



HYPOCRISY

D.M. ANNECHINO

Hypocrisy

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Create Space (2014)

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Also by D. M. Annechino

They Never Die Quietly

Resuscitation

I Do Solemnly Swear

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my Uncle Bob DiMarco, who's been more of an older brother than an uncle. He's a guy with strong opinions on everything. He loves a cold beer on a hot summer day, has a great sense of humor, and he makes the best frittata in the world. He'd be near perfect if he'd just give me his Greek hot sauce recipe. But he won't.

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PROLOGUE

When he pressed the pistol against her temple, Dr. Lauren Crawford remembered something she'd heard many years ago. At the exact moment before death, when the end is inevitable, your entire life passes before you. She'd always believed it was a legend, but now she knew the truth. She saw herself playing hopscotch in front of her home with Teresa, her best friend. She could see herself on her tenth birthday riding a Shetland pony at the State Fair. A giant Ferris wheel spun slowly in the background; the smell of cotton candy

filled the air. She remembered her high school senior prom, Bobby Hanford, the purple orchid corsage, her first kiss. She could see her dad, lying in a coffin, his skin pale, cheeks sunken, feeling inconsolable and torn to pieces. Then there were memories of Christmas, her favorite time of the year. She envisioned herself helping her mom decorate the entire house, hanging wreaths and garland and red and green stockings above the fireplace. She recalled writing her name on the steamy windows while the fragrance of a slowly-roasting turkey teased her senses. But then, the vivid memories froze and all she could see was a splash of red light.

In an instant, total darkness.

CHAPTER ONE

The call came in to the 911 line from a Yankee fan who had parked his Mustang next to the victim's Camry. He never would have noticed her slumped forward in the back seat had it not been for the blood spattered on the back and side windows. Amaris Dupree, working out of the 40th precinct in the south Bronx, was the first homicide detective to arrive on the scene. Five CSI officers and the M.E. were already on site, each one performing their assigned duties. Dupree got a glimpse of the body and felt a familiar pang of discomfort. She'd

learned to conceal her uneasiness well, but she couldn't fool her queasy stomach.

Except for a few seedy characters Dupree had met over the years, conniving for an invitation into her bed, most people wouldn't call her beautiful. But walking the streets of New York, she still managed to turn a few heads. Of course, most guys weren't checking out her face. Someone once referred to her as strikingly attractive. She liked that title. It was original.

“Were we able to ID her?” Dupree said to CSI John Butler, her hands perched on her hips.

He shook his head. “Whoever ruined her day must have taken her personal

items—purse, briefcase, whatever. The only thing we found was a bloody nail file.”

“Murder weapon?”

“Nope. Gunshot to the head.”

“Any eye witnesses?”

“No one’s come forward,” Butler said.

“Has the M.E determined time-of-death?”

“Between eight and nine p.m.”

“Seems odd that no one saw anything at such an early hour. This is a pretty busy ramp garage, no?”

“Remember that Yankee Stadium is only two blocks away,” Butler said. “And the Yanks played the Red Sox last night. My guess is that the garage was

full of Yankee fans' cars and she was killed during the game. And believe me, no way *any* Yankee fan would leave a Red Sox game before the last strike."

Dupree thought about that. "Makes sense." She pointed to the rear of the car. "I-HEAL. Interesting vanity plates. Must be an MD or someone in healthcare."

"Did you call in the license plate?" Butler asked.

Dupree cocked her head to one side, her wavy auburn hair resting on her shoulder. "Really, John? Did you *really* just ask me that question?"

"Guess I should know better by now."

"You think?"

"If it was a mugging," Butler said,

“she must have really pissed him off. Who the hell steals someone’s purse and blows out their brains?”

“Assholes do,” Dupree said. “And so do speedball addicts whacked out of their gourd. It’s amazing what a strung-out junkie will do for ten bucks.”

“Where’s your sidekick?” Butler asked.

“T.J. should be here any minute. You know him. Always likes to make a grand entrance.”

Dupree, wearing latex gloves, carefully opened the back door of the car. She had no intention of disturbing anything; that was a job for forensics. She just wanted to get a visual of the body to see if anything struck her. She

removed a small flashlight from her pocket and leaned into the back seat, cautious not to touch the body or any other surface. At five-foot-ten, with breasts any pole dancer would be proud of, she could feel the strain on her lower back as she stood hunched over. Most women envied her generous endowment, but combined with her height, rarely could she stand in front of any man and have them look her in the eyes.

She turned on the flashlight and illuminated the victim's face. The entry wound was at her temple and the skin around the area looked charred, suggesting that the assailant had pressed the gun against her head. By the irregular shape of the wound, it appeared that the

killer had fired more than one shot. Dupree closed the door and went around to the other side of the car to look for an exit wound. Slowly, she inched the door open, careful not to disturb the position of the body. Dupree saw no physical evidence of an exit wound or any sign that the bullets were anywhere in the interior of the car, which meant that the killer likely used a small caliber, low velocity handgun and the bullets were lodged inside the victim's head. When Dupree pointed the flashlight at the seat, she noticed an inordinate amount of blood. She looked over her shoulder at Butler, wanting to share this information with him, her eyes opened wide. He and two of his colleagues seemed more

fascinated with checking out her butt than doing their jobs.

Dupree just shook her head.

Years ago, when she'd been heavy into Yoga, her instructor, a pencil-skinny-gal named Divia, told Dupree that she was blessed with a "perfect pelvic tilt." When she asked Divia to explain, she'd said, "You have a beautifully-shaped ass, my dear. I'd give my right arm for a rear-end like yours." Between the boobs and the butt, they'd always made her feel somewhat self-conscious. When she'd made detective, the first thing she did was to buy a half-dozen pant suits to downplay her attributes. She rarely removed her jacket—even when the temperature flirted

with triple digits.

By the disgusted look on Dupree's face, the boys got the message and went about their business. Butler just stood there and shrugged.

"He was an asshole all right," Dupree said. "He shot her in the head—execution style."

"I'll get a sample of the blood and get it to the lab," Butler offered.

"You're going to need two samples," Dupree said. "There's a significant amount of blood on the seat and based on its proximity to the body and where the blood is spattered, I don't think it's the victim's. Hopefully, it's the perp's blood and he's listed in the FBI DNA Index System."

Butler let out a heavy breath, noticeably upset. “Sometimes I really hate my job, Amaris.”

Aside from his “man-behavior,” Dupree respected Butler not only for his competence and dedication, but for his sensitivity, a rare quality in the homicide division. Most of her colleagues, particularly longtime veterans, had become unaffected by the shock and horror of murder. Other than Butler, few of her workmates seemed fazed by bodies so badly beaten they made visual identification impossible. Some could even stomach brutalized children without showing the slightest sign of anger or disgust. Dupree wasn’t sure if this apathetic attitude was a self-

preservation technique designed to hide and protect their true feelings, or perhaps years of dealing with homicides had made them callous and indifferent. For how many years can a person be subjected to murder and unimaginable cruelty without developing immunity to it? Dupree swore that if she ever felt untouched by violence and death, it would be time for her to seek a new career. Even after five years in homicide, she still felt that twinge of nausea whenever she looked at a lifeless body, and she struggled to conceal her emotions. Ironically—and this fact always puzzled her—she loved her job.

The sound of squealing tires brought Dupree's thoughts back to the business at

hand. She saw two black and whites and a black Chevy Suburban come to a screeching halt. More troops were on the scene hoping to find a clue—any clue—that might give them a lead. Dupree's partner, however, still hadn't shown up.

When T.J. and Dupree became partners six months ago, she felt an immediate connection, and guessed one reason was because they had something in common: They were both minorities in the homicide division, taking refuge in the same foxhole. T.J. was the only African-American and Dupree the only woman. Cops, by nature, were notorious pranksters and "The White-Boys-Club" targeted T.J. and Dupree often. Their pranks were always edged with racism

and sexism. One time, on T.J.'s birthday, he found a beautifully wrapped present on his desk. Inside was a copy of *Little Black Sambo* with a note that said, "*Couldn't find a copy of Tar Baby, so we thought this would do.*" At Christmastime, her first year as a detective, Dupree found mistletoe hanging above her chair decorated with tampons. The note scribbled on her notepad said, "*Merry Christmas. You've always got the rag on so we didn't want you to run out.*"

But Dupree and T.J. didn't take the abuse from their fellow detectives without recourse. For Wells's fifty-fifth birthday, he got a sample bottle of Viagra. And Parisi, noted for his

inability to unscrew the cap off a bottle of ketchup, wasn't pleased when he received a four-pack of Ensure Muscle Milk for Christmas.

She got along well with T.J.; he was a good cop with great instincts, but their partnership lacked intimacy. Sure, on a professional level, they were totally connected. They were two forces pulling in the same direction. But on the personal side, they were strangers. Their relationship just didn't fit the mold for two cops who spent fifty or sixty hours a week together.

A short, squatty policeman, barely tall enough to meet the minimum height requirement for a cop, approached Dupree. He offered his hand. "Tony

Moretti.”

“I’m Detective Dupree. I don’t think we’ve ever met.”

He firmly grasped her hand and cranked on her arm as if he were pumping water from a well. “Just transferred from the 122nd in Staten Island.”

“Lucky you. Welcome to the real world.”

“Anything I can do to help?” Moretti asked.

Dupree perused the concrete ceiling, turning her head a hundred-eighty degrees. “Find out who monitors security for this garage and get me copies of all the surveillance tapes for the last 24 hours.”

“I’m on it, Detective. It’s a pleasure finally meeting you.” He smiled. “I’ve heard from several people that you have an interesting nickname.”

“I’ve got lots of nicknames, Moretti. Most inappropriate to repeat.”

“Why do they call you the Velvet Hammer?”

“When you get to know me better—assuming you do—I think you’ll figure it out.”

Dupree’s cell phone rang. “Detective Dupree speaking.”

“Hey Amaris, it’s Brenda, your favorite support analyst. Got something for you. The I-HEAL plates are registered to Dr. Lauren Crawford. Don’t know what kind of doctor she is,

but the address on her registration is in Brooklyn. In the Park Slope area. 1550 Plaza Street West, Unit 22C. Date of birth is September 22, 1968. I took the liberty of downloading her driver's license photo and sent a copy to your e-mail address."

