for you as a possible kidnapping victim. They probably haven't connected you to the disk even."

"How did those thugs do that?"

"It doesn't matter. Alarm code for some of the files? Campaign worker who saw you do it? A smart correlation between your leaving the campaign and the Times breaking the scandal. My colleague, Sid Chessman, conjectured that connection, and he's just an average guy, not a rocket scientist. The thugs might not know for sure, but they might figure the best way to verify their conjecture is to beat the crap out of you and find out what you know."

"Do you think they realize their mistake, thinking I was Kit?"

Greg shrugged. "No way of knowing right now." He sat by her on the bed. "I'm going to have to maintain the pretense that I'm going about my duties as always. You going to be OK tonight again?"

"My turn to sit in that old chair without springs all night, I guess, gun in hand. Sure, I'll be OK."

“How ‘bout I sit in the chair now while you take a nap? In a few hours, I’ll order Chinese. You like Chinese?”

“Everything except that the lottery numbers never work,” she said with a smile. “General Tso’s my favorite. Spring rolls with spicy mustard for appetizers. Fried rice.”

“Sounds good. Get some shuteye, and I’ll stand guard.”

“I always figured you for a moody introvert,” said Linda, patting her tummy. She didn’t know whether the gas was from the hot mustard or the sodas Greg had bought in the motel’s machines.

“Maybe I am,” Greg said, collecting the takeout boxes, shoving them into the delivery bag, and dropping the whole thing into the trash can. “How have I proved that’s not true?”

“I thought we had a nice dinner discussion.”

“Because I talked about wanting to be a lawyer and settling for John Jay? You were lucky. You received some scholarship money, at least. I didn’t have the grades. I don’t play computer games much anymore, by the way. I see enough violence in SVU.”

She stretched. “You were right. By giving that drive to the Times, I caused a lot of trouble for myself.”

He glanced at the time on his phone. “I have my shift to do. Are you OK?”

She patted the gun in her lap. “Is this legal?”

“Does it make a difference?”

“If I kill someone, I want to use a legal weapon.”

“Might not matter, depending on who you kill. And I’m the legal owner, not you.” He waved his hand a bit. “Be careful. Remember to use the curtains. Remember the escape route. Call me if anything happens.”

“Assuming I can.”

“Think about what clothes you might need. Other stuff. Wherever we go, we’ll stop somewhere on the way and I’ll buy it.”

“We?”

“OK, maybe I’ll send you by train. Then you’ll have to buy it. Whatever.”

She moved the curtain aside enough to watch him leave.

This time Sid Chessman sat on the edge of the desk. It groaned under his weight. “We have some video of Linda Richmond from the F-train station near your place. That another coincidence?”

“Unusual, because she lives in Queens. But not unusual if she’s looking for a job after leaving the Ellison campaign.” Greg eyed his colleague. “Why do I feel you’re accusing me of something?”

“She’s not bad looking, you know.”

“Never said she was. Both her sister and she are easy on the eyes.”

“Sis still is even after all that happened, except she’s almost a vegetable. Kind of logical you would comfort Linda a little.”

“That happened two years ago. And I resent you insinuating that I would take advantage of her.”

Sid held up both hands. “Don’t get in a lather, bro. Heard you’re taking some vacation time.”

“People talk too much. It’s not really a vacation. I have an uncle in Connecticut that’s in a bad way. Thought I’d spend some time with him before he leaves this world. Things are a bit slow anyway. Others can handle the pimps and their girls for a while.”

“Yeah, SVU’s a drag. Rodriguez is retiring from homicide. I can put in a good word for you.”

“I heard about that. It might be a good idea. I might be burning out in SVU. I’ll let you know.”

Sid took the cigarette from his ear, sniffed it and fondled it, and then put it back. “Can’t say there’s any more satisfaction derived from solving more cases, and it doesn’t seem to make much difference if a perp actually kills a woman by beating her or just leaves her for dead, but there are interesting cases. We have one on the books where we like a guy that might have killed his wife for her life insurance.”

“Just a different kind of abuse.”

“Guess so. But I always thought SVU was a downer.” He stood up. “Hope your uncle surprises you by getting better.”

“Not likely. He’s ninety-two.”

Chapter Nine

Greg took back control from the car from the autopilot when he left the interstate. Linda seemed to be in a funk. Can't blame her. She has a lot on her plate.

"This is a mansion," she said when they turned into the mansion's driveway that meandered more than a mile through lush gardens.

"Not really. But Beth and Jerry have good pensions and worked hard all their lives, saving a lot of money, investing in stocks and bonds, and so forth. You'll like them both."

Jerry Jackson had been a railroad man. He'd also been through three divorces. Number four wife, thirty years younger, was still with him, acting as his caregiver. Greg watched her in the yard talking about her roses with Linda.

"She's a keeper," said Uncle Jerry. He spun in his motorized wheelchair. "Guess the fishing you'll be doing at the cabin ain't gonna be the usual."

Greg smiled. *Let him think we're lovers. That will make him keep it to himself if anyone asks!* "Guess you haven't been up there in a while?"

"Just last spring Beth took me there. You know the deck. Plenty of room for me to scoot around and smell the pines. And she loves the place more than I do. She was never into the fishing, but she loves the solitude."

"That's what I'm looking for—solitude."

"Yeah, guess you could call it that. Just don't knock her up yet, nephew. That could be a shitload of trouble. I know. I was paying child support most of my life. No one can touch my pension except Beth, though."

"How'd you manage that?"

"Good lawyers. The bloodsucking bastards have some uses." He looked around the den. "I'd offer you a drink, but Beth hid the hooch. Have you two done it yet?"

"None of your business, uncle. You can't try for a hard-on by listening to my stories."

"Don't need your stories none," the old man said with a grumble. "Them little pills do just fine, even now."

Greg couldn't imagine how Beth managed that, but he figured that the old shriveled and wrinkled engineer wasn't lying. Mom always said her brother was a Casanova.

"You two better head up there right after lunch. The old country roads aren't easy to navigate in the dark, and the state ain't good about fixin' the potholes anymore."

"We'll do that, uncle. But now that Beth's outside with Linda, tell me how you're really feeling."

