

The book cover features a textured background with a blue upper half and a red lower half. A dark silhouette of a hand is positioned in the center, with its fingers spread. The title 'GEOFF LOFTUS' is at the top in large, white, outlined letters. The word 'PURGATORY' is in the middle in large, black, outlined letters. At the bottom, it says 'A JACK TYRRELL NOVEL' in white.

**GEOFF  
LOFTUS**

**PURGATORY**

A JACK TYRRELL NOVEL

# Purgatory

By

Geoff Loftus



**Definition of *purgatory***

**1:** an intermediate state after death for expiatory purification

*specifically:* a place or state of punishment wherein, according to Roman Catholic doctrine, the souls of those who die in God's grace may make satisfaction for past sins and so become fit for heaven

**Merriam-Webster Dictionary**

“Angst is not the human condition, it's the purgatory between what we have and what we want but can't get.”

**Miguel Syjuco**

*We were trapped by a homicidal maniac.*

*Not that Cecilia St. John was the kind of person you would have cast as a homicidal monster in The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. She was a smart, rich, gorgeously sexy psychiatrist with a penchant for seducing middle-aged men. And then killing them.*

*Even though Kim Gannon and I didn't fit her usual target profile, Cecilia was definitely planning to kill us. And very soon. Kim and I stood absolutely still in the headlights of her Range Rover; snow falling all around us on a wooded hillside in Cold Spring, New York. Cecilia was uphill from us, almost invisible, standing beside her vehicle and behind the glare of the headlights. I would have been delighted to shoot her and be done with it, but the only part of her I saw was her hand and the gun in it. The heads of her two security goons were barely visible—I was sure they both were ready to shoot us, but they weren't giving me targets I could hit. The idea that Kim and I were under their guns absolutely terrified me. I've had a lot of guns pointed at me. I'd been in combat in Afghanistan. But I hadn't been caught—fully exposed—with the love of my life standing next to me. And I was afraid right down to my soul.*

*Cecilia called out, "We'll start with your dropping*

*your guns. Just toss them a few feet in front of you."*

*I did as I was told with the Glock in my right hand.*

*"The other one, too."*

*"That's it."*

*"Don't be childish, drop the other one."*

*I dug into my left parka pocket and tossed the other gun near the first. I glanced at Kim, on my left, and noticed she was empty-handed. She must have tucked her gun away. And, as long as Cecilia didn't think to ask for it, Kim wasn't planning to give it to her.*

*"Thank you," Cecilia said, satisfied. She took a step forward but remained behind the glare of the headlights. I wasn't sure, but Cecilia's hand holding the pistol was rock-steady, and I swore that it was pointed right at my gut. Kim crept close to me and nudged me with her hip.*

*"In my belt," she whispered. "Four shots."*

*I put my left arm around her shoulder. Just being a supportive significant other.*

*Cecilia smirked, "How sweet."*

*Kim said, "You're probably not familiar with what we're feeling right now."*

*Cecilia's mouth turned down at the corners, and she said, "I'm a psychiatrist. I'm familiar with all emotions."*

*"I'm not talking about theoretical emotions. I'm talking about feelings."*

*"I know what you're talking about. I'm not interested in emotions except in theory. Now, what I want*

*from you is any evidence you may have found regarding our activities."*

*"You said we had no evidence," I responded.*

*"Yes, but now I'd like you to confirm it."*

*"What happens if I do? Are we all going to live happily ever after?"*

*"Some of us may not live as long as others."*

*"That's what I was afraid of."*

*"But you have no choice," Cecilia said. "Now would be a good time for your confirmation that you have no evidence."*

*"I can't confirm that," I said.*

*"What?" Cecilia asked.*

*Kim twisted under my arm and looked up at me.*

*"What?" she whispered in surprise.*

*"You may have guessed that we hacked into your computer and found nothing. But I also cracked your safe and found the phony passports. That means prison and fines."*

*"I'm not particularly worried about passports that can easily be destroyed. Is that all you have?"*

*"No. There's your bank account in the Cayman Islands."*

*"It's just money. It proves nothing."*

*"True. But there's also your Wells Fargo account in Cold Spring."*

*"Our business checking account? You must be joking."*

*"No, not your checking account. Your safety*

*deposit box. The reason we couldn't find any evidence on your computer is that you don't keep it there. Anything you need a record of, you write down. Very old school. Very secure." As I continued to speak, I was moving my left hand down Kim's back. I slipped it under her parka, found the pistol, and slowly withdrew it. "Except the FBI will be executing search warrants at the Cold Spring branch tomorrow morning. They'll pop open your safe deposit box and seize your goodies. I couldn't stop them if I wanted to."*

*"That's not possible."*

*"Oh, but it's very possible. As in VERY."*

*"God damn you!" Cecilia shouted, pointing her pistol at my head. It's damn hard to shoot someone in the head, but in that moment I was utterly convinced she was going to blow my head off.*

*I slammed my left shoulder into Kim, sending her sprawling. The Glock with four shots went instantaneously from my left hand to my right and came up as Cecilia fired at me. There was a tug at my left sleeve, and then I fired.*

*Cecilia fell backward. I kept going, one continuous, swift series of aiming and firing. Down went one then the other security goon.*

*I walked up the hill to the side of the Range Rover and checked the fallen guards. Both dead. "No, no, no," I muttered.*

*Kim had followed me and picked up their guns. "I'm sorry you had to kill them."*

*"Me, too. But thanks for saying that."*

*I knelt by Cecilia and felt for a pulse. She was alive. "Thank you, God," I muttered again.*

*I stood up, surveying the scene, considering our next move when Cecilia spoke, "Don't move. I can't believe you fell for my playing unconscious."*

*"Silly me. I was so overjoyed that I hadn't killed you."*

*"You won't make that mistake again."*

*"And you won't make the mistake of overlooking the girlfriend again," Kim said, pointing a Glock at Cecilia.*

*"Put your gun down," Cecilia said, getting to her knees. There was a ragged tear in her left sleeve where she had been shot.*

*"After you," Kim said.*

*"Have you ever shot anyone? It's not easy."*

*"I bet. But you're pointing a gun at the man I love, and I'm guessing that will make it much easier to shoot you. Do you really want to find out?"*

*I was as still as a statue. I was too far from either Kim or Cecilia to make any kind of move. Dear God, please help Kim right now—*

*"All right, I'm going to put my gun down," Cecilia said. She reached out as if to put the gun down, then snapped her hand up and fired.*

*Kim hadn't been fooled by Cecilia's phony surrender. She fired in the same instant that Cecilia did.*

*Cecilia's single bullet missed the mark. But Kim hit her in the chest with all three of her shots. Cecilia fell,*



*face up, her eyes wide open to the falling snow—*

I snapped awake, sprawled on my living room couch. The haunting jazz piano of Bill Evans's *You Must Believe in Spring* was playing on my stereo. The third track on the album, "Gary's Theme," was just concluding. I'd only drifted off to sleep for six or seven minutes. Long enough to re-experience the nightmare of Kim killing Cecilia St. John. There had been no choice. Or rather, there had been a brutal choice: Let me die, or kill someone for the first and only time in Kim's life.

Unfortunately, my life had been the only thing she had saved. Kim had suffered PTSD, just like I had after my time in Afghanistan. The trauma from ending another human's life had shattered our relationship. About a month after the killing, Kim had told me that she didn't see how we could continue as a couple. The emotional damage she had suffered had finished us.