"Hang on for a sec." Dupree fished through her purse and located her iPhone. After a few clicks, the photo of Dr. Crawford appeared on the screen.

"Got anything else for me?" Dupree asked.

"I searched our database and as far as I can tell, she's a model citizen. Never even got a parking ticket."

"Next of kin?" Dupree asked.

"I checked the County Clerk's birth

records and got the name of her mother and father. Dug a little deeper and found out that her father died a few years ago, but her mom is still alive—lives at 213 Penn Street in Williamsburg.”

“Thanks, Brenda. Please text me both addresses. I should be back to the precinct in a couple hours.” After studying the driver’s license photo Brenda had sent her, and comparing it to the victim, Dupree confirmed that the murdered woman was Dr. Crawford.

Butler was busy examining the interior of the car, searching for any foreign object—a piece of thread, a stray hair, any clue that might lead them to the killer.

“I’m out of here,” Dupree said.

“Had enough fun for one day?”

“You guys can handle it from here.”

Dupree’s lips tightened to a thin line.

“I’ve got to track down T.J. and go break a mother’s heart.”

CHAPTER TWO

“So, where the hell have you been?” Dupree asked T.J. She leaned against her desk and folded her arms across her chest like a teacher waiting for a student to explain why he was late for class.

“It was a rough night—didn’t get much sleep.”

“You’ve been a slacker lately.”

“I’m really sorry, Amaris.”

T.J. stood a head taller than Dupree; his skin the color of creamed coffee. He’d never talked to her about it, but she’d heard that he was a gym-rat, one of those workout fanatics who would rather

pump iron for two hours than do just about anything else. He could also shoot hoops like a young Michael Jordan. Although she'd never seen him with his shirt off, clearly he maintained a toned and muscular body. Always clean shaven, she'd never seen him with any facial hair—not even stubble. And he kept his hair short and neatly styled.

Dupree's cell phone rang. She looked at the display and saw Butler's name.

“Did you solve the case already, John?”

“Afraid not. But we did get a positive DNA match on one of the blood samples.” He paused. “Unfortunately, it's for the victim, not the perp.”

“Is it Lauren Crawford's blood?”

“Affirmative.”

“How were you able to match the DNA so quickly?” Dupree asked.

“Don’t know why, but Crawford’s DNA was cataloged in the National Database.”

“Good work. Anything else to report?”

“Officer Moretti was able to get copies of the surveillance tapes at the ramp garage. We’re reviewing them as we speak to see if they got a shot of the perp’s face. If so, we’ll put it through face recognition and hopefully ID this creep.”

“Keep me in the loop, John.”

“Sure thing.”

Dupree combed her fingers through

her long wavy hair.

“Positive ID?” T.J. asked, his dark eyes locked on Dupree’s face.

“Yep.”

Without saying another word, Dupree grabbed her purse and keys and headed toward the door. She looked over her shoulder at T.J., expecting him to follow her, but he stood there gulping the last mouthful of coffee. “Do you need an embossed invitation or would you rather take the day off and go fishing?” She hated being a bitch, but sometimes...

He threw his cup in the garbage pail and followed Dupree out the door.

As much as Dupree loved the energy and

pulse of Manhattan, Brooklyn felt more like home. She'd lived there until she'd turned seventeen, a monumental crossroad that redefined her life and overshadowed her fond childhood memories. That's when she and her mother stopped talking. Every time she drove the busy streets of Brooklyn, she felt overwhelmed with nostalgia and sweet memories turned sour. Except for police-related work, this was no longer her turf.

“There it is,” T.J. said, pointing to a beautiful all-brick home.

After parking the car, they walked up the short flight of stairs leading to the front porch and entrance of Ms. Crawford's home. Two English Ivy

plants hung from hooks on either side of the front door. A wooden bench—similar to those you see in a park—sat in the corner of the porch. She didn't want to be reminded, but the architecture resembled her mother's home. The home her mother decided to sell shortly after Dupree, a reckless teen, got pregnant and abandoned all sense of reason. Owning the home free and clear, Dupree's mom was able to pay cash for a comfortable one bedroom apartment on 5th Avenue in Manhattan.

Before Dupree could knock, the door swung open. The woman, presumably Dr. Crawford's mother, was likely in her sixties, but didn't look a day over fifty. Dupree didn't know if it was

Neutrogena, Nivea, or the juice from aloe vera plants, but whatever regimen Ms. Crawford followed to look so young was working well.

“I’m Detective Dupree and this is Detective Brown. Are you Ms. Crawford?”

“My dear husband’s long gone, but I still prefer *Mrs.* Crawford if you don’t mind.”

“May we have a word with you?” Dupree asked.

Mrs. Crawford studied the detectives’ faces with striking intensity. Her eyes darted back and forth as if she were trying to read their minds. “You’re here to deliver some bad news about my daughter, aren’t you?”

The question caught Dupree off guard. “May we come in and talk?”

Mrs. Crawford stepped to the side and invited them in. “Please have a seat.”

Dupree and T.J. sat next to each other on the light brown sofa. Mrs. Crawford sat adjacent to them on a straight back chair. Dupree removed a digital recorder from her purse and set it on the cocktail table. “Do you mind if we record this conversation?”

“Do whatever you must.”

Dupree noticed a small table covered with a lace doily. On top of the table she saw about a dozen framed photographs. One of them—a full-face portrait one might have taken for a graduation—

caught Dupree's eye. Dupree pointed at the portrait. "Is that a photograph of your daughter?"

Mrs. Crawford nodded. "The day she graduated from Harvard with a Ph.D. in physiology. Third in her class. She also holds double Master's Degrees in chemistry and biology. My Lauren is a real brainiac." Mrs. Crawford folded her hands on her lap and studied the portrait of her daughter. "How did you know I have a daughter?"

For an instant, Dupree lost her voice.

Mrs. Crawford looked at Dupree with troubled eyes. "Say what you have to say, Detective."

Dupree eyed T.J. who hadn't uttered a sound since entering the home. "I'm so,

so sorry to have to tell you this, but your daughter was...murdered last night.”

Dupree expected an explosive response. Most of the time, next of kin reacted with violent outbursts, gut wrenching screams, and uncontrollable sobbing. But everyone processed devastating news differently. One time, a young mother whose daughter had been kidnapped, raped, and strangled, began swearing and swinging her fists at Dupree. But Mrs. Crawford seemed remarkably composed. Too composed. With some people, Dupree had learned, the immediate shock and unwillingness to accept the fact that a loved one was killed suppresses the reality of it all. But then, weeks, sometimes months later, a

residual shockwave crashes over the victim's survivors and the agony begins.

With her eyes full of tears, hands trembling, Mrs. Crawford asked, "How did my Lauren...die?"

Loathing the words as they slipped off her tongue, Dupree whispered, "A gunshot wound."

"Where did you find her?"

"In the backseat of her car."

"Was she...assaulted?"

Dupree knew what she meant. "We don't believe she was sexually assaulted, Mrs. Crawford, if that's what you're asking."

"God have mercy," Mrs. Crawford said. Tears dripped down her cheeks.

"I am deeply sorry for your loss,"

Dupree said.

Mrs. Crawford's tears turned to heartbreaking sobs. She covered her face with her hands.

At this particular point in time, Dupree hated her job. She'd rather be working in a Pennsylvania coal mine or scrubbing toilets—anything other than this. “We don't have to continue with this conversation, Mrs. Crawford. We can do it another time.”

“Do you think it's going to be easier for me in a week? A month? Ten years from now?”

Dupree and T.J. remained silent and waited for her to regain her composure.

Mrs. Crawford stood with great effort and shuffled towards the table covered

with photographs. She picked up the portrait of her daughter, pressed it to her chest, and eased herself onto the chair. For a few moments, the grief-stricken woman stared at her daughter's photograph.

"Now I understand why Lauren was concerned for her welfare," Mrs. Crawford whispered. "She'd always had the keenest sixth sense."

"She *knew* she was in danger?" Dupree almost shouted.

"For a while she had this eerie feeling that someone was following her."

"Someone in particular?" T.J. asked.

Mrs. Crawford shook her head. "Not exactly. It was just one of those unexplainable inklings. I told her to

leave the research and get a traditional job; something out of the limelight. But that was the shortest conversation in history. I don't think even a death threat could have stopped her from continuing with her research."

"You mentioned that your daughter earned a Ph.D. and two master's degrees?" Dupree said. "What did she do for a living?"

"I'll try to tell you the whole story, but first I need to use the bathroom." Mrs. Crawford stood, her body teetering slightly. Afraid she might fall, Dupree ambled over to her and held onto her arm. "Are you okay?"

"Not at all."

"Want me to walk you?" Dupree

asked.

“I can manage,” Mrs. Crawford said and shuffled down the hall.

As soon as the door clicked shut, Dupree could hear Mrs. Crawford’s pitiful sobs.

“I hate this,” Dupree said. “Really friggin’ *hate* this!”

“It’s not the most pleasant part of our job.”

Dupree listened carefully but could no longer hear Mrs. Crawford crying. She looked around the living room. It so reminded her of her mother’s home. The windows and baseboards were trimmed with thick mahogany-colored gumwood, appearing to be about an inch thick and six inches wide. Hefty beams spanned

the ceiling, and exquisite crown moldings trimmed the angle between the ceiling and the walls. The hardwood floors were stained a few shades lighter than the rest of the wood trim and were finished to a lustrous shine. Mounted above the wood-burning fireplace, a thick wooden mantle was covered with what appeared to be antique vases, figurines, and a pendulum clock.

Mrs. Crawford returned and set a box of tissues on her lap. Her eyes were red and swollen. She removed several tissues and blotted her eyes. "Thanks so much for waiting. My bladder isn't what it used to be." She tapped her temple with her index finger; her face had a look of total confusion. "Where were

we?”

“You were going to tell us about your daughter’s career,” T.J. reminded her.