"Some nights I dream I'm having a conversation with the Grim Reaper. It's hard to get old, boy. I've lived way longer than I thought I would, but I ain't feelin' bad at all. Kind of perplexin', you know. Your mom died from a stroke at sixty-three, and here I'm going strong in my eighties and still going strong."

"Ninety-two, uncle."

The old man frowned. "Lost count there. But don't interrupt me. It seems unfair that some die so young and others live to be so old."

"Better than dying on the battlefield, maybe."

"Your dad died serving his country. Don't let anyone tell you no different. The city is pretty much a battlefield in your job too, I guess. Talked to that piece of tail about that? She needs to know how dangerous your job is."

“She’s not a piece of tail, uncle, and we’re not there yet. Leave it alone.”

“Don’t get all huffy. Do what you can to lift her spirits. She seems like one of those depressed women I always stayed away from. Good looking, but depressed.”

Maybe she has a reason to be depressed. “Here come Beth and Linda. Maybe it’s lunch time?”

“My woman is like a clock. She’s always afraid my sugar will get screwed up.”

“I’m going to be more nervous here than at the motel,” said Linda, looking across a small area with tufts of grass and pine needles at the woods from the huge back deck of Uncle Jerry’s fishing cabin.

“There’s a difference. I’ll be here.”

She spun to face him. “This won’t really solve my problem, you know. I need to know why someone wants to kill me.”

“Maybe not kill you, but find out what you know and seeing if it’s harmful to their interests.” He jerked a thumb toward the sliding glass doors. “I brought my laptop with all the Ellison files on it. Time for some cyber sleuthing while we wait for something to happen.”

“You’re no hacker.”

“But I know a few.” He held up his hand when he saw her expression. “Ultimate recourse. But the cabin has a generator and satellite service.”

“Really? Whatever for? Isn’t it supposed to be a place to get away from it all?”

“I guess Beth didn’t tell you she worked in cybersecurity for a Hartford insurance firm. She met Jerry at a Patriots game in Foxboro. She’d come up here and work while my uncle fished.”

She smiled. “That old boy is a real lecher. Some of his jokes made my ears burn.”

“He’s an amateur psychologist. He wanted to observe your reactions.” *I won’t say I wanted to do the same. Your eyes always left Uncle Jerry’s and went to mine.* “He’s just a harmless old man.”

“Old, maybe. I don’t know about harmless. When do we start?”

“I’ll rev up the generator after dinner. Steaks tonight. Fish tomorrow maybe, or Spam and beans if I don’t catch anything tomorrow morning. And we have plenty of beer and coffee.”

“And no help to be had if those guys in the SUV find us.”

“They’re not likely to do that. This cabin doesn’t exist in anyone’s property tax database. They’d need to access county records, and Beth’s maiden name is on the deed.”

“OK, I would like some more time with those files.”

Greg leaned back in his chair. “I can’t break the encryption. Any ideas about what’s in those files.”

Linda looked up from her crossword. “Maybe the file names suggest something?”

“Sources 1, 2, and 3. Donors? Funding sources? Could be just stats to use in debates or something.”

“Yes, stats could be explosive. Jepson was a senator before he was president. The two even co-authored some legislation.”

"No honor among thieves," Greg said. "Someone on the campaign staff must have the encryption. Otherwise, why have these files on the server?"

"Minnie's the office boss, but she has to be innocent."

"Why?"

"Because she's an angel. I can't imagine her being involved."

"Do the various offices share files?"

"Of course."

"The person who can decrypt the files could be anyone then, from here to the West Coast, but probably a longtime staffer, someone the senator trusts. No way to figure out who it is, really. I'm going to go on the internet and send an email with those files attached to an old friend from John Jay."

"Isn't that dangerous?"

"The files will still be encrypted. If Cory can't break the encryption, no one can."

"You're not doing it through a popular email service, are you? Yahoo or Gmail?"

"Nope. He runs a website off his own server. I'll use his contact page."

She came over to the kitchen table and stood behind him. She saw a tall blond woman with huge breasts and large hips wearing nothing but a U.S. flag pointing a finger at her like an old Army draft poster. "BoobsAndRubes? What's that?"

"'Boobs' has a double meaning obviously, and a rube, originally meaning 'country bumpkin,' is now used as a synonym for nerdy klutz. He started the site back in high school. It's mostly just pics and blog posts on many diverse topics—mostly anti-establishment. He has articles that skewer both Ellison and Jepson and other articles extolling the virtues of Eugene V. Debs."

"Who's Eugene Debs?"

"History, my lady. He was an important union leader who ran for president several times as a socialist way before the McCarthy era."

"And he compares him with Ellison or Jepson?"

"Can't really say. I don't have time to read all his posts. But he's a computer wizard. He's done a lot of sleuthing for me. In the old days, they'd call him a snitch, but he hates pervs and wants to expose them all."

"An SVU asset then."

"Definitely. An undeclared asset. Only I know about Cory. Help me write the email. I want to tell him where the files came from without really saying where they came from."

"OK. I'll show how erudite I am now. Type the following: 'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...there's something afoot, dear Watson, with all the news that's fit to print.'"

"I don't get it. How can he understand that?"

"He will, if he's as smart as you say he is. The last part relates the first part to the NY Times article."

He nodded. "OK. Even if he doesn't understand that, the files will pique his curiosity. I'll sign it as John Jay, of course."

She smiled. "Of course."

Chapter Ten

Cory Holguin looked like a fat surfer. His stringy, long blond hair reached his shoulders. His bronze skin could have resulted from too much Hawaiian sunshine. But he was of Costa Rican and Colombian descent through his paternal and maternal grandparents—he colored and straightened his hair in a SoHo salon. He was gay but mostly asexual because his true love was just about anything associated with computers.

He opened a notebook when he saw the email and wrote with a pen containing chartreuse ink, “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...there’s something afoot, dear Watson, with all the news that’s fit to print—John Jay. Old Greg waxing poetic?”

The “John Jay” had captured his attention and told him that the email was from his friend. He then forgot about the message and focused on the files, knowing that Greg wanted him to look at their contents. He was surprised after an hour’s work to see they had nothing to do with the SVU. He jumped up and found the NY Times.