I reached for the mug of double cappuccino on the coffee table. It had gone cold. I can't drink cold—or lukewarm—caffeinated beverages of any kind. I picked up the mug, carried it to the kitchen, dumped the room temp sludge into the sink, and began preparing a fresh cappuccino. As my espresso machine gurgled, I considered my situation.

Ever since Kim and I had broken up, two months ago, I had been playing it safe—not tangling with very dangerous people, avoiding the fights and occasional stabbings and shootings. It was ironic that I was playing it safe now that we were done, because that's all Kim had

wanted: For me to choose a safer way of living.

She had hoped that I'd be willing to exchange my calling to right wrongs for the calling of marriage and family. Kim had loved my righteous remediations, but she hated all the violence and danger that went along with it. Can't say I was all that fond of the danger either.

I put the finishing touches on a fresh cup of cappuccino and sipped away as I considered my life.

Much as I had wanted to marry Kim and have a family with her, I had struggled with the decision to stop helping people. But when my last case concluded two months ago, I had been shot twice in a single week and realized this was no way to live. Then, without any hesitation whatsoever, and no conscious thought, I gave up the danger. Left it behind without any regret. But Kim and I had broken up anyway. The damage to her psyche and our relationship had been done.

I always knew that one day I'd have to retire from the rectification business. But I hadn't thought I would let it go so easily. I'd always worried that part of me was addicted to the action. Not that I ever would have admitted that to anyone. Not to Kim or to my shrink. Not even to Harry (my partner and guardian angel—yes, *guardian angel*). Maybe not even to the Chairman (better known worldwide as God)—but He would have known all along. I had gotten the opportunity to balance the moral books directly from the Chairman through Harry, and it had been a very satisfying arrangement, leaving aside the question as to whether I had been addicted to action. Now here I was,

no more righting wrongs, no more helping people, no more meetings with Harry, and I didn't miss it.

Which did not mean that Kim's and my problem had resolved itself. I had told her I was going to exit the righting-wrongs business. My announcement hadn't changed her mind. Three months earlier, Kim had shot and killed a woman to save my life. Killing someone changes you forever. The Kim who had loved me and wanted to marry me was irrevocably altered. She associated me with that moment of ultimate violence. And she didn't want to live with the guy who would always remind her of the worst moment of her life.

So we had had the conversation where "going on a break" became "breaking up." I had followed through with my resolution to leave the rectification business. But Kim and I hadn't talked in two months. I had the queasy feeling that our "break up" was set in stone.

Maybe it was time to let her go, Tyrrell. I took a last sip of cappuccino, rinsed out the mug, and left it in the sink.

When you're letting go and moving on and all that other healthy stuff, it's also definitely time to go to work. Just because I had retired from the dangerous side of my calling didn't mean I didn't have a business to run: Tyrrell Security Consultants. And it was time to go see the wizards.

The wizards were Naomi Fukushima, computer hacker extraordinaire, and Stewart Budman, the best forensic accountant this side of Jupiter. The Chairman had

put us together to help people, but we to earn a living while we were at it, and my little consulting firm allowed us to do that. Since my name was on the door, so to speak, and since I paid them, I was the boss. But we operated as a team of equals.

Having hung around my apartment all morning in sweats, I showered, shaved, and dressed for work. The standard dress code and our business hours were very casual, so that Tuesday afternoon in May, I wore a gray Fordham T-shirt and tan cargo pants, carrying nothing more dangerous than my phone. I only donned a suit and tie when meeting stuffy, corporate clients. (Although I sometimes thought the clients would be more favorably impressed if I showed up in my old Army uniform replete with medals. Or flashing my Deputy Marshal badge. Sorry, I digress. . . .)

The afternoon was sunny with a light breeze and a temp in the low 70s. I walked from my apartment on Grove Street in Greenwich Village to Naomi and Stewart's office on the top-floor—the sixth—of a building on West 17<sup>th</sup> Street in Chelsea. I trudged up all those steps to their apartment. I'm in pretty good shape—despite all the shootings and stabbings in my past—but those damn steps always left me a bit winded.

I took a couple of deep breaths at the top and resisted the urge to check my pulse to assure myself I was all right. I knocked on the door, and, after a few seconds, Stewart opened it, letting me into the kitchen. He was a charmingly scruffy white guy, stocky, about five-feet-six,

and had thick brown hair that curled over his ears and the back of his neck.

“Would you like a cappuccino?”

“Does Winnie the Pooh like honey?” Okay, I admit it, I have a caffeine problem. So what? It was much better for me than the days I was consuming alcohol until I passed out.

Stewart shook his head, stepped to the espresso machine, and said, “One cappuccino coming up.”

I walked into the railroad flat, a series of long narrow rooms that ran from the back of the building all the way to the front. The apartment was decorated—well, the word “decorated” made it sound as if there was some kind of intent behind the ramshackle furnishings—with lots of battered but functional furniture that even desperate college students wouldn’t have grabbed off of the curb. I passed through what Stewart referred to as their “conference room” with a large wooden table in desperate need of refinishing and six metal, folding chairs.

Naomi was sitting in the next room in front of a table with multiple screens and keyboards. She was a petite, very pretty, Asian woman, with large dark-brown eyes and black hair streaked in pink. Until recently the streaks had been bright blue.

“Does Stewart like the new color?” I asked pointing at her head.

“I *like* the new color.”

“Sorry, didn’t mean to step on your sense of self-worth.”

“I know. You’re not clever enough.”

“Ouch.”

“And, yes, he likes it.”

“All’s right with the world then.”

Stewart entered the room and handed cappuccinos to Naomi and me.

“Okay, we’ve got a problem,” he said.

“Actually, the problem belongs to our clients,” Naomi interjected.

“Yes,” I replied. “But when our customers—who in this case are the hugely profitable, international consulting firm Baldwin McGill—when our customers have a problem, we have a problem. What’s the issue?”

“Someone’s ripping them off,” Stewart answered.

“How much? And how’s it being done?”

“Hundreds of small-cash transactions that add up to big bucks.”

“It’s sometimes called ‘salami slicing,’” Naomi explained. “When a company’s accounting software rounds amounts, the slicing program takes the pennies that have been *rounded off* and sends them to a bank account. Send enough pennies and you get a fat bank account.”

“This sounds vaguely familiar,” I said.

“Salami slicing was used in the plots of *Superman III* and *Office Space*,” Stewart said.

“Are you kidding me? Our client’s being ripped off by a plot device from a *Superman* sequel?”

“Don’t forget the clever workplace comedy,” Stewart replied.

“If you do it right,” Naomi cut in, “it can be very lucrative. But it takes one hell of a programmer to pull it off. Not only do you have to create the slicing code, but, in this particular instance, our hacker also created routines that manipulated the logs so that there’s no evidence anyone had tampered with the original software.”

“Wait . . . there’s no evidence?” I asked. “Do you mean there’s no evidence of the installation of the salami slicer? And there’s no evidence of any of the transactions that were made?”

“Both,” Naomi replied. “The logs don’t show any installation of the code. And there’s no evidence of any of the little moments where our perpetrator sliced off some cash.”

“How did you manage to discover this if there’s no evidence?”