“Oh, yes, Lauren’s career. She’s worked for several high profile companies doing all kinds of research—technical research that’s way over my head. But a few years ago, my doctor diagnosed me with stage III pancreatic cancer. And the prognosis offered little hope. If you know anything at all about this terrible disease, you know that it’s almost always fatal. I underwent the traditional treatment that included aggressive chemotherapy, which has to be what hell is like. I lost about thirty pounds, had no appetite, spent hours near a bathroom because the waves of

nausea were unpredictable and overwhelming. And of course, I lost all of my hair. Even my eyebrows.

“After all my pain and suffering, the doctors said that the cancer wasn’t responding to the chemo, so they pretty much gave up on me and told me I had about six months to live. To be honest, I actually felt relieved. I had been through so much pain and psychological distress that I welcomed death. I now know firsthand why so many sickly people want to die. You reach a point where your quality of life is so dreadful, death seems a better alternative.”

Mrs. Crawford paused again and took a long swallow of water. Her eyes glistened with tears.

The woman's story mesmerized Dupree. And it brought back painful memories of her own. After a long, agonizing fight with breast cancer, Dupree's mom had lost the battle. She remembered how her mom had given up, how she'd gone from a vibrant woman to skin stretched over bones, how her face was permanently etched with a look of total despair, how her rosy cheeks were replaced with ash-white skin. During her mom's long illness, nineteen-year-old Dupree tried to mend their broken relationship, a tragedy for which she felt totally responsible. But her mom was so medicated with morphine, Dupree never knew for sure if her mother comprehended her apology or if she'd

earned her mom's forgiveness. Her mom's death was the catalyst that had given her the will and desire to straighten out her life. Wide-eyed with anticipation, Dupree waited for Mrs. Crawford to continue.

“Just at the point where I'd given up all hope, Lauren told me that she'd done a lot of research and discovered that the Century Nutrition Clinic in Tijuana had experienced some remarkable success treating terminal cancer patients with homeopathic herbs and low dose chemotherapy. Now keep in mind that this clinic only treats cancer patients who are incurable and have nothing to lose by trying alternative treatments. Well, to make a long story short, the

doctors in America gave me six months to live—and that was nearly three years ago. Bear in mind that more patients have died than survived—I was one of the lucky ones, but all things considered, Lauren believed that Dr. Hulda Clark, the woman who founded the clinic and developed the treatments, was onto something revolutionary. But ironically, Clark herself died from cancer in 2009. Dr. Orlando Garcia, Clark's second in command, continued her work but with limited funds. Consequently, future advancement of Dr. Clark's theories would be unlikely.

“Just before Clark died, Lauren convinced her to let her work at the clinic and learn as much as she could

about Clark's research and treatments, promising Clark that she would work with her to prove her theories. Clark, knowing that she was close to death, didn't want all her years of hard work to quietly go away. So, convinced that further research along the same path might yield some extraordinary medical discoveries, Lauren persuaded a private investor to fund the project. That's when Lauren opened the Horizon Cancer Research Center.

“Clark's critics—probably 90% of the medical community—believed that she was a quack and a charlatan. Whether or not this is true, only Hulda Clark and God know. If you Google her name on the Internet, you'll find some

terribly disparaging accusations. All I know is that I'm still alive and feel better than I have in years, and that my daughter—one of the most brilliant freethinkers in the world—believed that Clark's theories were valid. I'm sure you'll be speaking with Dr. Edward Mason, director of operations for Horizon. He can give you more technical information about the research if that will help with your investigation."

When Mrs. Crawford finished her story, Dupree asked, "Do you still go to Mexico for treatments?"

"Every ninety days. And I have to stay there for six days." She stared at the floor. A look of deep concern on her face. "Oh, my. I don't know how I'm

going to get to the clinic in Tijuana for my next treatment. It's not something I can do alone. All those terrible things you hear about Mexico, the killings, drug trafficking. It scares the daylights out of me. In the past, Lauren and I would fly to San Diego and she would drive me to the clinic. That's the one flaw in this treatment. Once you start, you have to continue for the rest of your life. I guess it's because it doesn't cure cancer, it controls it."

"There's no one else that can accompany you?" Dupree asked.

"I do have a long lost nephew in Long Island. I'm sure I can twist his arm to help his only aunt—especially if I'm picking up the tab." Mrs. Crawford

paused for a minute and looked at the photograph of her daughter. Her eyes again filled with tears. “To be honest, now that Lauren is gone it doesn’t seem all that important that I go for my treatments. She was my...life.”

The room was so quiet, Dupree could hear the tick-tock of the pendulum clock sitting on the mantle.

“Is there anything else I can answer for you?” Mrs. Crawford said.

It was a delicate question but Dupree had to ask. “Did your daughter have any enemies, ex-boyfriends, a colleague at work who might want to hurt her?”

She thought about the question for a short time. “Well, she was dating a guy awhile back. Jonathan Lentz. But Lauren

caught him cheating and broke it off. I can tell you first hand that he was terribly upset.”

“And how do you know this?” Dupree asked. “Did you see him afterwards, witness an argument?”

“I never saw Jonathan again, but a few days after she ended their relationship, I overheard a telephone conversation between the two of them. I wasn’t eavesdropping and of course, I could only hear my daughter’s side of the conversation, but it was a pretty heated exchange.”

“Does anything specifically come to mind that might suggest he threatened her?” T.J. asked.

“Not really. But there is another thing

about their relationship that still troubles me.” Mrs. Crawford sipped a glass of water. “During the time Lauren and Jonathan dated, I noticed some suspicious bruises on her wrists and ankles. Every time I questioned her about the black and blue marks, she’d come up with some cockamamie excuse that really didn’t make sense. One time, when the bruises were particularly pronounced, I confronted her and she really got upset with me, which was so unlike her. So, I let it go and never bothered her again.” She drank a little more water. “There is one more interesting fact. After she ended her relationship with Jonathan, the bruises healed and I never saw them again.”

Obviously, Dupree thought, Dr. Crawford's boyfriend enjoyed playing rough. Or maybe it was the other way around? She twisted her head from side to side, trying to get the kink out of her neck. "How often did you see your daughter?"

"Well, she called me twice a day, at nine a.m. and nine p.m. And twice a week we'd meet for dinner. Sometimes I'd prepare a home cooked meal, but usually Lauren would take me out to a fancy restaurant." She paused. "When she didn't call this morning..."

"Did your daughter ever talk about her research or give you updates on her progress?" T.J. asked.

"Often. In fact, she was scheduled to

make a major announcement to the press.”

“Do you know what the announcement was about?” Dupree asked.

“Something to do with clinical trials and the Food and Drug Administration.” Mrs. Crawford hesitated again, her eyes still teary. “I’d like you to know that my Lauren did not decide to open Horizon because she was searching for fame and fortune. Quite to the contrary. She really wanted no part of the limelight, but she knew that if she did, in fact, find a cure for cancer, or at the least, more effective treatments, she’d never be able to hide from the press or medical community. I just want you to know that she was a selfless woman driven purely by

humanitarian objectives. She had no ambitions to be a celebrity or line her pockets with hundred dollar bills.”

Dupree kept asking herself, who had the motive and will to murder Dr. Crawford? Was it her ex-lover? Revenge? A robbery gone bad? Or did it have something to do with her cancer research? Dupree now realized that the possibilities were many.

“Thank you so much for your time, Mrs. Crawford,” Dupree said. “We’ll be sure to update you on any new developments.”

Mrs. Crawford’s eyes again filled with tears. “I will keep you in my prayers, Detective Dupree.”

CHAPTER THREE

Dupree did not aspire to breaking the law. However, talking on her cell while driving was a habit she just couldn't break. She turned on the speaker so T.J. could hear both sides of the conversation. "Don't disappoint me, Butler. I need some good news."

T.J. had lectured her more than once for not using a hand's free device. But no matter how compelling his argument, Dupree didn't care. Maybe, she thought, a hint of her rebellious teenage years still lingered.

"I hate to ruin your day—I really do,"

Butler warned, “but we examined every surveillance tape and there’s not one single frame we can use for facial recognition.”

“That’s not what I want to hear,” Dupree said. “You’re jeopardizing your rank as my number one go-to-agent. And I *know* you don’t want that.”

“Heavens no.”

“So, now that we know what you *don’t* have. Tell me what you *do* have.”

“If you study the perp’s body language,” Butler said, “it’s obvious that he knew the *exact* location of every video camera. When he stepped off the elevator, he immediately turned up the collar on his leather coat, stared at the floor, and all we could see was his

baseball cap. He turned left when a camera was on the right, and turned right when it was on the left. But it does appear that he's either bald or he's completely shaved off his sideburns, which seems a little strange for a guy with hair."

"So, the only thing you can tell me is that you think the guy is bald?"

"When he maneuvered into the backseat of Dr. Crawford's car, his collar turned down just enough for us to see a small tattoo or birthmark on the back of his neck about the size of a quarter. Unfortunately, the surveillance system in the ramp garage must have been manufactured during the Renaissance, because the resolution is

horrible. Even with our sophisticated video equipment, we can't really get a clear close-up of whatever that mark is on his neck. And once they were in the backseat, the glare from the window made it impossible to see what was going on."

"What else do you have for me?"

"Well, there's more, but it's trivial."

"Nothing's trivial." Dupree said.

"He's a big, thick man. Over six-feet tall. He was wearing a long leather coat that hung below his knees. And he's Caucasian."

"A leather coat in the middle of summer, in New York City?"

"It sure is odd."

"Here's what I don't get," Dupree

offered. “If the guy’s intention *was* to kill Dr. Crawford, why pick a public place and risk being seen?”

“That’s the big question, Amaris.”

“Thanks, John. Keep me in the loop on any new developments.”

After disconnecting the call, she glanced at T.J. “What’s your take?”

“I think we need to interview Dr. Crawford’s ex-boyfriend.”

“You read my mind.”

Finding Jonathan Lentz’s address required little effort. Dupree wasn’t sure if he would be home in the middle of the day, but T.J. and she drove to his apartment in Queens anyway. Even if

they didn't find him home, sometimes a suspect's neighbors offered a wealth of information.

“Doesn't seem like the type of neighborhood where Crawford's ex-boyfriend would live,” T.J. said. He pointed to a pile of trash littering the sidewalk in front of Lentz's building. “You'd think that a brilliant scientist like her would be dating someone from the Upper East Side.”

“Maybe she looked at people from the inside out and didn't get all caught up in status.”