“Holy Mother of God!” He deleted the decrypted versions and the originals after storing them on his server in a folder that had all kinds of security. He then answered the email.

“Obi-Wan, it’s the worst of times! Dick Tracy should have what you sent. We need to talk. John Jay.”

He went and made a vegetarian smoothie, laced it with pure rum, and gulped half of it. *Talk about scandalous shit! What’s old Greg up to?*

He then smiled. *He’s protecting the whistleblower! But that’s all the more reason to involve the FBI. That whistleblower is going to need some serious witness protection.* “Dick Tracy” was their code name for the FBI they had invented because that agency often got involved with the SVU when the perv just happened to be some government official. Or a government official frequenting prostitutes. Or a kidnapper.

Cory had just finished his healthy gruel when his email was answered. “Dick Tracy has what I sent but maybe hasn’t peeked inside yet. Want to go fishing?”

What the hell does that mean? He thought a moment, went to another laptop, and pulled up an old email from Greg that had an attached photo showing the cabin. Buried in the thread were brief and obscure directions on how to get there. The photo had the caption “Good Fishing.”

Dangerous, but maybe he knew I keep that kind of personal stuff on another computer as long as there are no references to SVU business. He looked at his watch. I can catch the ferry in Port Jeff. He had to hurry. And he would need to carry the decrypted files—Greg wouldn’t have any of his fancy code handy, that was for sure. He decrypted the originals again, stored the decryptions on two memory sticks, and stored one of those in each of two secret pockets in his leather coat.

Connecticut, here we come!

The trip to Port Jefferson didn’t take long by his New York City standards. He took 495 East and then the Northern Parkway toward Hauppauge, where he flew along with his blond hair flowing behind like he was a Valkyrie, the old motorcycle helmet only needing rams’ horns. He knew from the honking he distracted a few drivers with the advertisement of his website on the

back, with the almost-nude woman who was a bit more covered for traffic consumption. After slowing down when he had to get off on some state roads, he arrived in Port Jeff some two hours later, in time for the 3 p.m. ferry to Bridgeport. He had to argue with the ferry office that he could squeeze his motorcycle on just about anywhere.

Once in Bridgeport, the rest was easy. He pulled up to the cabin. *No car?* He thought that was strange. The silence also told him to be on guard. *I'm not going to die today!*

Cory had always known that working with Greg on SVU business was dangerous. He couldn't know when some pimp or perv would find him out and come after him. He wasn't a violent man, but he was a cautious one. He reached into the back compartment of his cycle and pulled out his Smith & Wesson Model 29 chambered in 0.44 Magnum, Dirty Harry's gun. *Make my day, you rats!*

The front door to the cabin opened a crack. "Put that damn cannon away," said Gregg. "We're good here."

Cory held the gun down at his thigh. "I'm bringing it in. You might want some more firepower when you see what's in those files."

"Looks like a who's-who list for criminals," said Greg. "I can't imagine why all these people want to see Ellison elected."

"Maybe they also support Jepson," said Linda. "What do the numbers mean?"

"How much they donated, I presume," said Cory.

"If 1.2 is in millions, then all of them donated more than 200k," said Greg. "How do they launder that?"

"I didn't have time to figure that out," said Cory, "but they might not have to launder the donations if they're given to some PAC and this file is just a record of that. We can't see where the funds are going. With Citizens United in effect, Ellison is probably clean. It's even possible she doesn't even know who the donors are. She probably has some financial wizard handling all that."

"Would these be damning even after the election?" said Greg.

"Depends on whether Ellison wins, I suppose," said Cory. "In that case, she could give herself a partdon. Any idea how the FBI's investigation is going?"

"That's why I'm asking," said Greg. "They might not have your skills."

"They probably do, but their bureaucracy might get in the way. And they might try to authenticate all the contents Linda sent to the Times first. I doubt the newspaper did that, just because they wouldn't know how to do it."

"The more important question is: who's chasing us." Linda looked from one man to the other. "At least that's the more important question for me right now."

"Who knows you're here besides me?" said Cory.

"My uncle and his wife," said Greg. "They probably think Linda and I are here for a lusty weekend and won't talk."

Cory winked at Linda. "Always figured Greg needed a girlfriend. Or boyfriend. Whatever." She smiled, but he then frowned. "Your relatives will talk if these guys get to them. I hope you covered your tracks well. There are CCTV cameras all over the tri-state area now. It just depends on how tech savvy the bad guys are."

Chapter Eleven

"I'm rethinking that reappointment," Ellison said over the phone.

"Maybe I don't care what you're rethinking anymore," said the man from Homeland Security. "Your campaign is in trouble. Your future depends on whether the FBI can study all that information they received and make something of it before the election, of course. You're betting on their incompetence. I'm not sure I would."

"You could hedge your own bets," she said. "We'd like to interview a certain person-of-interest who might be hiding the whistleblower."

"Do you know who the whistleblower is?"

"We're narrowing down the list. I'm liking a certain black girl who resigned a few days before the Times broke the story."

"Who's the person who might be helping her?"

"If I tell you, will you put some people on finding him for me?"

"Not many people. And we might have to get NYPD involved. They own a lot of the cameras."

"Hmm. That's not a good idea. I want to keep this low key. How 'bout military security?"

"Not much there for the city, except for homeland defense. I'll see what I can do, though, if you give me his name."

Sid Chessman looked sideways at his colleague. "Why is the local DHS office interested in Greg? He's on vacation. I'm not about to interrupt him. The poor guy doesn't take enough vacations to detox from all that crap he sees in SVU."

"Some senator wants to give him some kind of award. Says she knows families with runaway kids who've been saved by the unit."

"Which senator?"

"Damned if I know. The request was made to the mayor's office."

And like I'm going to jump to do the mayor's bidding! Sid shook his head. "It can wait until Greg gets back from vacation. And I'll tell the mayor's office exactly that. Whoever heard of such a thing anyway? An award for doing his job? Greg will laugh until he breaks a rib."

"I suppose he would. I'll let you handle the calls from now on."

"I don't have anything to do with Greg. I'll talk to the lieutenant."

"I wouldn't," said the colleague. "He might make you tell DHS where Greg is."

"You're right. Forward the calls to me."