“The award for this year’s Most Amazing Hunch goes to Stewart Budman!” she said proudly.

“How’d you figure it out?” I asked. “Did you really just play a hunch?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Why? What made you think something was wrong with the books?”

“I can’t really explain it,” Stewart shrugged. “Just felt ‘off’ to me. So I decided to check every Baldwin McGill invoice to a client. They seemed to be in order. So I checked the deal memos between the company and the customers.”

“The prices were different,” I said.

“Yup. Just a little bit lower on the invoices.”

“Human error?” I asked.

“More like human manipulation. Sure, you could get the occasional mistake by a billing clerk, but I found hundreds of mistakes by several different clerks. It looks more like a scheme than a huge bunch of mistakes.”

“Okay, I think I’m following you so far, but could you walk me through this, step by step?”

“Of course,” he said, beaming with satisfaction at his discovery. Not that I blamed him. “Let’s say that you, Tyrrell Security Consultants, bill a customer a hundred bucks. I’m your clerk, and I see that we’re supposed to bill the customer a hundred bucks. So that’s what I bill. But . . . our evil genius, let’s call her Naomi—”

“Hey!” she objected.

“I did call you a genius.”

“I am not amused.”

“Boys and girls, could we return to the business at hand?” I asked, trying to refocus the conversation.

“Sure,” Stewart said. “Okay, Naomi’s created software that intercepts the payment for that invoice and retroactively adjusts the invoice and the corresponding accounts receivable number from \$100 to \$99.”

“And my evil-genius code sends the single buck I skimmed off to an account somewhere,” Naomi added, “and then cleans up the log entries so there is no evidence of any adjustment to the invoice, the accounting system, or of the single dollar going off to another account.”

“I’ve been trying to get a handle on how



widespread this is,” Stewart said. “So far, I’ve cross-checked six hundred contracts and their corresponding invoices.”

“And all of the contracts have higher numbers than the invoices,” I replied.

“Yes, they do,” Stewart agreed.

“How many transactions are we talking about?”

“A lot. Each contract covers a consulting project that usually lasts up to six months or more. Each project has multiple consultants working on it, consultants with differing levels of seniority and different billing rates.”

“And the slicer is taking a bit from each consultant on every single invoice?” I asked.

Stewart nodded, “Maybe a dozen slices per invoice, every two weeks, hundreds or even thousands of small cash slices per project.”

“What’s the total?”

“On a six-month project, with a total projected price of four million, probably thirty-two thousand. That’s less than 1 percent.”

“What’s Baldwin McGill’s annual billing?”

“Last year they reported billings of \$4.5 billion.”

“Which means the sliced salami would total a bit more than \$30 million, right?”

He nodded again, “More like \$36 million.”

“That’s a hell of a lot of sliced salami in a single year. With no record in the logs of any adjustments?”

“None,” Naomi said.

“Have you been able to find the start date for this

swindle?" I asked.

"It appears to have started about three years ago," Stewart replied. "I haven't found any discrepancies between contracts and billing prior to that."

"What happened three years ago?"

"There was a re-shuffling of Baldwin McGill's top management team. Three senior consultants were named CEO, COO, and CFO."

"I'm guessing you've already done a deep dive into their backgrounds."

"Of course," they said in unison.

"Should I assume the obvious and classify the CFO as Suspect No. 1?"

"No." A definitive answer from Naomi. She clicked her computer touchpad and a photo popped up on the monitor. A middle-aged man with salt-and-pepper hair and an almost square face. "Chuck Donohue is an Irish Catholic who went to Iona Prep in New Rochelle, then to Notre Dame for his bachelor's and his MBA. Been married for thirty-five years to the same woman. They brought up their two daughters in Scarsdale, where he's been a regular churchgoer at Immaculate Heart of Mary. He's been with Baldwin McGill for thirty-one years and has spent his entire career doing strategy engagements."

"Are you saying that a seemingly boring Irish Catholic couldn't be up to some skullduggery?" I asked.

"I'm saying he's a Steady Eddie. Ridiculously steady. Doesn't fit the profile of a criminal mastermind."

"I agree with Naomi," Stewart said. "I know you're

Irish Catholic and absolutely willing to get into all kinds of skullduggery, but you and the CFO are completely different.”

“Fine, it’s not the CFO. What about the other two?”

“The CEO is another boring Steady Eddie,” Stewart answered. Naomi clicked again and a new picture popped up. Very dark hair, long slender face with piercing brown eyes. Stewart continued, “This is Arjun Laghari. His family emigrated to the New York area from London when he was a child. He went to Princeton and Harvard. He’s married with three kids. Like Donohue, he’s done strategy engagements for his entire career until becoming CEO. There’s nothing in his resume that suggests he has the accounting or technical chops to oversee this kind of crime.”

“Which leaves us with the COO?”

“Pay dirt!” Naomi grinned.

“Why, pray tell.”

“Her name is Blake Payton,” another click, another picture. Short dark hair, bright blue eyes, and well-defined jawline. Her smile was very tight, and her jaw was firmly clenched. In this portrait photo, Ms. Payton seemed to be as serious as a heart attack. Naomi went on, “She grew up in an affluent family in Connecticut. Got her bachelor’s from Amherst, served in the Army for four years after school including time in Afghanistan, then got her MS in Computer Science at Cornell, and an MBA from Harvard. Never married. Stays in shape by running. No church or

charity work, doesn't seem to have any hobbies. She's all about her job and running."

I said, "So far she sounds dedicated to her work and just about as boring as the two guys."

"So far. Payton did a lot of technology consulting engagements and was a successful rainmaker for Baldwin McGill. She worked her personal connections from the Army and her Ivy League alma maters, landing a bunch of big-time clients including a hedge fund, a regional sports TV network, *and*—"

"Ta da!" Stewart exclaimed.

Naomi finished, "Primores Securitas."

"Whoa," I sputtered, "the big-time security firm?"

"Yup. Your competition," Stewart chuckled.

"Hardly," I said. "They're more like Blackwater operating in Afghanistan and Iraq back when Dick Cheney was vice president of the U.S. of A. They provide all kinds of services, most notably bodyguards, private security teams at the homes of the rich and famous, and mercenaries for wee, tiny countries that need a Rental Army."

"Maybe you should expand our services into running mercenaries. Lots of money to be made."

"Lots of human-rights violations to be had. No thank you." I pointed at the monitor with Blake Payton's photo. "Any indication she's involved with any international foul play by Primores Securitas?"

"No," Naomi replied. "But Payton was on General Douglas McNamee's staff in Afghanistan, and he's the CEO of Primores."

“That’s a cozy connection.”

“And, if you’re Payton and you need to protect ill-gotten gains, it’s nice to have a small army of professional bad asses available at your beck and call.”

“Very convenient,” I muttered.

“Let’s finish Ms. Payton’s profile: So, she had a profitable career with Baldwin McGill, becoming the partner in charge of IT. From there she went to the chief operating officer spot a little more than three years ago.”

“Does she have the technology chops to have written the salami-slicer code?” I asked.

“No, no way,” Naomi responded. “There’s probably only a handful of people in the entire world who are clever enough to pull that off.”

“You could have done it, couldn’t you?”

“Of course. But I didn’t, which leaves a small, select pool. Payton might have access to one or two of them. She’s smart enough to have thought up the salami-slicing scheme and to oversee it. And she has access to the servers and networks.”