“Well,” T.J. said, “that would be a refreshing change from the norm.”

T.J. and Dupree parked in front of 3548 118th Avenue, double-stepped it up

three flights of stairs, and found apartment 3D. The dimly lit hallway reeked of cat urine and the carpeting looked as if it hadn't been vacuumed since the day it was installed.

“By the looks of this place,” T.J. observed, “Dr. Crawford definitely wasn't caught up in status. This joint is a rat-hole.”

Dupree knocked on the door.

No answer.

She knocked harder.

“Who is it?” shouted a voice from the other side of the door.

“New York City police,” Dupree shot back.

The door opened slowly; the hinges screeching in protest. The man stood

there with his robe not quite covering his private areas. His hair was a mess.

“Are you Jonathan Lentz?” T.J. asked.

“In the flesh.”

Literally, Dupree thought.

“I’m Detective Dupree and this is Detective Brown.” She pointed to his groin area. “You might want to put that thing away.”

“Sorry.” He pulled his robe tighter around his body and did his best to calm down his unruly hairdo. “Sorry about my appearance, Detectives. It’s been a rough night.” He gestured. “Come on in.”

Except for the unmade bed in the corner of the tiny studio, the place was surprisingly neat and orderly. Even with his hair looking like it hadn’t been

washed or combed in days, the young man was as attractive as a Calvin Klein model. She suspected that he'd had his way with a stable of women.

“Have a seat, Detectives.”

They made themselves comfortable on the worn-out sofa. Jonathan stood in front of them with his arms folded low on his torso, almost as if he were hugging an ailing stomach. Dupree noticed his eyes toggling back and forth between her face and chest. She nonchalantly fastened the top button of her blouse. She reached in her purse, removed a digital tape recorder, and set it on the cocktail table. “Mind if we record this interview?”

“Nope.”

Lentz stuffed his hands deep into the robe's pockets and sat on a loveseat.

"This is about Lauren Crawford, isn't it?"

"Why do you ask?" Dupree said.

"I heard it on the morning news. She hadn't been positively identified yet, but when I saw the dent in the rear door of her Camry, I knew it was her."

Dupree was somewhat surprised that Dr. Crawford's murder had already hit the media. Then again, there were many instances when journalists knew more than the cops did.

He pointed to an almost empty bottle of Dewars. "Drank myself to sleep."

"Can you tell us where you were last night between eight p.m. and midnight?"

Dupree asked.

“Well, I can tell you one thing for certain: I wasn’t with Lauren.”

“I’m not suggesting that you were, Mr. Lentz. I just need to know your whereabouts for our investigation.”

“Wanna know where I was? Waiting for Lauren in a little coffee shop in Jackson Heights called Better Blast Coffee. Got there at eight-ish and left around eleven-thirty. You can verify that with both Jasmine, the owner, or Tim, one of the baristas.”

“We understand that you two split up weeks ago,” Dupree said.

“We did. But once she stopped being so pissed off at me, we actually became friends.”

“Why was she angry with you?” T.J. asked.

He adjusted his body and combed his fingers through his unruly hair. “I had a little...fling.”

“So, why were you meeting her for coffee?” Dupree asked.

“She called me a few days ago and said she needed to speak to me about something very important. I said, ‘Okay, let’s talk.’ But she insisted that we meet face to face. She sounded really nervous—almost desperate. Her voice was shaky and barely louder than a whisper.”

“Obviously,” T.J. said, “the meeting never took place.”

Lentz’s chin rested on his chest and his eyes filled with tears. “No...it...

didn't."

T.J. waited for him to regain his composure. "I'm sorry you're upset, Mr. Lentz, but I'm sure you can appreciate why we need to ask you some questions."

"When she said she wanted to see me, I was hoping she had second thoughts about us splitting up and maybe wanted to give it another go. We were supposed to meet at eight p.m. When she didn't show up, I didn't panic because she'd done this before. She'd get so caught up in her work that she'd completely lose track of time. I called her cell and left her three voicemails."

He paused for a minute, his emotions again hard to control. "Can you imagine

how I felt when she dumped me? I really loved her.”

“Didn’t love her enough to keep it in your pants,” Dupree said.

Lentz glared at Dupree. “I guess I have no defense for that accusation, except to say that guys will be guys.”

“Hm,” T.J. said. “I thought the expression was, ‘Guys will be pigs’.”

Lentz didn’t say a word.

“Tell us about the frequent bruises on Lauren’s wrists and ankles,” Dupree said. “What’s that all about?”

Dupree expected that the question would rile him, but it hardly fazed him.

“Without getting into any nitty gritty details, which is none of your damn business anyway, let’s just say that

Lauren enjoyed some kinky sex games. And that's all you need to know."

"And did these games include bondage?" T.J. asked.

Lentz nodded. "Are we done?"

"For the time being," Dupree said. "But as the investigation moves forward, we may want you to come down to the 40th precinct in the south Bronx to answer a few more questions."

"Well I hope you two work weekends because I'm booked solid Monday to Friday. I work two jobs just trying to keep my head above water. Only reason I'm home today...well I don't think I have to explain."

Dupree handed Lentz her business card. "Call me day or night if there's

anything else you can remember that might help with the investigation.”

He snatched the business card and stuffed it in the robe pocket without looking at it. Just as the detectives were leaving, Lentz touched Dupree’s arm.

“I know that both of you probably think I’m a total, white-trash deadbeat and can’t begin to understand why a brilliant, educated, and sophisticated woman like Lauren would even give me the time of day. Well, appearances don’t always tell the whole story. I know I live in a crappy, rundown building in Loserville, USA. But it hasn’t always been like that. Up until I lost my obscenely lucrative job at Lehman Brothers right after they went belly-up in

2008, I was flying high. Unless you've gone through a meltdown like this, you have no idea what it's like to go from Armani suits and a 500SL to grease-stained overalls and a cardboard sign begging for loose change. There's no dignity in being poor. I lost my home and forfeited all my worldly belongings. I slept in shelters, rat-infested alleys, and sometimes I hunkered down in the backseat of an unlocked car. I wolfed down half-eaten Big Macs and pissed in the streets. I collected unemployment for as long as I could. I figured the government at least owed me that. Never once did I apply for welfare or food stamps. I'm clawing my way back slowly, working two low-paying jobs. I

don't have much, but I have my integrity. I pay my rent and my belly is full. Lauren saw something in me, a quality hidden beneath the surface of a man wearing a silly paper hat and peddling hot dogs and pretzels from a little stainless steel cart. She saw my heart and she saw my soul and knew that I was more than just a corner vendor."

Dupree and T.J. stood silently in the doorway. His story begged for a meaningful reply, yet neither detective knew what to say. All Dupree could muster was one quick remark.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Lentz. I'm sorry for your loss" She looked deep into his eyes, and felt that something wasn't quite right.

CHAPTER FOUR

“You buy his hard-luck story?” Dupree asked. T.J. and she headed back to the precinct.

“I believe that he got caught up in the financial meltdown, lost his job, and now works a couple of scrub jobs, but the rest, I think, is classic horseshit. What’s your opinion?”

“I thought his performance earned him an Oscar.”

“I’ll check out his alibi at that Better Blast Coffee shop,” T.J. said.

Although T.J. always tried to portray himself as a thick-skinned, unflappable

man, Dupree suspected that he, like her, was deeply moved by Mrs. Crawford's painful situation. She had been a detective long enough to know that a cop just can't get emotionally involved with a victim's family, a suspect, or witness. It was the first commandment in law enforcement. Yet, more than once, she found herself too close to the wrong person.

“What's next on our ‘To Do List’?” T.J. asked.

“First thing in the morning, we're meeting with Dr. Mason, the director of research for Horizon.”

“When the hell did you set up that appointment?”

“I'm a multi-tasker, remember?”

“What time?”

“He said to drop by any time between eight a.m. and noon. After that, he’ll be out of town for several days.”

“Nine o’ clock okay with you?” T.J. asked.

“How about eight?” Dupree smiled. “And one more thing. If you’re not here on time, I’m going to talk to the captain about demoting you to a beat cop in Harlem.”

Dupree dropped off T.J. at the precinct. On her way back to her place, she called Brenda and asked her to run a background and criminal record check on Jonathan Lentz.

Dupree loved living in the heart of the city. Although most tourists referred to this throbbing area of sidewalk cafés, off-Broadway playhouses, and jazz clubs, as Greenwich Village, the locals just knew it as “The Village.”

As soon as Dupree entered the apartment, her two cats, Benjamin and Alexandra—Ben and Alex for short—greeted her at the door with a chorus of “meows.” She looked at their bowls of dry food and they were almost empty.

“Sorry guys. Been a rough day.”

To Dupree, New York was so much more than the Empire State Building, Central Park, and the Statue of Liberty. It was a thriving metropolis of culture, entertainment, and fashion. Where else

could she buy a Gray's Papaya hot dog, the best in the world? Or walk into Katz's deli for a delicious pastrami or corn beef sandwich, piled high and as tender as prime rib? Dupree loved New York. The food. The people. The energy. The culture. But every so often, she needed an escape from the hectic pace of the city. So, she'd rent a remote cabin buried deep in the Adirondack Mountains, where she had to pump water from a well, do her business in a broken down outhouse, and survive without a refrigerator, stove, or even electricity. Completely alone and isolated from civilization, she'd sit by a warm fire and read a classic Fitzgerald or Hemingway novel by candlelight, and enjoy a

peaceful weekend with no computers, cell phones or TVs. Once in a while, she'd curl up with a trashy novel, a vice she never shared with anyone. An occasional weekend in the mountains was how Dupree decompressed, how she reflected on her chaotic life and kept herself focused. Without a frequent escape from dead bodies and diabolical killers, she'd never be able to cope with the demands of her job.

People often asked Dupree how she could afford a million-dollar apartment in the heart of the Village on a homicide detective's salary. She would generally say, "I can't. That's why I eat Ramen noodles every night." At the reading of her mom's will, when Dupree learned

that her mom had willed the apartment and a modest savings account to her, Dupree was overwhelmed with guilt, shocked that the woman she'd so deeply wounded would leave everything to her. Dupree kept asking herself, "What did I do to deserve this?" Her answer was always the same: "Nothing." The apartment served as a constant and nagging reminder that her mom, in spite of Dupree treating her so poorly, was a kindhearted, loving woman.