Sid watched his colleague return to his desk. *Yes, whoever heard of such a thing?* The request was so unusual, he was suspicious. He remembered Jackson's calls about the murdered woman. *Is Greg pulling a fast one?* He picked up the case folder. *That victim had been in her friend's apartment. Friend's name: Linda Richmond.*

He had an uneasy feeling. *Did they interview the friend?* No. She hadn't been seen since the murder, and the FBI was looking for her as a potential kidnap victim. He leaned back in this chair, causing it to protest. *Was Richmond associated with the Ellison campaign scandal?* He paid no attention to politics or politicians, but maybe Richmond was running because someone

knew she'd passed the files to the Times. *Not really my business. My job is to solve a murder case.* He then frowned. *Maybe the candidate was somehow involved. Maybe she's the senator making the request to the DHS!*

Joe Hill studied the house. *Simple elegance. Just what a working man would want.* He knew this was a long shot. A young cop and a ninety-two-year old uncle can't have much in common!

"This is a waste of time," said Rawlings, who was in the driver's seat of the SUV. "We have a whole damn list, and we're spending time looking for this Jackson guy? We can talk to him when he returns from vacation."

"Maybe we're wasting time, but the cop is linked to the Richmond woman. If we're going to take her off the list, we have to get to her. He might know how to do that."

"I'm betting the whistleblower is that office manager Minnie. She pretends to be all sweetness and light, but she didn't get that job without walking over a few people."

"Your problem, Rawlings, is that you don't trust anyone."

"Damn right. She has access to everything."

"Why wouldn't she be on the lam then?"

"Because that would be an admission of guilt. She thinks she can get away with it."

"If the FBI decrypts those key files, it won't matter who gave all of them to the Times. Ellison would be toast. Jepson is probably not happy either."

"Why not? His opponent is going to crash and burn."

"Forget it. Look, the wife's arrived. Shall we help her with the groceries?"

"That would be the neighborly thing to do."

They left the SUV, crossed the street, and walked up the driveway.

"Hello, ma'am," said Hill, flashing a fake badge. "We're looking for your husband's nephew, Greg Jackson."

"Greg's on vacation," she said. "I'm sure Jerry won't want to disturb him. You can talk to Greg when he returns to work."

"It's urgent. He might be in danger. We're here to offer some protection for him, maybe take him to a safe house." Hill smiled. *I can make up any story to suit the occasion!*

"I'll ask you to leave now," Beth said. "Greg said nothing about this, and I don't want you bothering my husband."

"I'm sorry you feel that way," said Hill. He nodded to Rawlings, who grabbed Beth and pinned her arms behind her back. "Let's go talk to your old man, Mrs. Jackson."

Beth looked both angry and afraid. Rawlings marched her up the driveway and front steps into the house.

Chapter Twelve

"I think it's time to be proactive," Greg said to Cory. "How easy is it to get to phone records?"

"Not hard if I do it," said Cory. "Using that info to nab someone would never work in court, of course."

"I just want the information."

"In that case, it's easy. A campaign's internal security with calls and emails is notoriously hackable, especially when dealing with arrogant politicians who are sloppy with emails. Who's the first target?"

"Ellison."

"She probably calls a lot of people. Who you looking for in particular?"

"Anyone on those decrypted lists."

"There are no phone numbers on the lists to match with."

"Correlating with the names will be enough. Linda and I will be sending them a little message, something like 'We know what you're doing.'"

"That should stir up the hornets' nest," said Linda. "They'll come after me even more!"

"They still don't know who you are," said Cory. "Maybe they'll start stinging someone else."

They had finished six calls when Cory approached them with a scowl. "I don't know what to make of this. Many landline calls from Ellison on Cape Cod to Jepson at the White House."

"Maybe Ellison is trying to stop Jepson from vetoing a critical bill? Or chewing him out for doing so?"

"A possibility, but I don't think so. There were twenty calls on the day the Times broke the story and others followed during the next few days."

"Sometimes politicians publicly pretend another politician is a mortal enemy when they're buddies in private," said Linda. "Like Bill Clinton and Bush 41."

"When they were both ex-presidents," said Cory. "These two are running a campaign."

"OK, bad example," she said. "Hatch and Kennedy then."

"Before my time. These two candidates are such mudslingers, I can't imagine them being friends."

Greg stood up suddenly. "There might be another explanation!"

Linda eyed him. "You had an epiphany?"

"Suppose there are some common names between Ellison's backers in that decrypted list and Jepson's? Those donors might be pressuring both candidates."

"That means Ellison is guilty—the person getting those backers wasn't just some exuberant campaign staffer." Cory smiled. "Both campaigns could be rotten. Not surprising."

Linda was nodding. "That theory works. Legal backers often contribute to both campaigns, ensuring they'll curry favor no matter who wins. Why not illegal backers?"

Cory smiled. "We need to send your little message to both Ellison and Jepson directly."

Ellison's aide stuck his head into her study. "You received an interesting voicemail," Charles said. "I'd ignore it, but the person was obviously disguising his voice."

"What's the message?"

"We know who your backers are, senator.' Maybe some sleazy reporter at the Times?"

"Maybe. Try to trace the number and I'll verbally flog the jerk."

Ellison was comfortable in her Chatham mansion. She had contingency plans if she lost the election to retire from the Senate and enjoy her grandchildren there. *Too bad I can't stand their parents—they're insufferable bores.* She supposed she was that way at one time. She had always enjoyed the privileges wealth and power brought her. She already had the former by birthright, and a political science degree from Smith College and law degree from Harvard brought the latter.

Her opponent, President Lloyd Jepson, came from a similar background—in fact, they were good friends at Harvard. Their wealthy fathers, one a health services tycoon, the other an owner of several high tech companies along Boston's 128 beltway, had determined their political affiliations. But Ellison had become tired with the game of power politics and wasn't sure she was going to win—it was hard to unseat an incumbent, even if she knew how Lloyd Jepson's thought processes worked. It was really the staff that won or lost elections.

Those donors tempted me. Who wouldn't be tempted by the bottomless barrel of cash reserves they made available? Modern campaigns couldn't be run without huge cash outlays, and the needs had surpassed what corporations and special interests had to offer with the country's insidious legal limits and disclosures.