“And the slicing seems to have begun a few weeks after she became COO.”

“Why wait until she was COO? And why suspect her and not the current IT director?”

Naomi shrugged, “I don’t know why she waited. Maybe she wasn’t ready. Maybe she didn’t want to do it when she was the person directly in charge of guarding the cookie jar. Maybe the current IT director is in on it.”

“There’s no way he’s the mastermind,” Stewart

added. “That’s just my personal assessment, but I just don’t think he’s got what it takes.”

“Me either,” Naomi said. “He couldn’t have come up with the slicing code in a hundred years.”

“Anyone else in IT capable of doing this?” I asked.

“No one else has the necessary clearance to get that deep into the computer systems,” Naomi responded. “If someone lower on the digital chain of command needs to do something ultra-secure, they have to be let into the system by the IT director, who also has to supervise them.”

“All roads seem to lead to Blake Payton,” I said.

“You don’t sound happy to have a suspect.”

“Tomorrow, I have to figure out how to tell our clients—and Blake Payton is one of the executives I’m reporting to—that one of them is stealing from the firm. But I can’t offer any hard-and-fast proof of who’s guilty. And nothing but a theory as to how she pulled it off. I can’t give them a single scintilla of evidence.”

“It’s tough to be you,” Naomi grinned.

“That’s why the firm’s name is *Tyrrell* Security Consultants,” Stewart added.

“No,” Naomi disagreed playfully, “his name is on the firm because he’s the one who gets shot at.”

“And beaten up,” Stewart pointed out.

“You two are a laugh riot.”

I walked back to Greenwich Village from Chelsea. Not much of a walk, just long enough to enjoy the late afternoon sun and the glorious spring weather. My mind was filled with alternating thoughts: Would I ever have a chance with Kim again or had Harry done as I asked and blanked me from her mind? Had he given her the peace of never remembering me and the pain I caused? What the hell was I going to tell the executives at Baldwin McGill? And, almost as important: What the hell was I going to eat for dinner?

When I reached my front stoop, I quickly scanned the street in both directions. I'd been attacked right here once before, and ever since, I'd taken precautions before climbing the stairs. But there was no one around. I trotted up the stoop, went inside, and walked up the steps to my third-floor apartment.

My home was a long-term sublet from a Brit who had returned to London. Harry had arranged it. A new thought bounced into my head: Now that I had retired from righting wrongs, would I ever speak with Harry again? The apartment was on the back of the building and the larger of the two bedrooms and the living room overlooked the back yards of the neighboring buildings, like the setting in Hitchcock's *Rear Window*. I wish I could

say that I saw as many interesting things as Jimmy Stewart had.

That late afternoon there were no distractions to be seen in any of the back yards. None. Which left me with my thoughts of Kim. And Harry. And Blake Payton of Baldwin McGill. And dinner. And Kim . . .

No, Tyrrell, you can't call her. Damn.

I walked into my bedroom and went straight to the closet. I stopped before opening the closet door, looked at my windows, and decided to pull the blinds shut. It would be better if my neighbors didn't happen to see what I was up to. With the blinds drawn, I went back to the closet, opened the door, and pressed a small wooden panel on the right closet wall. The spring-loaded panel popped open to display a keypad. I tapped in my code, pressed my thumb on the pad, and a three-foot-wide by five-foot-tall section of the closet wall clicked open, revealing a well-stocked, carefully organized weapons locker.

Grenades of the smoke and flash-bang varieties along with Ruger, Glock, and Walther pistols were hung on a rack above shelves with spare ammunition magazines. A rifle rack on one side of the locker had a sniper rifle and a shotgun, as well as a couple of Uzis.

The tools of my trade, I thought bitterly. I would be as happy as a pig in the proverbial muck if I never used a single one of these weapons again.

I'd learned to use many of these weapons in the U.S. Army Special Forces when I served in combat and some black ops in Afghanistan. After my honorable



discharge, I served in the U.S. Marshals Service for five years as a Deputy Marshal. The Marshals Service relied much more on hand guns than long guns. As it turned out, I was pretty damn proficient with either.

As it also turned out, I suffered with PTSD thanks to my time in Afghanistan. Like too many returning vets, I didn't get help. But being in the disciplined environment of the Marshals Service gave my life structure and disguised how badly affected I was.

And then there was Maggie.

Maggie: my beautiful, smiling, warm, generous wife. Who was a good enough therapist to know that she couldn't treat me as a patient. Who nudged and encouraged me to get help. Who couldn't protect me from my own negative emotions. The loving spouse I ignored, mired in depression, self-disgust, and way too much booze.

In a final, grand gesture of self-loathing, as if placing a maraschino cherry on the summit of a mountain of whipped cream atop an ice cream sundae, I took a bribe. A Mafioso paid me to give him information about a protected witness. The Marshals' Witness Security Program is air-tight. Since 1971, thousands of protected witnesses have been kept absolutely safe. The only problem for the Mafioso was that I didn't work for Witness Security so it was impossible for me to produce the information that he paid me for. I could rationalize taking the bribe because there was no way on earth I could provide him with the info he wanted. The protected witness was completely safe.

You will probably not be surprised to learn that the Mafioso had no sense of humor about my failing to deliver. He had me shot. I was wounded, but Maggie, my wonderful and completely innocent Maggie, died.

I reached inside the weapons locker, grabbed a Ruger SR9, checked that it was unloaded, and walked out of the closet. I sat on the bed and stared at the pistol. I don't know what motivated me to look to a damn pistol for insight, but there I was, focused on it as if it were the Oracle of Delphi. Or maybe just an oddly shaped lens into my soul.

Ironically, the Mafioso who had come after me was shot and killed shortly after he had us shot, which meant that I was off the hook for not delivering on my bribe. When Maggie died, I left the Marshals Service on disability and dedicated my life to drinking. What? Did you think the tragedy of my wife's murder was going to straighten me straighten? No, no, no. I was seriously pursuing my bottom.

I had Irish whiskey in my morning coffee. I drank beer all day long to medicate my psychic pain and still allow me to function on the simplest, most basic level. To pick up some cash, I occasionally used my size and training to collect debts for some less than reputable lenders. Working for people like that is harmful to your mental and emotional health. But if you are committed to finding your bottom, as I was, it's a great way to make money as you continue to sink.

Finally, five years to the day that Maggie had died,

she appeared to me as a ghost. I know that sounds utterly insane. Or it sounds like my drinking had caught up with me, and I was suffering from alcoholic hallucinations.

But . . . she asked me not to drink for 24 hours and said she would come again if I stayed away from booze for that length of time. Only the faint possibility that my Maggie would appear to me again could have gotten me to stop drinking for even the short period of a single day.

I stopped. And she came back.

She told me that she still loved me, but that I was no longer the man she had married. It was the worst thing anyone had ever said to me. There was a hollow pain in my heart. But because Maggie still loved me, she had interceded on my behalf. I was being given a second chance, and if I stayed away from alcohol for another day, Harry would come to me the next night.

All I wanted was to hold her again. All I got was a sad smile, and Maggie saying "I love you."

It was more than I deserved. I avoided booze for one more day. Harry came.