There was a time—it seemed in another life—when Dupree looked forward to preparing a nice dinner and sharing a bottle of wine with someone special. But it had been a long time since she'd been involved with anyone—at

least on an intimate level. With her thirty-fifth birthday coming soon, it loomed as a poignant reminder that a stiff drink, dark chocolate, and chick-flicks had become substitutes for a comforting hug and passionate kiss.

Her cell phone rang.

She looked at the display and didn't recognize the caller. "Detective Dupree."

"Hi, Detective, this is Jonathan Lentz, Lauren Crawford's ex-boyfriend. I hope I'm not disturbing you."

Tearing her away from a bagel and cream cheese was an interruption she could forgive. "No, you're not disturbing me at all. What can I do for you?"

"Well, you asked me to call if I

remembered anything that might be significant.” His voice sounded raspy, as if he’d just woken up. “I don’t know if this means anything, but about a week ago when I spoke to Lauren on the telephone, she said that for the last few weeks she felt as if someone was watching her.”

“What do you mean?”

“According to Lauren, a creepy guy in a white Ford Fusion would frequently sit in his car across the street from her apartment and seemed to be watching her. On two occasions, she’d seen the same car parked across the street from where she worked.”

Dupree thought it peculiar that Lentz hadn’t mentioned something as

significant as this when she'd interviewed him earlier. Then again, shock plays a lot of tricks on your brain. She recalled that Mrs. Crawford had also spoken of a mysterious stalker.

“Did she describe the man or happen to take down his license plate number?”

“She didn't say. I told her to call the police and report it, but I don't know if she ever did.”

“Is there anything else, Mr. Lentz?”

“Only that I hope you find the bastard who killed her and lock him up for life.”

“That's exactly what I'm going to do.” She hung up, picked up her glass of wine and gulped a mouthful.

Before she barely had a chance to swallow, her cell rang again. “This is

Detective Dupree.”

“Hey there Detective, it’s Brenda.”

Dupree looked at her watch. “Are you still working?”

“On my way out the door, but I thought I’d give you the info on Jonathan Lentz.”

“How utterly ironic,” Dupree said. “Would you believe that I just got off the phone with him?”

“Odd coincidence.”

“So, what’s the scoop, Brenda?”

“He’s been a good boy for the last few months, but before that he was quite a character.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, it all started in June of 2008. It seems that he likes to get into fist fights. Mostly in bars. Must be one of those

guys who gets alcohol courage when he drinks—makes him want to kick some ass. He likes to hang with some pretty seedy characters. Real bad boys. He's been arrested four times but never been convicted. Maybe he just likes to beat the crap out of people.”

“That’s interesting,” Dupree said. “He doesn’t seem the type.”

“Do they ever?”

“Good point. Anything else I should know?”

“You got it all, Sugar. Have a good night.”

“You as well.”

Dupree remembered Lentz’s narrative about losing his job at Lehman Brothers in 2008 and how he was clawing his

way back to solvency. Curious, Dupree thought, that Lentz neglected to mention his colorful past.

Maybe he wasn't the hard-working citizen he claimed to be.

CHAPTER FIVE

T.J. hopped in Dupree's car with a groan and closed the door. He strapped on his seatbelt and reclined the seatback as far as it would go. On the radio, Lady Gaga was proclaiming that she was "Born this Way." T.J. turned off the radio.

"Don't like Gaga?" Dupree asked.

"Not this morning."

"I can't believe you actually got here on time."

"Enjoy it," T.J. said. "It may never happen again."

"You look like you could use a gallon

of strong coffee and a quart of Visine.”

“Shoot me. Please.” T.J. said. “Just put me out of my misery.”

Dupree merged into the flowing traffic and headed for the Horizon Cancer Research Center in the Bronx. “Rough night, hey?”

“The night was just fine.” T.J. said. “It’s the morning that got me.”

“Too much partying?”

“No. Nothing like that. I just don’t get enough sleep.”

“Try a couple of Excedrin PM’s and melatonin just before you go to bed. But be sure you turn the volume up on your clock radio or you’ll sleep till Christmas.”

The rush hour traffic was unusually

light this morning, which was as rare an event as a solar eclipse of the sun.

“Want me to swing by Starbucks?” Dupree offered.

“Don’t think my stomach could handle it.” He let out a heavy sigh. “Oh, by the way. Before I went home last night, I drove to the Better Blast Coffee Shop and Lentz’s story checked out. He was there all evening.”

“I’m impressed by your tenacity. Are you turning over a new leaf?”

“I wouldn’t go that far.”

Dupree had much to say about their impending conversation with Dr. Mason, and she wanted to be sure that T.J. and she were on the same wavelength. But every time she glanced at him, about to

Speak, his eyes looked droopy and it appeared that he'd be sound asleep in a few minutes. For most of their six-month partnership, T.J. had been alert and ready to roll first thing in the morning. In fact, he was an energetic, cheery "morning person" who came to work singing. He annoyed the crap out of everyone around him who was still struggling to gradually wake up. But something recently changed. Something wasn't quite right with him. She realized that she had to confront the issue, but now was not the time.

Driving the side streets of the Bronx, watching kids enjoying their summer vacation—

playing hopscotch and stick ball—

reminded Dupree of a life less complicated. A life she abandoned when her teen years changed her from a sweet girl to an out of control and defiant young woman. She tried to blame it on her father, a worthless man who abandoned his wife and daughter when Dupree was only three years old. But the peer pressure in high school influenced her more than any other factor and set her on the wrong path.

Why at this particular time she would be reminiscing about such things made no sense. But she not only had survived her teenage years, she'd fulfilled the promise she had whispered in her mother's ear moments before she died.

"I'm going to be somebody, Mom. I'm

going to make you proud of me.”

Dupree wasn't sure if she'd kept her promise by getting into law enforcement. But she hoped that her mother looked down from the heavens with favor.

Trying to clear her head of all these troubling thoughts, she pulled into the driveway of the ten-story office building and found a visitor's spot. They got out of the car and headed for the entrance. Just inside the door, Dupree noticed the building directory. Horizon was located on the top floor.

Dupree and T.J. stepped into the elevator. As soon as the door closed and the elevator moved upward, Dupree elbowed T.J. “Are you ready for this interview?”

“Want the truth?”

“No. I want you to bullshit me.”

“I really don’t feel up to it.”

Although annoyed, Dupree appreciated his honesty. “Tell you what. You just sit there and look pretty and I’ll ask the questions. Just don’t fall asleep.”

“I’ll do my best.”

The elevator door opened and Dupree stepped out; T.J. lagged a few steps behind her. It appeared that Horizon Cancer Research Center occupied the entire floor, which was not what Dupree had anticipated. For some reason, after speaking to Mrs. Crawford, Dupree got the impression that Horizon would be in a small space the size of a janitor’s closet in the basement of a musty old

building. But clearly, this was a first class operation, and whoever funded the project had wheelbarrows full of money. Just looking around, Dupree guessed that there had to be at least a couple dozen employees moving about. And she suspected there were many more “worker bees” out of sight.

They approached the reception desk and a young woman greeted them with a big grin. She looked like someone who could be modeling a Versace evening gown on a fashion show runway. Her teeth were bright white and perfectly aligned. And her low-cut blouse left nothing to the imagination.

“May I be of assistance?” she asked. Her eyes were fixed on T.J. Dupree felt

as if she were invisible. This was not the first time Dupree witnessed a young woman making goo-goo eyes at T.J. Why wouldn't they? He was trim, muscular, good looking, and he had a beautiful smile. What Dupree found peculiar, was that all the female attention never seemed to faze him.

“We have an appointment with Dr. Mason,” Dupree said.

Still not making eye contact, which was really starting to irritate Dupree, the young woman said, “May I have your names, please?”

She flashed her badge and ID. “I’m Detective Dupree and this is Detective Brown.”

The young woman grinned at T.J. and

tossed her long, blonde hair to one side, fashion-model-style.

“Please have a seat,” the receptionist said, pointing to a small reception area. “I’ll buzz Dr. Mason.”

Once they were seated, Dupree, talking slightly louder than she intended to, said, “She seems quite taken with you.”

“I hadn’t noticed.”

“Seriously? You must be sleeping on your feet. She was almost drooling.”

“I think you’re reading way too much into it. Besides, I’m not the least bit interested.”

Curious, Dupree thought. During the six months she’d worked with T.J., she’d heard plenty about his sordid

romantic life and his involvement with “loose” women; how he’d jump at the chance to exploit any opportunity. Of course, Dupree was not naïve. Locker-room-cop-talk—especially when it centered on a detective’s sexual escapades and latest triumphs—was almost always more fiction than fact. If what she’d heard about T.J. was, in fact, true, it did seem peculiar that he showed no interest in the obviously-smitten receptionist.

They sat in silence for a minute. Dupree fussed with her hair, watching members of the staff hustling about. Everyone seemed to be in a hurry. She glanced at T.J. and his eyes were at half mast. She elbowed him in the arm. He

opened his eyes and looked around as if he had no idea where he was.

“Seriously, T.J. Are you kidding me or what?”

“I’m really sorry, but—”

“Call me a nagging bitch if you like, but being sorry doesn’t quite cut it. I don’t know what’s up with you lately, but you’d better get your head out of your ass. I don’t give a flying fuck what you do on your off-time. Drink yourself into oblivion. Shoot heroine. Screw yourself silly. Whatever turns your crank. But when you’re carrying a shield and sidearm, you’re on the clock, and you’re *my* partner, I need you on-board one-hundred percent.”

A short stocky man with thinning

silver hair approached the two detectives. Dupree gave him a onceover and noticed a slight limp. In spite of that, he moved with purpose in his step.

“Hi,” the man said. “I’m Dr. Mason. Sorry you had to wait.”

The detectives stood and introduced themselves.

“Follow me,” Dr. Mason said. “We can go into my office and hopefully find some privacy.” As they walked, the doctor talked. “This place is always humming, but since Dr. Crawford’s terrible death, it’s been a madhouse. Excuse the cliché, but we’re operating like a ship without a rudder.”