She believed she was the right choice for the American people, someone offering change that would stop the things dragging the economy down, like unions, entitlement and welfare programs, limits on mining and drilling, and so forth. Of course, Jepson believed just the opposite and had won the presidency selling that to the American people. Like always, the result had been nearly a 45-45 percent split, and Jepson won in the Electoral College, which was becoming a habit in American elections. Ellison thought the pendulum would swing the other way this time. Moreover, she was a more attractive opponent than her old predecessor.

After Charles stuck his head in again to announce that the call was untraceable, she picked up the phone and called the president.

President Jepson had his Chief of Staff transfer the call to the Oval Office. "Calling to berate me about some real business like a bill I'm pushing, or just letting off steam about the campaign. You should retire, old girl, and get lost in that huge mansion you own."

"Donor business." Ellison hung up.

Jepson frowned, went to small sofa in the sitting area where his briefcase sat, and pulled out a cellphone. He returned the call to Ellison, who explained the real reason why she was calling.

"Let me check the other phone."

Jepson pulled another cellphone out of the briefcase and scrolled through the missed calls. He heard the message "We know who your backers are, Mr. President." He shut that phone off and picked up the other one where Ellison waited for his verdict.

"Someone at the FBI, do you think?"

"Could be, if they figured out the encryption. Any way you can check?"

"I'll ask the AG if he knows how that FBI investigation is going. It would be a natural thing for me to do. You should have been more careful, Tracy."

"I'm always careful. My staff gets sloppy. Obviously. We're narrowing the list of potential whistleblowers."

"I don't want to know."

"You should help."

"I can't get involved."

"You already are."

"Technically, no. Those files came from your campaign, not mine."

"How did they know to send you that message then?"

President Jepson thought a moment and then felt that the Oval Office had become chilly. "Depends on who they are. There's nothing that connects me to those files."

"We're talking, aren't we? That's a connection, isn't it? Maybe some asshole in the NSA is playing games with us."

"What would be the motivation?"

"Revenge, extortion, fun and games—how could I know that? That possibility never occurred to me until now. Maybe the whistleblower isn't from my staff at all, but some Snowden wannabe."

"And they're good enough to get through your cloud's firewalls and copy those files. C'mon, Tracy. No one's that good."

"Yeah, I guess you're right. My only recourse is to find the whistleblower. How's the debate prep going?"

"I'm not showing my cards. You're the enemy, remember?"

"Yeah, that's the crap we feed the public."

Chapter Thirteen

“Call out to your husband,” said Hill as Rawlings crab-walked Beth into the foyer of their home. “Tell him to meet you in the living room.”

Rawlings tightened his grip on her arms and made her wince.

“Jerry, it’s Beth. Can you meet me in the living room?”

They went into the living room and waited. Rawlings stood holding Beth in front of the huge floor-to-ceiling fireplace while Hill waited by the picture window.

From his desk, Jerry Jackson watched it all on his security system. *Who are these bozos?* He was furious that they were hurting Beth, but forced himself to stay calm. He found his automatic in his bottom desk drawer and took the shotgun from the gun rack. He liked to fish more than hunt, but the lake had a good supply of ducks that he shot at from time to time. He couldn’t remember ever hitting one. *Hard to hit a moving target, but these assholes are standing still.*

He found the comforter he used when it was chilly and hid both guns under it. *Should I wait and let them come after me? No, probably just one would come. I need to get them both!*

He started maneuvering the wheelchair toward the living room. Up the ramp—the house was split level but still negotiable in wheelchair—down the corridor and into the living room. It was a trip he had done many times because he really enjoyed that fireplace.

Just inside, he shot the man holding Beth. He was much taller. Rawlings fell with a bullet hole in his forehead, an astonished look frozen on his face.

Jerry had made that true shot with his right hand. The left held the shotgun, its aim oscillating as Hill went for his gun. The shotgun blast hit Hill in his legs. He sank to the floor where he shot Jerry. The shotgun went off again, shredding curtains behind Hill, as Beth ran to her husband. Hill shot them both.

Hill groaned and wondered if he’d ever walk again. He reached around, grimaced, and managed to take out his cellphone from his pants pocket.

“Hill here. Damn it! I need some backup. We’ll need to sterilize this place too. The old geezer almost killed both of us.”

The rest of his crew had fanned out in the little village, showing their fake badges and asking people if anyone had seen Greg Jackson or Linda Richmond. They were ten miles away.

By evening, Hill was in a hospital bed.

“You’d better learn how to use a shotgun, Mr. Adams,” said the intern who was examining his legs. “You’re lucky the blast didn’t hit you in the face. You’d be dead. We lose a lot of novice hunters like that.”

And I feel like taking this IV dripline and strangling you. “Am I good to go?”

“If the guy who brought you in can drive you. When you get home, inform your primary and tell him the wounds should be checked in forty-eight hours. No showers until then.” The intern held up a clipboard filled with forms. “I’m writing it all down for you. No aspirin, only Tylenol. The aspirin might reactivate the bleeding.”

Hill watched the doctor leave. *Damn swamis! The Indians everywhere now.*

“Does this tell us Linda Richmond is the whistleblower?”

Hill watched Brad Needles pour him some coffee, mulling over the question. He took a sip. *Strong, like I like it.* “Inconclusive. I think the old fart was just protecting his wife. He had a gee-whiz security system and saw how Rawlings was handling her. Even at ninety-two, the old man wasn’t stupid. He had a damn arsenal too. Hunting stuff, mostly, but we found all kinds of fishing gear in the basement. He must have tied his own flies for a time.”

“Kind of embarrassing to be bested by an old gent,” said Needles with a smile.

“If you were me, you’d be dead,” said Hill. “And I was lucky. The element of surprise is always an advantage. Rawlings didn’t even have time to draw his gun.” He tapped a drumroll on the table. “We need to put this to bed. Any luck with the village people.”

“The old man has a fishing cabin somewhere,” said Needles. “Nobody knows exactly where, but there aren’t that many lakes around.”

“We need some aerial recon. Anything with a parked vehicle is suspect.”

“Way ahead of you. There are three possibilities.”

“Gee, just three? We won the lottery. I suppose they’re in three different compass directions.”