How to explain Harry? Harry was Black, about 6-feet tall, and slender, dressed in his usual attire: a suit, white or pale-blue shirt, and a conservative tie. His dark skin was without wrinkles and stretched smoothly from his cheekbones to his solid jawline. He appeared to be approximately forty years old, but I knew from what he had told me that he was much, much older. I've never been sure exactly how angels measure their lifespans. Yes, I said angel. What else do you call someone who appears

suddenly in the middle of your room, the street, a dungeon, wherever the heck you happen to be? Who supplied all the weapons in my security closet, and all the necessary gun licenses and permits? Who found me the “clients” for whom I would right wrongs.

The hangover had cleared up. But going 48 hours without a drink for the first time in years had left me feeling shaky and tired.

After eating a couple slices of pizza for dinner, I had channel-surfed a bit and fallen asleep on the couch as I waited for Harry to make an appearance. At least, I think I fell asleep. . . .

I found myself standing on a beach, the waves breaking and then rushing toward my bare feet but stopping inches short of my toes. The sun was setting and the sky was red with a beautiful, end-of-day glow. It made me think of the old adage: Red sky at night—sailor’s delight. Looking around, I realized two things: I didn’t know where I was, and I didn’t know the man standing next to me. Despite the fact that we were on a sandy beach, he wore a suit and dress shoes.

“Do I know you?” I asked.

“I’m Harry,” he said. His voice was deep and firm. “Your wife told you I was coming.”

“I’m—”

He interrupted me, saying, “Jack Tyrrell.”

I grunted in response.

“I know almost everything about you,” he continued.

“*Really?*” I packed as much sarcasm into the short word as was possible.

“Yes. For example: I know when, where, and how you were shot and how Maggie died.”

“*What?*” I spun around, looking at the red evening sky and then back at him. I struggled with the possibility contained in his words. “Are you serious? Did you witness her killing?”

“Yes, in a way,” Harry said quietly. His soft, steady tone was unnerving.

“What does that mean?” I repeated in shock.

“It means, ‘Yes,’ I am completely aware how she was killed, how you almost died in the same incident, and your feelings of guilt.”

His calm demeanor and large, unblinking brown eyes made me angry. Or maybe it was his pronouncement that he knew about Maggie’s death and my guilt. I gazed out to sea and watched the ocean toss wave after wave onto the sand. How could I be on the beach? I was struck by a thought so overpowering I couldn’t believe it.

“Are you . . .” it was impossible to say the words, but I tried again, “are you . . . ?”

“No. But I work for Him.”

“Are you taking me somewhere?”

“No, I’m going to *send* you somewhere.”

“Where?”

“Wherever the Chairman wants you to go.”

“The Chairman . . . ? Is he . . . ?” I couldn’t phrase my question. Instead, I timidly pointed toward the sky.

“Yes.” Harry nodded. “I work for Him. I’m your Supervisor.”

I found it hard to breathe. I walked around in a small circle, ignoring the tide line and the surf coming over my feet. “You work for . . . Him? And . . . I work for you?”

“We—you and I—both work for the Chairman. I’ll be the one conveying His plan to you.”

“Do I get to meet the Chairman at some point?”

“Everyone meets the Chairman eventually.”

“Could I . . . could you tell me what His plan for me is?”

“You’re going to right wrongs.”

“Excuse me?”

“Have you ever read *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens?”

“I saw the movie. The one with Alistair Sim. Does that count?”

“Yes. Do you recall what the ghost of Jacob Marley says to Scrooge?”

“Something about three spirits, Ghost of Christmas Past, Ghost of —”

“Yes, but before that, Scrooge is shocked at Marley’s suffering. He doesn’t think it fair. Scrooge says: ‘But you were always a good man of business, Jacob,’ and Marley’s ghost becomes very upset and shouts: ‘Business! Mankind was my business.’”

I was breathing even harder now, “Are you telling me that mankind is my business?”

“It’s the Chairman’s, mine, yours, everyone’s—it’s

the only true business there is.”

“And now my job in this business is to right wrongs?”

“Yes.”

“Why didn’t the Chairman give me this chance before taking Maggie?”

“He did.”

“Have you come to me before?”

“No. But some of my colleagues have. The Chairman doesn’t give up easily—even when dealing with someone as obstinate as you.”

“Why didn’t He make me see the light?”

“That’s not how it works. We all have free will; we all choose how we live. You chose not to recognize my colleagues, and you chose not to listen to their messages.”

“Do I have a choice now?” I asked bitterly. “Can I choose not to work for the Chairman?”

“Yes, you can choose. You can always choose. Your options are: Work for the Chairman or continue to live a miserable life.”

I scanned the almost-dark sky and the phosphorescent surf rushing over the sand. “If this is my miserable life, I choose this.”

“This isn’t your life. Your life is empty, lonely, corrupt. You take no action to help anyone. You do nothing, but wait and brood. You haven’t got the slightest sense of the Chairman’s presence.”

“So, if my choice is to live this way, I die and go to hell?” I asked bitterly.

“Yes, if you choose to continue your life as you have.”

I pounced on this: “In that case, is it really fair that hell is the end-result of one of my choices?”

“The Chairman is always fair. And your choice is fair, because it is *your* choice. Have you ever read *The Great Divorce* by C.S. Lewis?”

“What the hell is this, an English-lit class?”

For the first time in our conversation, Harry smiled. It was a tiny, Mona Lisa smile, almost imagined but definitely there. “Lewis wrote that ‘All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be *no* Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find.’”

After a long pause, I said, “I’m exhausted.”

Harry smiled a bit more, “Talking about making life choices tends to have that effect.”

I sighed, staring at the dark horizon against the less-dark night sky.

Finally, I said, “Okay, what does this righting-wrongs job involve?”

Harry stepped next to me. “You have an excellent skill set for what the Chairman has in mind,” he said. “You are a combat veteran and a former U.S. Marshal. Your experience will be put to use to help people—victims—that the law enforcement community isn’t able to.”

“How the hell am I going to accomplish what the NYPD or the FBI or any other agency can’t? I’m not Superman.”



“You will receive direction from me, something the police and federal agents don’t get. The Chairman will make sure you have the resources you need to solve cases and help people.”

“Why doesn’t the Chairman help these folks directly? Couldn’t He do it quick and easy?”

“He could, but then *you* wouldn’t have the opportunity to help them.”

I said, “The opportunity to help them—that’s just the ‘Mankind is our business’ crap. Are you telling me we’re all supposed to take care of each other?”

His large, dark eyes met mine. “Yes.”

I didn’t like to think about what he saw when he looked at me. I turned away from him to watch the waves roll in. “How ’bout if I right the wrong of Maggie’s death?”

“No. You have been selfish and self-centered for the last five years. You chose to waste your life. If you choose to work for the Chairman, you’ll do it for the benefit of others not for yourself.”

“Mankind is our business,” I muttered.

“Yes.”

“There’s one more thing for you to consider.”

“Oh?”

“After you help people, they won’t remember you. They may be aware that they were helped, but none of them will ever thank you. None of them will ever say goodbye to you.”

“Whoa,” I said. “You really expect me to be completely selfless, huh?”

After a long pause, Harry said, "Are you ready?"

"I guess so." I took a very long breath. "I should probably come clean with you," I said. "I've actually read *A Christmas Carol*."

"You've read it thirteen times to be precise. Each year at Christmas. That's one of the things that made the Chairman think you were seeking."