They passed cubicle after cubicle, computer after computer, lots of

equipment foreign to Dupree. Along the back wall was an area enclosed in glass that ran the whole width of the floor. All the employees inside wore space age uniforms. Dupree felt like she was taking a tour of NASA.

Dr. Mason led them into his office and asked them to have a seat. Checking out the office without making it too obvious, Dupree was surprised at its simplicity. But the distinct smell of stale cigarette smoke and the overflowing ashtray absolutely stunned her. The administrative leader of an organization involved in cancer research was a *smoker*? It was hard for Dupree to wrap her head around *that* one.

“Please tell me that you have a

suspect in Dr. Crawford's murder," Mason said.

"At this point," Dupree answered, "there's no hard evidence pointing to anyone in particular. But as things unfold over the next few days, as we fit the pieces together and conduct more interviews, I think we'll come up with a few possibilities."

"What can I do to help?" Mason offered.

"First off," Dupree said, "do you know of anyone who might have wanted to harm Dr. Crawford? Any enemies here at the lab? Conflicts with other staff members? Vendettas? Professional jealousy, perhaps? Was there somebody who could gain something from Dr.

Crawford's death?"

"Lauren ran a tight ship and she kept the staff toeing the line. I'm sure she offended people sometimes with her abruptness and obsession with perfection. She was a stickler for details and insisted that everyone live up to her lofty expectations. But all things considered, I can't think of anyone who would have a motive to murder her."

"As the Executive Director of Horizon Cancer Research Center, what exactly is your role?" Dupree asked.

"Although I do have a modest equity position in the company, Lauren ran the entire operation. I was merely a figure head—like the Queen of England. She was the one who secured the primary

investor and kept the checks rolling in. She had all the power and all the authority to run the research center as she saw fit. She respected my feedback, of course, but ultimately made all major decisions.”

“With all due respect,” Dupree said, “why did she hire you as her Executive Director? Why did she need you if she ran the whole operation?”

“Lauren needed an oncologist on staff. I had just retired from my private practice, and frankly, after only a few months, I was bored to death. Don’t believe what people say about retirement. It’s not what it’s cracked up to be. Anyway, when Lauren offered me this opportunity, although somewhat

skeptical, I found myself fascinated with the whole concept of what she was trying to accomplish. I'm talking about the possibility of developing the most significant medical discovery in the last hundred years." He paused and blotted his forehead with a tissue. "If anyone else had tried to recruit me, I likely would have passed. But Lauren's credentials in the medical research industry were impeccable. So, as a widower with no living relatives on the east coast, with nothing much to do but read and go fishing, I accepted on the condition that I not have to work more than fifteen or twenty hours a week."

"Dr. Crawford's mother told us her daughter had scheduled a press

conference that was supposed to take place yesterday morning,” Dupree said. “Do you know the nature of that press conference?”

“Lauren had been working very closely with Dominic Gallo, Deputy Director of the Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, a division of the FDA responsible for reviewing data and clinical studies on proposed new drugs and treatments. With Gallo’s assistance, Lauren planned to announce that Horizon was only months away from submitting an application to the FDA for an extraordinary treatment that could lead to a cure for certain cancers.”

“So, who’s going to follow through with this now that she’s out of the

picture?”

“Good question. Now that Lauren has paved the way, I’m sure there would be several takers in the research community. In fact, Hyland Laboratories, the biggest pharmaceutical company in the world, contacted us about a year ago with a proposal to form a partnership. With their resources, it would have dramatically improved our operation. But Lauren, strong willed and often stubborn, turned them down. Hyland may still be interested in a partnership, but at this particular juncture, we’re in crisis mode and to be honest, I’m not even thinking about a successor.”

“Tell me something, Dr. Mason,” Dupree said. “Considering the

sensitivity of the data and research you deal with every day, how do you protect it?”

“All of the data, clinical trials, and the FDA application are stored on a secure server with what they call an Advanced Encryption Standard System similar to what the U.S. government uses for top secret files. It is also backed up through an independent data protection company. Only Lauren and I had authority to access the information on the server. Lauren regularly downloaded the latest data to her laptop. On the afternoon before Lauren was murdered, she and I downloaded virtually everything on the server to her laptop computer because she was planning to

work from home on some very critical statistics and needed all the research data. Her goal was to submit some preliminary documents to the FDA before the end of the week. Unfortunately, when she was murdered, she was carrying her computer and also a back-up hard drive. So, whoever murdered her likely has the computer and hard drive with all of the statistics and clinical trials results.”

“Did Dr. Crawford’s computer have a security system to protect the data?” Dupree asked.

“Yes, a very sophisticated system. One that is nearly impossible to hack into.”

“What does ‘nearly impossible’

mean?”

“The system on Lauren’s computer has a unique feature. If someone tries to gain access and doesn’t input an exact series of passwords, the system is designed to crash the hard drive and make recovery of the data impossible. However, nothing is so secure that some computer whiz can’t override it.”

“So what happens now?” Dupree asked. “Is the research project on hold?”

Mason nodded. “First off, with Lauren gone, our funding ends. Our benefactor made it abundantly clear when he agreed to fund this project that he would only do so if Lauren ran the show. No Lauren, no money. In the spirit of science and medicine, I’ll appeal to him, of course,

but I really don't have much hope. We've got enough money to operate this place for another thirty days—not nearly enough time to prepare everything we need for the FDA. And even if we had funding, without Lauren, picking up where she left off would be very difficult. Lauren was, perhaps, the only person on earth qualified to complete this research. She had a handle on every aspect of the project. Even if a savior came down from the heavens and assumed Lauren's role, we still need a financial partner or we're out of business.”

Dupree processed what Dr. Mason said. “I can understand how someone would benefit from stealing all the data

and developing their own drugs using Dr. Crawford's research. But why murder her?"

"It's feasible that the killer not only wanted Lauren's computer, but also wanted to be sure that whatever sensitive information lived only in her brain and wasn't yet recorded, went to the grave with her." Mason paused and seemed to be gathering his thoughts. "We can't ignore the possibility that whoever stole this information may have wanted to suppress it rather than develop it."

"Why in the name of all that's reasonable would anyone want to suppress research that could result in developing a cure for cancer?" Dupree asked.

“It’s no secret that the drug industry is a huge, multi-billion dollar money machine. They make most of their money *treating* diseases, not curing them.”

“So,” Dupree said, “if Dr. Crawford’s research proved valid, and the treatment was effective, many cancer-treating drugs marketed by competing drug companies would become obsolete and they might stand to lose significant money?”

“Billions. Once patented and approved by the FDA, the developer of the drug would have exclusive distribution rights for seven years.

“That certainly adds another dimension to the investigation,” Dupree said. “Tell me, Dr. Mason, how did this

whole research idea come about? When we spoke to Dr. Crawford's mother, she told us about her pancreatic cancer and the treatment she received at the Century Nutrition Clinic in Tijuana. She said that three years ago the doctors in America gave her six months to live. Is there some kind of miracle treatment for cancer patients in Tijuana?"

"Let me preface my answer by first giving you some background on Dr. Hulda Clark."

Dupree remembered Mrs. Crawford talking about her daughter's relationship with Dr. Clark.

Mason adjusted himself in the seat and rested his chin on his folded hands. "I'm not going to get too technical but

here's the story. Clark had a doctoral degree with an emphasis in biophysics and cell physiology. She wrote several books describing her methods of treating cancer and she operated a number of clinics in the U.S. Perhaps her most controversial book was titled, *The Cure for all Cancers*. Following a series of legal difficulties and actions by the Federal Trade Commission, she was pretty much run out of the country and relocated to Tijuana, Mexico where she launched the Century Nutrition Clinic. One of her fundamental theories was that all cancer patients had two things in common. First, they all had parasites in their intestines called flukes. Second, they all had high levels of isopropyl

alcohol in their bloodstream. For healthy people, the flukes pose no major problems because most parasitic eggs pass out of our bodies with bowel movements. But some eggs hatch and get into your blood stream.” Mason paused and drank some water.

“Under normal conditions, our liver kills the hatchlings. However, for people who have a high level of isopropyl alcohol in their bodies, the liver is unable to trap and kill these flukes. So, they settle in any host organ that is unhealthy—like a smoker’s lungs, a breast with a benign tumor, an enlarged prostate, or low functioning kidneys. The hatchlings begin to reproduce at an out-of-control pace. Once they become adult

parasites, they feed off the infected organs.

“When adult parasites infest your liver, a growth factor called ortho-phospho-tyrosine appears. This causes normal cells to divide uncontrollably and ultimately produce cancer cells. The only way that the fluke parasite can live outside of your intestines and exponentially reproduce is if isopropyl alcohol is present in your body.

“Clark’s theory was that three herbs: black walnut hulls, wormwood from the *Artemisia* shrub, and common cloves—administered in conjunction with a low dose chemotherapy drug—could rid your body of over one-hundred different types of parasites—including the cancer-

causing fluke. And the treatments did not produce any major side effects.” Mason took another mouthful of water. “There’s more, of course, and I could go on for hours, but that’s a brief overview of Hulda Clark’s theory.”

Dupree looked at T.J. and could sense he had a bunch of questions to ask, so she ever so slightly nodded her head and hoped he’d get the message.

“How do these fluke parasites get into your body?” T.J. asked, glancing at Dupree. “Mostly from processed foods and undercooked beef. Poultry, believe it or not, could be the single biggest cause of parasite infestation.”

T.J. continued. “How does the isopropyl alcohol get into the

bloodstream?”

“This may surprise you, but isopropyl alcohol is everywhere. It’s in shampoo, hairspray, mousse, cold cereals, cosmetics, bottled water, store-bought fruit juices, mouthwash, shaving cream, white sugar—even in carbonated beverages and decaf coffee.”

Dupree’s head was spinning with all this technical information. She wondered whether this was a murder investigation or an anatomy class.

“Dr. Crawford’s mother told us that her daughter actually spent some time working with Dr. Clark in Tijuana,” Dupree said.