“I’d eliminate one of them. There’s only an old Harley parked there. Richmond doesn’t have a car, but Greg Jackson does. The Harley doesn’t fit.”

“Good. We’ll check out the other two. If we get nothing, we’re going for others on the list.”

Chapter Fourteen

Corey had continued on his survey of the lists contained in the encrypted files but took a breather when Greg went to catch a fish and Linda went to the kitchen to see what she could do for dinner if he wasn't successful. That's when he saw the bad news.

"Greg's going to be upset with this," he said to his new friend.

"More than not catching a fish?"

"Much more. Words can't describe it. Come see for yourself."

She read the headline. "Possible Murder-Suicide in Connecticut." When she saw who the victims were, her jaw dropped. "I just met them! No way they would be suicidal."

"Goes along with the authorities not being able to figure out who was the suicide and who was the murder victim, because both had a gun in hand. I should go get Greg."

"What are you going to tell him?"

"That his uncle and aunt are dead, and the guys who did it probably know where we are now."

"He could be anywhere on the lake."

"He'd go to the nearest fishing hole, fish there a bit, move a little, but he wouldn't stray far. It's late. I'll go fetch him. Lock everything behind me and kill the power."

"What about your bike?"

"I'll hide it beside the car." He rummaged in his backpack. "Dirty Harry's gun. Watch the recoil."

Linda hefted the Magnum. "I can hardly lift it! Why don't you take it? You might need it."

"Because Greg is armed already. Point in the general direction and pull the trigger. Just the bang will make the perp have a heart attack."

Greg saw Cory approaching through the foliage. "Not much luck," he said so his friend could locate him. "I've thrown two back for undersize."

As Cory neared, he said, "Keep your voice down. There might be fiends and ogres in these woods."

"What does that mean?"

"That your uncle and aunt are dead, and it's likely they revealed our location before they died."

"I'll kill the bastards!" he said as he reeled in. "Why did you leave Linda alone?"

"She'd be more exposed out here. But let's get back to her. Be thinking of a Plan B as we go."

"There's no Plan B! We were supposed to be safe here. What are the police doing?"

"Next to nothing. Maybe forensics. They've declared it a murder-suicide."

"They must have staged the crime scene. Professionals. We're dead. We might as well make our last stand here."

"John Jay, Obi-Wan thinks that woman has turned you into a wuss." Greg stopped and glared at Cory. "Yeah, OK, maybe your decision is heroic like Davy Crockett at the Alamo, but

the separation between heroism and foolishness is a fine line. They'd turn that little cabin into a hunk of Swiss cheese. We need to even the odds."

"There's only one way to do that, so let's get to it."

At the cabin, Linda hugged him. "I'm so sorry."

"So am I, but Jerry wouldn't want us to give up. Pack up what you need. We're leaving. Do my things too. Cory, fire up your laptop."

"It's still on. What are you going to do?"

"Send a message to Sid Chessman."

Mystic Seaport was open all year round, its winter offseason a bit restricted, but it seemed deserted at 2 a.m. Park security was light too. They made it onto the *Morgan* without incident.

"Just what did you say to Chessman?" said Cory. He had decided to leave his beloved Harley hidden near the cabin and ride with Linda and Greg. "I could get seasick."

"Puke over the railing, not here," said Linda.

"You won't get seasick. This old boat hardly moves."

"I hear some waves."

"All in your imagination."

"You didn't answer my question."

"I told Chessman that Linda is ready to talk. Specifically: "Friend of victim ready to talk. Mystic Morgan. See you there.""

"Offering me up on a platter, I see," said Linda. "And isn't that a bit terse? I doubt Detective Chessman is into coded messages as much as Cory."

"He'll know what I mean," said Greg. "His kids loved the *Morgan*."

"Well, I don't," said Cory. "How long are we going to wait here?"

"Until Sid or a surrogate shows up."

"And what if the bad guys show up first?" said Linda.

"We defend ourselves."

Chapter Fifteen

"The big oaf is on the move."

Hill opened his laptop, preferring to answer the email from there. "Tail him. If it's routine police shit, don't tell me, but if his movements relate to our target's whereabouts, let me know."

"What was that about?" said Needles.

"For the moment, it's irrelevant." They were at cabin #2 and still no Richmond or Jackson. "This is a waste of time."

"What about cabin #3?"

"Yet another direction. I'm for visiting other people on Ellison's list." He heard the ping of a text message on his cellphone. "Jepson has been contacted. Says blitzkrieg required. Continue your mission."

"What's that mean?"

"They're going after anyone who possibly knows anything," said Hill. "Campaign staff on both sides, reporters, cops—hell, maybe they'll take Ellison and Jepson out too. Not any of my business. Nor yours. 'Continue mission' means find Richmond and Jackson. They're taking care of everyone else on the list."

"It will be a bloodbath," said Needles.

"Again, not our problem. Maybe they'll be pros and make them all look like suicides—guilt about anything as a motivation. Let me see that recon photo of #3 again."

Needles slid it over. "I guess someone's there. Isn't an old Harley worth a bit of money?" They could just barely make out the bike.

"Same as an old car. It depends on its condition and whether all the parts are originals. Cars and bikes can be collectibles. Two people could be using it too." He pointed to the woods next to the bike, smudging the photo. "Something weird here. Could be a hidden car. Worth checking out, I guess, because the rest of our list is out of our hands."

"And our pay will be docked accordingly."

"I'll make sure we collect for the old man and his wife. We did a good job covering that up." He smiled. "And we deserve extra hazard pay, especially me."

When they arrived, part of the Cleanup Crew took the cabin and others the woods.

"There are car tracks back there," said Needles. "Nothing we can trace."

"The bike belongs to someone named Cory Holguin," said Hill. "No connections to Jackson that I can see. We need to find out who the cabin belongs to. If it's the old man, Jackson was probably here, maybe with Richmond."

"And Holguin?"

"Maybe a friend of one of them." He looked around the group of bored faces. "Take it easy, fellows. Break out the card decks. We're going to be here for a while until someone finds out who owns this cabin."

"If it's old man Jackson, so what?" said Needles. "We won't know where the three are off to."

“But we’ll know where they started. It’s a recon game again. Our friends have access to some powerful surveillance methods.”