I faced him. "Maybe I'll find."

"Maybe." He smiled. "Good luck."

A second later I found myself back on the couch in my apartment. No sand on my feet, but a faint trace of the aroma of salt water remained in my nose. Holy moly, I thought.

And that was how I had gone to work righting wrongs. Harry and I had been very busy for the last almost-two years. We'd confronted the Russian Mafia; Chinese spies teamed with corrupt corporate Americans; the old-fashioned Italian Mafia; neo-Nazis attacking the EU's banking system in Paris; international money-launderers in London; neo-Nazi terrorists in New York; a family business based on seduction and murder; and a pair of art dealers/collectors whose main trade was in sex-trafficking and weapons dealing. We'd been *very* busy. But not always successful. Oh, we had an almost unblemished track record of stopping the various criminal enterprises we had faced. But two of our clients had been killed by the bad guys. And a couple of others were not likely to live happily ever after. And, as I mentioned earlier, I had been shot, stabbed, and beaten up on numerous occasions, which had necessitated

stitches, butterfly closures, surgical staples, blood transfusions, and a couple of hospital stays. Righting wrongs was not for the faint of heart.

As all of this making things right was going on, Harry and the Chairman had been kind enough to guide me into establishing my security consulting business so that I would have a comfortable, regular income to live off of. Harry had also introduced me to Naomi and Stewart.

However, since I had decided to retire from the dangers of righting wrongs two months earlier, I hadn't seen or communicated with Harry. The last time had been only a few minutes after Kim had broken up with me. I was standing on the southwest corner of the intersection of West End Avenue and West 81<sup>st</sup> Street, looking up at the lights in Kim's apartment.

"Harry?"

"I don't mean to add to your pain at this moment," he had said, making his usual out-of-nowhere appearance, "but isn't standing here and watching Kim's building—"

"A little stalker-ish? Yeah . . . I should get moving." I had walked down West End Avenue with Harry in step beside me.

"Could you . . . make her forget like all the others?"

"Do you want to make it so that Kim never knew you?"

"Yes, never have known me—or feel the trauma of killing someone. Without me, she wouldn't have killed anybody. She wouldn't be suffering the way she is now. I

just want her to be happy.”

“Do you understand that you’ll lose her forever?”

I had nodded. “Yes, I do. But I’ll love her forever.”

Harry had stopped at the corner of 79<sup>th</sup> Street and West End Avenue. “Are you sure?”

“Yes. I’m sure. I want her to be happy.”

“I will submit . . . your request to the Chairman.”

Harry had offered me his hand—something he had almost never done in our relationship. We shook.

He had disappeared. It had been two months since that conversation. No word on whether the Chairman was going to grant my wish and relieve Kim of her memories of me—and her pain.

Was no news, good news? Did Kim still remember me? Was there the faintest possibility—stop it, Tyrrell. It’s over. Move on.

Two months. As much as Harry and I had enjoyed disrespecting each other, it was always with humor. Always loving. Like siblings teasing each other. I missed him.

I walked back to my closet and replaced the Ruger in the ultra-secure secret space. It would be wonderful if that was the last time I ever held a gun. Or even looked inside the weapons space. I closed the door and heard the lock click.

Okay, Tyrrell, what’s on tomorrow’s docket? I had an appointment with the Big Three at Baldwin McGill: Chuck Donohue, Arjun Laghari, and Blake Payton. Just what are you going to tell them? Do you go the sneaky

route? Insinuate that something is wrong and check out how they react? Or maybe use your traditional blunt-instrument approach. Smash them with the bad news and see how they react when you tell them that one of them is stealing from the firm.

And what the hell are you going to do if Naomi and Stewart's theory about Baldwin McGill using Primores Securitas as their private badasses was correct? What's the likelihood that you'll be able to avoid using some of your weapons if those lovely mercenaries become involved?

I walked out to my kitchen, made myself a cappuccino, and turned on the Yankees game. But instead of paying full attention to the game, I was running possible scenarios for tomorrow's meeting through my head.

The more I thought about it, the more I liked the smash-them-with-the-bad-news approach. Gee, Tyrrell, what a surprise. Your favorite is blunt instrument. Never would have guessed.

Even if that led to becoming acquainted with Primores Securitas badasses. After all, despite all of the shootings, stabbings, blah, blah, blah, I was still alive and kicking. Most of the bad guys I had dealt with were not. As Kim liked to say, I was a government-trained private detective cum troubleshooter.

You're being paranoid, Tyrrell. You don't need to take a gun to a meeting with your white-collar clients. Even if one of them is a big time crook with a brigade of mercenaries at her beck and call.

But what if I wasn't? In the last two months I had enjoyed a violence-free life. I didn't want to go back to my previous dangerous existence, I really didn't. But wasn't it foolish not to prepare for deadly contingencies? Especially since my plan was to go with the direct approach with my potentially thieving client.

I checked myself out in the mirror on the inside of my closet door. My suit was a light-gray Glen plaid, à la Sean Connery as James Bond in *Goldfinger*. My shirt was crisply white, and my rep tie was burgundy with thin gold stripes. Very serious and business like, but—if I said so myself, and I did—it looked pretty damn good on me. Maybe not Connery good, but good. And unlike Sir Sean, my thick head of hair was actually mine. As I closed the closet door my eyes fell on the weapons locker.

Maybe, Tyrrell, you should take a Bondian Walther? The PPK was 007's weapon of choice, but I used a CCP. Only eight bullets, but it was a small enough to fit snugly under my tailored suit.

Is the Walther necessary, Tyrrell? This is paranoia.

Or maybe you have an unconscious urge to return to the violence of righting wrongs?

Hell no, I thought. Yes, it was possible that Blake Payton was not on the side of the angels. And maybe she used the mercenary badasses at Primores Securitas as her personal thugs. Maybe. But there was no proof. Just Naomi and Stewart's suspicions and my paranoia.

Baldwin McGill's offices were in the Lipstick Building at East 53<sup>rd</sup> Street and Third Avenue. "Lipstick" wasn't its official name, but it's color and shape bore a vague resemblance to a tube of lipstick. Bernie Madoff had run his multi-billion-dollar Ponzi scheme from this building, which meant that if Blake Payton was stealing from her firm, she was in the right place for rip offs.

I climbed out of my taxi and strolled across the sidewalk into the building. A very short walk but long enough to allow me to enjoy the beautiful weather of the spring afternoon. I had been issued a temporary ID by Baldwin McGill to make it easier for me to perform a security audit, and that ID allowed me to breeze through lobby security onto the elevators.

At Baldwin McGill reception on the twentieth floor, I greeted the young man behind the desk and said, "I'm Jack Tyrrell, I have a 11:00 A.M. appointment with Chuck Donohue, Arjun Laghari, and Blake Payton."

The young man said, "Please give me just a minute to check—" and began typing into a laptop. "Yes, Mr. Tyrrell, there's been a change. You're meeting with Ms. Payton only. Her assistant will be out in a moment."

A young woman appeared before I even had time to sit down. Like the man behind the desk, she was put together in a businesslike but bland way: charcoal-gray pant suit and a white blouse with no décolletage. I wouldn't have been able to identify either of them in a police lineup, and I'm a trained law-enforcement professional. The woman led me to a large office that had a spectacular view of the 59<sup>th</sup> Street Bridge and its pagoda-like towers. The desk, chairs, and coffee table were contemporary: lots of naturally finished wood and simple lines. Blake Payton's desk was a thick pane of glass sitting on a dark-metal frame with a lamp, a phone, and a laptop on it. The walls were bare, but with that view, who needed to hang anything on the walls?