“That’s correct,” Mason said. “That’s how the Horizon Cancer Research

Center was born. After witnessing many terminal patients outlive the prognosis given to them by American doctors—including Mrs. Crawford—Lauren concluded that Dr. Clark was on to something. But Lauren felt as though Clark hadn't taken it far enough. As Lauren used to say, 'Clark's in the right church but the wrong pew.' ”

“Earlier in our conversation,” T.J. said, “you mentioned that Dr. Crawford was a few months away from submitting an application to the FDA. If Dr. Clark was plagued with legal issues and moved her operation to Tijuana, how did Dr. Crawford get the FDA's blessing to continue research in the USA?”

“It's well documented that Dr. Clark

was not very popular with the medical community or with anyone involved in traditional health care or research. In fact, the vast majority of medical professionals were convinced that she was not only a quack but a charlatan. They felt she preyed on people with hopeless diagnoses. But Lauren didn't agree to work with Clark to act as judge and jury on her reputation or her motivation. In spite of the overwhelming evidence that Clark was a fraud, Lauren believed that her theories—however misdirected—were valid and worth pursuing further. Let's not forget that Lauren had some pretty impressive credentials and some powerful backers. Billionaire, Dr. Sidney Goldman,

donated a hefty sum of money to fund this research center. Not to mention the fact that he, personally, was very influential with the FDA.”

“That’s quite a story,” Dupree said, glancing at her wristwatch. “What was it about Dr. Crawford’s research that distinguished it from Dr. Clark’s?”

“Through clinical trials, Lauren discovered that combining the three homeopathic herbs with two modified chemotherapy drugs Clark was not using, she could completely stop the progression and spread of certain cancers. It wasn’t a cure—at least not yet—but an effective treatment regimen that extends the life of terminal cancer patients while maintaining their quality

of life. No hair loss or digestive issues.”

“Something certainly worth pursuing,” Dupree said. “Dr. Crawford’s death is quite a blow to this research center.”

“Yes, Detective. It sets this whole project back two or three years. Maybe even scraps it.”

“That would be terrible.”

“Indeed.”

“Two more questions and we’ll let you get on with your day,” Dupree promised. “First, any idea why Dr. Crawford parked her car in the ramp garage near Yankee Stadium? There’s plenty of parking right next to the building.”

“Lauren was so absorbed with her research that she rarely got much

exercise, so she purposely parked a few blocks away and walked to and from our facility.”

Dupree could understand her motivation. It made perfect sense. “Last question—and this may sound odd—but do any of your employees shave their heads?”

Mason stroked his chin in a contemplative way. “There are a couple guys on their way to baldness, but no one here is completely bald.”

“Thank you so much for taking the time to speak with us,” Dupree said. She handed him a business card. “Please contact me if you think of anything else that might help our investigation.”

“Sure thing, Detective.”

Dupree and T.J. were about to exit Mason's office when they heard him say, "Wait a minute. Something just occurred to me."

The two detectives did a perfectly synchronized about face as if they were performing a drill in boot camp.

"I don't know if this has any bearing on anything, but about a month ago, Lauren fired an employee named Maggie Hansen, one of our senior research scientists. She's a southern gal with a little attitude. But other than Lauren, nobody at Horizon understood the research project as thoroughly as Maggie did. Now I'm not suggesting that this woman killed Lauren, she certainly didn't seem capable of something like

that, but there was quite a blowout when Lauren fired her. So much so, that Lauren had to call security to escort Maggie out of the building. As Maggie was leaving, she yelled something like, ‘You haven’t seen the last of me, bitch’. I don’t know if it means anything, but I thought you should know.”

“Would you happen to have Maggie’s address?”

Mason typed something on his computer, waited a minute, then wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to Dupree. “I hope you find whoever is responsible for Lauren’s death. He not only killed *her*, but potentially killed millions of cancer patients worldwide.”

“So what do you think?” Dupree asked T.J., as she slipped the key into the ignition.

“Well, it seems that whoever murdered Dr. Crawford had it timed perfectly.” T.J. flipped down the visor and checked his bloodshot eyes. “If what Dr. Mason said is true—that Dr. Crawford rarely worked from home—then somebody was tipped off that she would not only be carrying her computer and external hard drive, but that they would contain every piece of research data downloaded from the secure server.”

“A little too coincidental,” Dupree said. “Someone on the inside has dirt

under their fingernails.”

“Dr. Mason?”

“Well, he sure is in the thick of things. And he did mention that he has an equity position in Horizon. We need to complete a thorough background check on him. I’d like to know if there are any criminal records, malpractice lawsuits, ugly divorces, or significant debt. And I really would like to know who he hobnobs with. Maybe this Maggie Hansen can fill in a few blanks.”

“Before we track her down,” T.J. suggested, “why don’t we check out Dr. Crawford’s place first? We’re driving to Brooklyn anyway and Park Slope borders Prospect Heights.”

“Nice thought, but the search warrant

hasn't come through yet. So unless you're into breaking and entering..."

"Hey, it's worth a try, no? Let's kill two birds with one stone."

"Okay," Dupree said. "I'll bet you a cold brew or cocktail of your choice that we don't get into Dr. Crawford's apartment without a warrant."

"I'll take that bet."

Dupree grabbed a folder from the backseat and leafed through the pages. She entered Dr. Crawford's address into the police department issued GPS. As soon as the woman's voice started barking driving instructions, she merged into traffic. The voice on the GPS directed Dupree to the Sheridan Expressway south to the Bruckner

Expressway.

It was a cloudy day in New York and the humidity seemed like it was flirting with 100%. Dupree wanted to remove her suit jacket, but felt certain her silk blouse was soaked with perspiration. Sweat stained armpits weren't exactly the image she wished to portray. And of course, there was also the ongoing desire to conceal her bountiful "gifts" from God.

When they arrived at the apartment building, a freakishly tall doorman, dressed in a navy blue uniform and an official-looking hat that made him appear to be an admiral in the Navy, hustled toward the front door and opened it for the detectives. He seemed

about ten pounds away from looking like a stick person.

“Good afternoon folks.” He gave them a thorough onceover and Dupree figured he was trying to remember if they looked familiar. “Is there something I can help you with?”

Dupree flashed her badge. “We’re New York City homicide detectives and we need entry into Dr. Lauren Crawford’s residence.” She glanced at her folder. “Apartment 22C.”

His pleasant and welcoming look turned sour. “Such a terrible tragedy. Dr. Crawford was a lovely person.” His eyes glazed over with tears. “Let me put you in touch with the building superintendent.”

The doorman strolled over to a small table, picked up a telephone, and dialed a number. Dupree strained to hear the doorman's half of the conversation but could only make out every third or fourth word. He returned with the same sour face.

"Mr. Cardone will be down in a few minutes." He pointed to an ornate bench with a padded seat cover that looked like velvet. "Please make yourselves comfortable."

As the doorman walked away from them, Dupree whispered in T.J.'s ear, "Looks like a piece of furniture from Buckingham Palace."

"Someone working here must be related to Prince William," T.J. added.

About to sit down, the elevator opened and a well-dressed, distinguished looking mid-fifties' man made his way toward them. His full head of black hair didn't have a trace of gray—not even at his temples. Grecian Formula had done a fine job, Dupree thought.

“My name is David Cardone,” he said in a formal fashion. “I’m the building superintendent. What can I do for you, Detectives?” He didn’t offer a handshake and had an air of arrogance about him that made Dupree feel that he had much more important things to do than speak to a couple of nosey detectives.

Dupree wondered why the

superintendent seemed so inhospitable. They were cops, not auditors from the IRS.

Dupree and T.J. showed him their badges and police IDs. “We’re conducting a homicide investigation and need access to Dr. Lauren Crawford’s apartment,” Dupree said.

“What a shocking incident,” Cardone said, shaking his head. “Dr. Crawford was one of my favorite tenants. At Christmastime she would give gifts to our entire staff and somehow she never forgot a staff member’s birthday. Such a tragic loss.” For an instant, Cardone’s demeanor softened, but his face quickly returned to an unfriendly scowl.

“It would help us a great deal if you

would let us into her residence,” T.J. said, repeating the request.

“Of course. I’d be more than happy to assist you. May I see your search warrant, please?”

Dupree and T.J. eyeballed each other.

“You *do* have a warrant don’t you?” Cardone asked.

“We’ve already requested one,” Dupree said. “And the judge should sign it in the next day or so. However—”

“But you don’t have it with you right now?” Cardone chewed on his lip. “I’m afraid I am unable to let you into Dr. Crawford’s residence.”

He seemed delighted to turn down their request, his tone clearly patronizing. “Owner’s policy, not mine.”

“Then get the owner on the phone and let me speak to him,” T.J. demanded.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible. He’s on a cruise ship in the Mediterranean and out of touch. I hope you understand.”

“Actually, we don’t understand at all,” T.J. barked. “We’re investigating a murder and it’s entirely possible that somewhere in Dr. Crawford’s apartment there might be a clue that could lead us to the murderer. Now you wouldn’t want to do *anything* to interfere with our efforts, would you?”

It seemed that Cardone was considering T.J.’s logic. “I’m terribly sorry, but I simply cannot disregard company policy or compromise the confidentiality of any resident.”

“Even if they’re fucking dead?” T.J. shouted.

Cardone backpedaled as if T.J. had pushed him. “There’s no need for cursing, Detective.”

T.J.’s outburst surprised Dupree. He had always been an aggressive interrogator, but Dupree had never seen him react with so much venom. She decided to try a different tactic. “Let me ask you a question, Mr. Cardone. Is there anyone other than Dr. Crawford who has authority to access her apartment?”

He nodded. “Sure. Certain members of our staff—plumbers, electricians—people who provide repair services.” He paused. “And as superintendent, I have master keys for all the residences.”

“So what you’re saying basically is that it’s more important to repair a plumbing leak than to catch Dr. Crawford’s murderer. Is that right, Mr. Cardone?”

“Well, um, not exactly.”

“Mr. Cardone, I assure you, I give you my word that a judge will sign a search warrant in a day or so and I’ll be sure you get a copy. Somewhere out there in the city,” Dupree pointed to the front doors, “Dr. Crawford’s killer is roaming the streets, or maybe buying a plane ticket out of the country. Time is so critical. We don’t want to remove anything. We only want to see if there is something that might lead us to the killer. Maybe there is a message on Dr.