“Maybe we should watch the media outlets to see if there’s any breaking news,” said another member of the crew.

“Our bosses will know about other aspects of the cleanup effort before the media does,” said Hill. “See if you can find some booze. I think we all need a drink.”

When that colleague put the bottle on the kitchen table, Hill smiled. “Wild Turkey Bourbon. That the only whiskey?”

“Yeah. So what. Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“That was the only whiskey in the old man’s house,” said Hill.

Satellite imaging detected Greg’s car sitting all alone in the parking lot at Mystic Seaport, confirmation via the license plate. Hill aroused his comrades.

“Time to move out, you dildos,” he said. “We have our guy. We’re bound for Mystic, Connecticut. By the way, there was a shooting at a party for Ellison’s staffers. A number of people were dead. The assailants are unknown but several staffers who were supposed to be there are missing.”

“Clever,” said Needles. “Maybe we should work with those guys.”

“Go ahead and try,” said Hill with a growl. “We look like angels next to some of them, but I’ll kill you where you stand if you abandon my ship.”

“Speaking of ships,” said a colleague, “there are plenty there at Mystic. Maybe our quarry’s playing pirates.”

“For now, that’s as good an explanation as any for why they’re there. A better one is that they knew we were coming—I don’t know how—and went there because it was near. Get a move on. They could sail a boat to the Caribbean by the time we get there, considering how fast you bozos move.”

“There’s only one bathroom. Lighten up, man.”

Chapter Seventeen

"How you doing, honey?"

Minnie glanced up from her cellphone at Sid Chessman. "How would you feel with three bullets in you?"

"OK, I'll rephrase that. Are you feeling well enough to talk? I understand you head up Ellison's New York campaign office. I have some homicides to solve, ma'am, and I need all the help I can get."

"I believe the doctors' verdict is 'serious but in stable condition.' Let's go with that!"

"That's for the media. All I need to know is that the doctors say you can answer a few questions and whether you're agreeable to that." She nodded. "Were the missing campaign staffers your shooters?"

"Who's missing?" She thought she knew but wanted to confirm. He rattled off five names. She shook her head. "The shooters took them. I don't know why."

Sid thought about that. "I don't know either. But you're saying the shooters weren't campaign staff members?"

"That's right. The shooters were dressed like ninjas. I think they assumed the rest of us were dead."

Sid nodded. "Everyone was except you. You were lucky, relatively speaking."

Tears rolled down her cheeks. "They were good people."

"I suppose the shooters wore ski masks?"

She shook her head. "Black hoodies with sad clown masks."

"That's a clue. Clown masks have been scarce for a while. I'm betting there are only a few places where you can get them." Sid's cellphone rang. He frowned at the "Out of Area Call" message that took the place of the caller's ID. "Excuse me a moment." He read the message, thought a bit, and returned his attention to Minnie. "What's your opinion of Linda Richmond?"

"She's energetic, dedicated, and completely honest. We hated to see her go. I talked to her. She's looking for more gainful employment."

He nodded. "Did you know her neighbor was killed in Linda's apartment?" Minnie's wide eyes were his answer. "We think that it was a case of mistaken identity. They could have been sisters, they looked so much alike. I've been trying to find her, but she's on the run. Do you know if she's in trouble?"

They were interrupted by a uniformed cop who handed Sid a message. He read it and furrowed his brow. "All right, Minnie, you just rest."

"What was in that message?"

"There have been incidents in other Ellison campaign offices and Jepson's to boot. The FBI and Secret Service are basically taking over."

"Why the Secret Service?"

"They think the candidates might be targets. I'm sorry. I have to go now. That's all we know. I'm sure we'll get to the bottom of this, though."

"Where are we off to, Sarge?" said Daryl Wood, a detective from Chessman's group. "It's kind of late. My wife expected me home hours ago. I thought the feebies were taking over."

"As far as that campaign party crime scene goes, yes, but I have a lead on Linda Richmond. Maybe. I don't know. Call your wife, take a good pee, and prepare for some travel. On the way, I'll explain more. You'll be contacting Connecticut State Troopers. Not too soon, though. I don't want them to get there before us."

"Where is 'there'?"

"Mystic Seaport. My kids love it. You might not, depending on how this all plays out."

They were soon speeding along the Cross Bronx Parkway on their way to I-95 and Connecticut.

"Are these cases somehow connected?" said Daryl after finishing his coffee.

"We have an open case, Kit Turner, right?" Daryl nodded. "I believe Kit Turner was mistaken for Linda Richmond. They look alike, and Turner was in Richmond's apartment using her oven."

"Yep, I'm familiar with the case. Did some legwork for it. You know that."

"It's not well known that Richmond had just resigned from the Ellison campaign a few days before the Times broke that story."

"Probably scared she was going to be blamed."

"Or killed, like in that party scene. And around the country. Someone's cleaning house."

"Multiple someones. Anything else I should know?"

"Greg Jackson made some suspicious inquiries after the Turner murder. He might be friends with Jackson, whose sister was brutally beaten and raped and is now basically a vegetable."

"Platonic friends or an item?"

Sid smiled. "Who knows? The important thing is that he might be helping her lay low. He took vacation time, but I just received a text message to meet him at Mystic Seaport. Now, that's probably not far from his uncle's house and fishing cabin. The uncle and his wife were just declared a murder-suicide, but I have my doubts." He held up his right finger to indicate a pause, tapped the strobe lights on the unmarked patrol car, and passed a slow truck. "That's about all I have. The relatives might have played host to Greg and Linda, and the two fled, or they might have been staying at the fishing cabin. Either way, they're in Mystic now, and I have a hunch they're in danger."

"Thank the Good Lord traffic's light right now."

"Why I'm hitting eighty-five-plus in spots. We'll make good time. I hope it's good enough."

A little over an hour and a half later, they pulled into the park's parking lot and spotted Greg's car. Sid parked beside it. Both detectives approached the car with guns drawn. Daryl reached for the door.

"Wait!" Sid had been at just the right angle and distance to catch the reflection of a faraway streetlight from a short piece of metal stuck in the door. "It's a trap. Call those troopers again and tell them that. They'll need a bomb squad. I'll see if any bodies are in the car without opening doors."