Blake Payton in-person was a lot like her photo: brilliant blue eyes, short dark hair, strong jaw, and a serious expression. She was wearing a medium-blue suit that, to my uneducated eyes, looked quite stylish. She stood up from her desk, strode to me, and shook my hand. She was about five-feet-six and wearing two-inch heels, which meant she still had to look up at me. That wasn't to say my six-feet-two height intimidated her. I had a feeling rabid rottweilers wouldn't have intimidated her.

"Mr. Tyrrell, nice to see you," she said. "I'm sorry that Arjun and Chuck couldn't make this meeting, something came up."

"No problem at all," I said. What I didn't say was that I wondered if she had arranged to see me alone—just in case I had bad news.



“Would you like some water or coffee?” she asked.

“Coffee would be nice. Thanks.”

Blake turned to her assistant. “Could you please get Mr. Tyrrell some coffee?” To me, “How do you like it?”

“Black, please.”

The young woman said, “Of course,” and disappeared.

“Couch? Arm chairs?” Blake asked.

“Couch, I think. Better view.”

She forced a smile and sat down at one end of the couch. I took the other. The assistant reappeared with a steaming cup and placed it on the coffee table in front of me. She spoke to Blake, “Door open or closed?”

“Closed, please.”

As soon as the assistant closed the door, Blake turned to me and asked, “Good news? Bad news? Both?”

“Both.”

“Start with the bad.”

“Why not?” I smiled. “It seems that someone is stealing from your firm.”

“Stealing from us? How much are we talking about?”

“Approximately \$12 million a year for the last three years. Not much compared to the firm’s annual billings, but a tidy, tax-free sum of 36 million to deposit into a Cayman Island bank account.”

“Do you know how this is being done?”

“Yes.”

“How?” she asked with a trace of impatience.

“Someone installed what’s called ‘salami-slicing’ code into your accounting software. It’s been taking a little cash here, a little there, then obliterating all signs of the adjustments. And eliminating all signs that the money was sent from the firm’s accounts to the bad guy’s account. Wherever that is.”

“So there’s no proof?”

“None.”

“How did you discover this . . . salami slicing?” she asked, interested but not threatened.

“Our team’s forensic accountant compared the rates in the deal memos to the amounts actually billed. There were small discrepancies, that over the course of time and multiple bills would provide a significant accumulation. He and our cyber expert deduced the method.”

“You said ‘someone’ stole and ‘someone’ installed. Do you have an idea who this someone is?”

“An insider.”

“Do you have a suspect?”

“Actually . . . *you* . . . are Suspect No. 1.”

Blake leaned back on the couch, grinned broadly, and said “That was direct.”

I nodded. “Yeah, why play cat and mouse?”

“You might enjoy it.”

“Not my style.”

“I can see that. If you wouldn’t mind humoring me, can you please tell me how I became a suspect?”

“Oh no, not *a* suspect—*the* suspect.”

“Yes, you did say that I was Suspect No. 1.”

“I did. And at Tyrrell Security Consultants, we try to be very precise in our suspect rankings. A lot of thought and analysis goes into each and every ranking.”

“Does that mean I’m to be congratulated for being No. 1?”

“Depends on how you feel about spending time in prison.”

“I thought you said you had no evidence.”

“You’re right again. But . . . what I should have said was, ‘We have no evidence, *yet*.’ We’ll find some. And you’ll go to prison.”

“You’re very confident.”

“We always find the evidence.”

Blake smiled and crossed her legs. Her left leg, the one nearest me, was on top, the knee “pointing” away from me. If my reading of her body English was correct, her smile was a diversion; her legs being crossed away from me meant that she was closing me off. Oh dear.

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked.

“Well, first, I’m contractually obligated to make a preliminary report to one of the firm’s senior officers.”

“I’ll issue a memo to that effect. Wouldn’t want you to be found in contractual noncompliance.”

“What a mouthful. *Contractual noncompliance*. Yes, please save me from that. I would really like to get the next, *contractually obligated* payment from your firm.”

“I’ll see to it,” she said. “What’s the second reason

you're telling me that I'm under suspicion?"

"I'm hoping you'll save me a lot of time and energy digging for evidence."

"And how could I do that?"

"Confess. It's good for the soul."

"Do you have a side business in saving souls?"

"Sometimes it seems like it."

"Interesting." She shook her head, "I appreciate your concern, but my soul doesn't need saving. And I have nothing to confess. You'll have to keep digging for evidence."

"Now who's confident?"

She stood up, indicating our meeting was over. "You said you had good news, too."

"Yes. Except for *your* salami-slicing operation, everything looks very good at Baldwin McGill." I stood up and moved toward the door. "We're going to suggest a few minor tweaks to your security processes, which you'll be able to make easily."

"That *is* good news. I look forward to reading your report." She pushed the door open. "I hope to hear from you soon."

"You can count on it."

Blake's assistant escorted me to the elevators, pressed the call button, and waited with me until an elevator arrived and its doors rolled open. Was she making sure I got the hell out of there?

Outside, I slipped on my sunglasses and walked across the sidewalk toward Third Avenue, loosening my tie

and undoing my collar button as I went. Okay, Tyrrell, how do you think the direct approach went? To be honest: Blake Payton didn't seem the least bit fazed by what I had said. Oh well.

I paused and considered my options. Not about Baldwin McGill. About food. Something about informing my client that she was a big-time thief that made me ravenously hungry. I checked my watch (something I only wore when I was dressed up—the rest of the time I used my phone like most denizens of the twenty-first century). It was not quite 4:00 P.M. Awfully early for dinner. I'd go home, change out of my suit and tie, and then decide what to eat. I began walking toward East 53<sup>rd</sup> Street.

“Jack!” a female voice called. “Jack Tyrrell!”

I turned and saw a thirtyish Black woman in white jeans and a blue denim jacket walking along the sidewalk toward me. I didn't recognize her. My internal radar started pinging, but I didn't see any obvious signs of danger.

“Hey, how are you?” she said as she got closer. “I'm Audrey Wilkens with Primores Securitas.”

“I'm sorry, Ms. Wilkens, but do I know you?”

“No. But we're going to get to know each other very well. At least, I'm going to get to know you.” She waved her hand as if calling a taxi.

I turned to see a metallic-silver Ram Promaster 2500 high-roofed cargo van pull to a stop only a few feet from where we were standing.

“Please, get in,” she said.

“No thanks.”

“Let’s do this the easy way.”

“Let’s not do it at all.”

“You might want to look at the van again.”

I turned. A heavy-set white guy wearing a ball cap sunglasses, and black T-shirt was sitting in the front passenger seat. He was cradling a pistol in the crook of his massively muscled and tattooed right arm. The weapon was equipped with a suppressor and a laser targeting system. I looked down and spotted a laser dot on my upper-right chest.

“Really?” I asked. “You’re going to shoot me on a Manhattan sidewalk in broad daylight?”

“If we have to. Then we’ll dump you in the van.”

“No doubt to ensure that I receive proper medical attention.”

“Of course.”

“Well, I don’t want you putting holes in this suit,” I said and took the few steps toward the van. The side door rolled open, and I stepped up and inside. Because of the high roof I only had to duck getting through the door.

Audrey followed immediately behind me and said, “Hands up,” as the side door closed.

The guy in the passenger seat had twisted around and was pointing his pistol at my gut. I put my hands up while Audrey patted me down, yanking my phone, wallet, and keys from my pockets and then dumping them in a dark-brown leather briefcase. She gently shoved me into a stainless-steel cage that was welded to the left side wall of the cargo hold.

“Sit,” Audrey said.

“Or you’ll shoot me?”

“If you’re that stupid, why not?”

“There’s no need for ad hominem attacks.” I sat down on the small metal bench welded inside the cage. “What a convenient little prisoner space. So cozy. So secure.”

The cage door was made of a heavy steel mesh that Audrey secured by slamming home bolts into the van's roof and floor.

“Let’s go,” she said to the driver, who was out of my sight. Audrey sat on a jump seat opposite me.

The van pulled into the uptown Third Avenue traffic. I had no doubt that the driver would start making all kinds of unnecessary turns to throw off my sense of where we were going. Assuming they weren’t planning on killing me. Which may have been a very big assumption.

“Gee, all this for my benefit,” I said.

“Shut up.”

“What if I don’t?”

“We’ll drug you. The sedative is really quick, but the syringe is huge.”

“You really do offer first-class passenger service.”

“I told you to shut up,” she said evenly.

“You are a scintillating conversationalist.”

“I won’t warn you again.”

“You guys work for Primores Securitas?”

She sighed. The van turned left, heading west.

“Come on,” I grinned. “You really think you can

open this cage without my putting up a fight? You obviously know who I am and my background. I've got you by six or seven inches in height, something similar in reach. Do you honestly think you can get a syringe into my arm in this cozy little cage?"

The van turned left again, now heading south.

"Probably not. But I could shoot you."

"After all the trouble you've gone to? And other than the fact that I won't shut up, aren't I cooperating?"

"You're a pain in the ass."

"You're not the first person to tell me that." I shifted on my little metal bench, futilely attempting to get comfortable. This cage did not have enough leg room. The seating arrangement must have been modeled after the seats in economy class on a 787. "So, anyway, do you work for *Primores Securitas*?"

Audrey glared at me.

"You're not the first person to give me the hairy eyeball, either," I said.

"The 'hairy eyeball?' What century are you from?"

"I got that from my father. Along with a love for classic rock: the Beatles; Cream; Santana; the Who; Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young; Todd Rundgren—"

"Shut up!"

The van stopped, probably at a traffic light.

"What branch of the service were you in before joining *Primores Securitas*?"

She turned to gaze out the windshield. As if on cue, the van turned right, resuming its westward trajectory.



“Army?” I asked.

No response.

“Air Force Special Warfare?”

Still no response. The van turned right again, now on a northward or uptown track.

“Girl Scouts? You probably sold a ton of Thin Mints once upon a time. Wouldn’t a box of Thin Mints go down great right now?”

“You are not as funny as you think you are.”

“Once again, you’re not the first person to tell me that.”

The van turned right, to the east, and then immediately to the right again, south. I was certain that we hadn’t gone through a tunnel or over a bridge, so I knew we were still in Manhattan, and I was pretty sure we were somewhere south of Central Park. But that was the full extent of my knowledge. I wouldn’t be able to retrace this route. Another stop. Another traffic light, I presumed.

“How long have you worked for Primores Securitas?” I asked. “It’s gotta be at least a few years. No way they’d send out a rookie to collect an important asset off the street in broad daylight.”

“Who says you’re an important asset?” she smirked.

“That was a neatly done put-down except that it’s highly unlikely you’d *kidnap* someone unimportant. You are aware that kidnapping is a crime, aren’t you? A felony. This is shaping up to be first-degree kidnapping, which could mean fifteen to forty years in prison for you and your

boys here.”

“Could you recommend a good attorney?”

“Why don’t you let me out here, wherever here is, and we’ll forget this ever took place. That way, you won’t need an attorney, and I’ll be able to get this suit to the dry cleaners to have the stench washed out.”

Her eyebrows arched at the word “stench.” The van turned left, drove for a few seconds and stopped. After about ten seconds, the van began moving and traveled for what I guessed was about two-hundred feet then slowed way down and turned right again. We bumped over something—the lip of a driveway, perhaps? A second later we were pulling into a structure. The exterior traffic noise all but disappeared, and the exhaust from the van’s engine was deeper and louder, reverberating in a confined space. I heard a metal gate clang down, and the driver turned off the van.

“Home at last!” I sighed.

Wilkens closed her eyes and shook her head. She leaned over to undo the bolts on the cage door. “There’s a gun covering you, so don’t make any quick moves.”

“You should know that threatening me with physical violence is one of the components of first-degree kidnapping.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” she replied.

With the bolts undone, she moved to the side door, gave the handle a gentle tug, and the door slid open. Wilkens stepped down and out of the van, pulled a pistol from under her jean jacket and pointed it at me.

As I walked out of the cage, I checked to my left. The heavy-set guy had twisted around in the passenger seat, his gun aimed at my mid-section.

“You guys are no fun,” I said. “If you like, I can give you some pointers on how to improve your customer experience.”

“Not today,” Wilkens said.

I stepped down out of the van and looked around. The van was parked between two cinderblock walls that stretched to about twelve-feet high. The walls ended a few feet from the van’s front, opening into a large space that went wall-to-wall in the building. Two more vans were parked inside to my left. Workbenches filled with tools for auto maintenance lined a part of the right-side wall. Farther down the wall, the benches were piled with everything you could possibly need for carpentry, plumbing or painting. Toward the back of the building, a wall of painted plywood had been built sectioning off a portion of the space. There was a door in the center of the wall with a very large window to the right. Inside I saw two desks, several filing cabinets, a coat rack, and what looked like some calendars of questionable taste fastened to the wall behind one of the desks.

“Great space,” I said. “Did you steal it from a high-school shop class?”

The heavy-set guy was now standing beside the van, his gun still pointed at me, and his line of fire was at an angle that kept Wilkens out of any crossfire. Yup, they knew what they were doing.

“We’re going to the back,” Wilkens said, gesturing with her gun. “You first.”

As I led the way, Wilkens and Heavy-set fell in behind me on my left. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw the van’s driver, a tall, skinny man with red hair and bad skin, gun drawn, flanking me on my right. They all stayed out of my reach—no sudden move was going to enable me to catch them unawares.

“Should I knock?” I asked when we reached the door.

Wilkens flicked her gun toward the door, which I interpreted as “go right in.”

There was no one inside the office, but there was another door in the center of the rear wall of the office that led into a windowless room. Wilkens repeated her gun-flicking, and I walked in as directed. As I stepped through the door, I noticed that the wall separating this room from the office was quite thick. So was the door. Soundproof? The room itself was pretty big, almost twenty by twenty feet. A plain wooden table was pushed up against one side. A black surgical kit on the table had been opened to expose the blades and scissors and clamps, gleaming in the light of a single overhead bulb. Next to the surgical kit were a pair of towels. On the floor next to the table were an old-fashioned laundry tub and a five-gallon plastic bottle of water.

“Oh, delightful,” I muttered.