Daryl backed off. "Don't know what you noticed, but it's a good thing you did. What are we going to do? Suck our thumbs?"

“Car’s clean except for C-4 on the floor in front of the backseat. No, we’re going to find that ship *Morgan*. That’s where Greg will be.”

Sid knew his way. As they approached the ship trying to keep in the shadows of the buildings, he spotted a group of men moving toward the ship.

“Those are some serious dudes,” Daryl said in a whisper. “I feel like I’m back in the Mosul. How’d they get here?”

“They were better at hiding their transportation,” said Sid. “Worst of all, we’re outnumbered.”

“Let’s wait for the troopers,” Daryl said.

“I don’t think those thugs will wait,” said Sid. “I’m going to move around and down the dock to get ahead of them. When I’m in position, I’ll step out a bit and challenge them. Maybe we can catch them in a crossfire. And maybe Greg’s armed and will join the party.”

“I’d rather wait and suck my thumb, I think. They outnumber us and have the advantage.”

“But we can surprise them, so grow a pair.”

Chapter Eighteen

Linda, Greg, and Cory were on the *Morgan* below deck in the cramped quarters for officers and crew. Greg still heard Sid's loud challenge, but he hesitated to join what was sure to be a firefight. They only had three guns—his service weapon, his illegal firearm, and Cory's cannon.

Built in 1841, the *Charles W. Morgan*, the last wooden whaling ship in the world, was 107 feet long with her beam measuring 28 feet. She had searched the entire world in a bygone era looking for whales when whale oil was used for lighting. She had a dignified retirement now, but she still was seaworthy.

He made his decision. "You two stay right here. I have to go help Sid."

Linda and Corey nodded, but both had their guns drawn. "Giv'em hell," said Cory.

By the time Greg reached the deck, a gun battle had begun. He crouched and moved to the front edge of the ship just forward of the huge try-pots once used for converting whale blubber into oil. He smiled. He remembered hating Melville's novel *Moby Dick*, calling it a manual for doing precisely that. *Thank God whales are now a protected species.*

He slithered over the deck to the edge and surveyed the action on shore. What looked like a SWAT team was fanning out, exchanging fire with two other men. It wasn't hard to determine the good guys from the bad because he got glimpses of Sid's face. Greg opened fire against the others.

He had no vest but assumed Sid and his buddy did. The three of them could make a good show of it if they didn't run out of ammo. Their opponents could afford to waste munitions with their automatic weapons. Greg, Sid, and his buddy had to make every shot count.

Hearing someone behind him, he turned to shoot. It was Linda.

"Cory thought you might need these." She gave him his illegal gun and Cory's Magnum. "He's calling 9-1-1 for backup."

"Good man, Cory. Get back down below deck."

"I can help you reload." She showed him a box of .44 cartridges.

He decided the Magnum was the better weapon at the moment. Its boom began to echo from the buildings and across the harbor like a small ship's cannon. He wasted a few shots getting used to the gun—it pulled a bit to the right—but soon the SWAT team stopped trying to flank Sid and his companion and scurried for cover, but not before three of them lay dead or dying from head shots. Even an impact of Greg's bullets in the vest knocked his target over.

It was hard for their opponents to avoid the crossfire. Another two died before the survivors raised their hands and threw down their weapons.

Greg covered them while Sid and his colleague moved forward with handcuffs.

"Their leader, a mercenary named Joe Hill, is dead," said the state trooper. He nodded to the body of a small man spread out on the dock. "Started out like many of us in the Army and turned to the dark side. We're not sure what to do with the live ones. Everyone else bled out right on the wharf." He eyed the Magnum in Greg's belt. "Your name isn't Dirty Harry, is it?"

Greg smiled and handed him all his guns. "The Magnum belongs to my friend, Cory, who called you."

"Daryl here called us," said the trooper. "Maybe Cory talked to someone else. Where's this Cory now?"

"Below deck," said Linda.

"Go fetch him," the trooper said to a colleague.

But Cory was gone. He had stolen Sid's unmarked patrol car.

"Some friend," said Sid. "I'm going to find that guy and throw the book at him."

"He's just scared of publicity," said Greg. "Leave him be for now."

"Back to business," the trooper said to Sid. "What's the story with these guys? Will we be getting an extradition request from your DA's office?"

Sid nodded. "For the murder of this young lady's neighbor."

"You said you thought this was related to this national scandal involving the president and the senator's campaign. That still true?"

"It's true. But I'll let Greg fill you in on that." Sid winked at his colleague from the SVU.

"All I'm going to say is that Linda here was the one who leaked the information about the senator's part in the scandal. It nearly got her killed and got a whole lot of other people murdered, including her neighbor who was mistaken for Linda."

The trooper looked at the starry sky, shook his head, and then back at Greg. "I suppose we're part of the protection detail now until the Feds show up?"

"We'd rather just get home," said Greg, eyes on Sid.

"They'll want written statements," he said. "We're going to be here awhile."

"Maybe the Feds will save you from the Connecticut bureaucracy," said the trooper with a smile. "This will become a major crime scene. I'll try to get some coffee delivered. We'll need it."

An FBI car left Sid and Daryl at the precinct and Linda and Greg at Greg's apartment just after dawn. The Connecticut troopers would have Greg's car until they could disarm the bomb it had become. The trip from Mystic had ended the caffeine buzz.

"I can't believe we survived that," said Linda.

He faced her and grabbed her by the shoulders. "That wasn't too smart coming out on deck like that. After all you've been through, you could have died."

"Cory thought you needed all the firepower you could get. Being a novice at this, I couldn't argue." She stared into his eyes. "Let me go now."

He dropped his arms. "Sorry. I shouldn't have grabbed you like that."

She put her hands on his cheeks and kissed him. "Men are so damn naïve sometimes. Don't you know we're meant for each other? Soulmates? Even Mrs. Murphy says so."

He smiled. "Maybe we should go say hi to her and Mr. Tom?"

"This afternoon." She headed for his bed but stopped in front of it and turned toward him. "Are you coming? My patience is worn pretty thin by now."

Note from Steve: You have just finished the novella *The Whistleblower*. I hope you enjoyed it.

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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.