Crawford's answering machine. Maybe somebody's name is written on a piece of paper. You are welcome to accompany us and observe everything we do. And if you get any heat from extending us this courtesy, I will take full responsibility and relieve you of any liability." Dupree firmly squeezed his arm. "Please Mr. Cardone, this is extremely important."

Cardone looked at Dupree and then at T.J. Back and forth, he studied them. Then he looked off into the distance. "I'm truly sorry, but without a signed warrant...I cannot let you into Dr. Crawford's apartment."

It took T.J. a nanosecond to turn around and double-step it to the front

door, long before the doorman could get there.

“Thank you for your time,” Dupree said, eliciting every ounce of willpower to remain civil.

The doorman tipped his hat and opened the door for Dupree. His face looked apologetic. T.J. was standing next to the entrance, staring at the sidewalk.

“Sorry I lost it in there,” T.J. said. “Guess I’m getting crotchety in my old age.”

“Actually, it’s nice to see that you have a pulse,” Dupree said, a big smirk spread across her face. “Maybe you’re just pissed cuz you owe me a drink.” Dupree elbowed T.J. in the ribs. “I think

there's a lemon drop martini in my future." She laughed. "And none of that well crap either. Top shelf or nothing."

CHAPTER SIX

Purposely, Dupree hadn't called Hansen ahead of time to schedule an interview. In some instances, she'd learned, the element of surprise catches the interviewee off-guard, and that's exactly what Dupree hoped to do with Maggie Hansen.

During the short ride from Park Slope to Prospect Heights, T.J. didn't say much except respond to Dupree's questions and comments. His quietness seemed out of character for him. For as long as she'd worked with him, he rarely had a problem speaking his mind. She guessed

that he was still angry because Mr. Cardone would not give them access to Dr. Crawford's place. Or, perhaps he was still pouting over Dupree's earlier scolding. She could not understand why he couldn't just let things go. Though often difficult, Dupree tried not to waste too much time on negative thoughts. Not that she never wanted to smash a bottle against the wall, or get in someone's face and verbally chew them out. In fact, during one particular interrogation, the perp had riled Dupree so much that she'd grabbed him by his shirt collar, yanked him to his feet, and shoved him so hard, he'd lost his balance and fell on the floor. She'd ended up in the captain's office where he proceeded to

browbeat her for twenty, grueling minutes. But when the captain's telephone rang, and T.J. announced that the perp Dupree had roughed up had given a full confession, the captain's rant came to a halt.

Dupree glanced at T.J. "Is your ass still chapped or are you going to let it go?"

"The guy just pissed me off."

"Look," Dupree said. "We'll likely have the signed warrant in a day or two, so there's no need to get your undies in a twist."

"I don't wear undies."

"WTMI."

"Huh?" T.J. said.

"Way too much information."

T.J. laughed. “All kidding aside, it’s way more comfortable to go commando style. Seriously. You ought to try it sometime.”

Feeling mischievous, Dupree gave him a quick glance, winked, and smiled. “I have. In fact, I’m going commando right now.”

Like a cartoon character, T.J.’s chin dropped.

If only I had a camera to capture the look on his face.

Dupree followed 7th Avenue North to Park Place, and headed east towards the heart of Prospect Heights. Known for its tree-lined streets, hundred year old

brownstones, luxury condominiums, and nearly as many museums as Manhattan, Prospect Heights was an upscale area of Brooklyn notable for its cultural diversity.

After parking the car in the underground garage, T.J. and Dupree rode the elevator to the lobby, the only floor the garage elevator had access to. When they stepped off, the security staff—at least four or five of them—looked like members of a SWAT team. Obviously, whoever managed this building was serious about security and the privacy of the residents. Dupree approached the front desk and T.J. just stood in front of the elevator doors waiting.

She flashed her badge. "I'm Detective Dupree and that's Detective Brown. We're here to see Maggie Hansen in Unit 2311." The security guard, grossly overweight, with a "comb-over" hairdo that would make a notable hair stylist commit suicide, studied her ID closely, moving his eyes back and forth from the badge to Dupree's face. He glanced at T.J. "May I see your identification as well?"

T.J. strolled over and showed the man his ID. Again, the security guard thoroughly examined the badge and compared it to T.J.'s face.

"Is Ms. Hansen expecting you?" the fat man asked, his tone less than accommodating.

Dupree urgently wanted to say, “I certainly hope not.” But she didn’t think that would be an appropriate response. “No she’s not.”

“Let me buzz her and tell her you’re here.”

Just then, two of the other security guards appeared; both standing to the side of the fat man.

After about thirty seconds, Dupree feared that Hansen wasn’t home. But then, the security guard said, “Sorry to trouble you, Ms. Hansen, but there are two detectives here to see you. Should I let them come up or send them on their way?”

Dupree glanced at T.J., hoping he wouldn’t react to the security guard’s

comment.

The security guard nodded. “Yes, Ms. Hansen, right away.”

“You’re all set, Detectives. Please take elevator #2.”

When Dupree and T.J. stepped onto the elevator and realized that there was actually an operator—something Dupree hadn’t seen in years—they looked at each other in amazement. Dupree guessed that T.J. was as surprised as she was.

“Floor twenty-three, please,” Dupree said.

The elevator zoomed up to the 23rd floor without stopping once. The doors opened and the operator pointed. “Ms. Hansen’s residence is down the hall on

your right. Have a pleasant day.”

T.J. tugged on Dupree’s arm. “How the hell did he know we were here to see Hansen?”

Dupree shrugged. “Is it my imagination, or is this place a little creepy?”

“Not the word I would use, but yes, it’s like something out of a Tim Burton movie.”

They found unit 2311 and Dupree softly knocked.

Nothing.

She knocked a little harder this time. The door swung open and there stood a young woman wearing baggy lounging pajamas. Her disheveled hair was loosely pulled back into a ponytail. She

held a cup of what looked like coffee in her hand. Except for the out-of-style glasses worn low on her nose, she looked anything but how Dupree pictured a scientist. But after a closer appraisal, Dupree realized that Hansen could star in one of those commercials where the frumpy, plain-looking teacher takes off her geeky glasses, let's down her hair, tosses it from side-to-side, and instantly looks like a movie star. With the right makeup and hairdo, Dupree thought, Hansen could be a knockout.

“Been expecting you,” the woman said, an unmistakable southern twang in her voice. Dupree guessed Virginia or the Carolinas. “Sorry I look so dreadful. Been a little negligent with my personal

hygiene since I lost my job.” She slurped her coffee. “I’m Margaret Hansen. Most people call me Maggie.”

“I’m Detective Dupree and this is Detective Brown. May we speak with you for a few minutes?”

“Do I have a choice?”

Already with the attitude, Dupree thought. “Of course you have a choice. You can speak with us now, or we can get a summons and you can come down to the precinct. Whichever you prefer.”

“I’m sorry for the sarcasm. Since I’ve been unemployed, I’ve been a little on edge. I hope you understand.”

“We do,” Dupree said. “We won’t take up much of your time.”

“I’ve got nothing but time.” Hansen

gestured with her arm. "Come in and have a seat."

Dupree looked around for a place to sit, but mounds of clothes covered the sofa, loveseat, and armchair. It looked like Hansen had heaped every piece of clothing she owned on her living room furniture. Hansen set down her coffee, lifted two armfuls of clothing from the loveseat, and moved them to the sofa.

"I'm really not a slob," Hansen apologized. "I'm just going through all my closets and dresser drawers and getting rid of the stuff I no longer wear or no longer fits me. There's a Salvation Army just around the corner." She pushed a pile of clothes out of the way and sat on the sofa. "Of course, if I don't

find a job soon, I'll be bringing all my clothes to a local consignment shop and eating egg salad sandwiches every day."

Clearly, Dupree thought, Hansen was in no mood to entertain two cops.

Just then, a grey Siamese cat casually wondered into the living room, walked over to Dupree, and sniffed her legs.

Dupree reached down and scratched the cat's head. It instantly started to purr.

"You must be a cat person," Hansen said. "Mickey usually doesn't warm up to strangers."

"Got two cats of my own: Benjamin and Alexandra. Must be that Mickey's picking up their scent."

Mickey meandered over to Hansen and hopped up on her lap.

“So,” Hansen said, “I don’t believe you came here to talk about my lifestyle or my cat. I would guess that you want to talk about Dr. Lauren Crawford.”

Dupree nodded. “That’s correct. Is it okay for us to record this interview?”

Hansen smiled. “Interview? I was under the impression that you were going to interrogate me.”

“Call it what you will,” T.J. said. “We’re merely here to gather information.”

“Fair enough. Tell me what you want to know.”

“How long were you employed at Horizon?” Dupree asked.

“Nearly three years.”

“And during the three years, did you

work directly for Dr. Crawford?” Dupree asked.

Hansen nodded. “I reported to her and only her.”

“Did you interact with Dr. Mason at all?” Dupree asked.

“Not really. He participated in our morning meetings and weekly brainstorming sessions to discuss the latest developments, but the bulk of my relationship with him was seeing him in the break room when I was having lunch or getting a cup of coffee.”

“As I understand it,” Dupree said, “Dr. Crawford and you parted company about a month ago, correct?”

“Thirty-four days ago, to be exact.”

“Can you tell us why Dr. Crawford let

you go?” T.J. asked.

Hansen laughed. “No reason to walk on eggshells here. She didn’t ‘let me go’, she fired me. And you want to know why? Because I missed a deadline by one day.”

“Can you be more specific?” T.J. said.

“I was working on a report that compiled statistics on a specific clinical study, and Dr. Crawford asked that I have these spreadsheets and graphs completed in three days. I worked my ass off to get them done—coming into work early and staying late—but there were a few components missing from the statistics that prevented me from completing the assignment on time. Now

bear in mind that this was through no fault of my own. It was merely a logistic problem. Dr. Crawford asked me to deliver the report to her no later than May 25th at five p.m. and I completed them on May 26th around noon. When I set the report on her desk and apologized for not meeting the deadline, she didn't even make eye contact with me. She just kept her eyes focused on whatever she was reading and said, 'Your work performance is unacceptable. This project is way too important for me to employ slackers. Gather your personal things and I want you out of here in thirty minutes'.

"I was absolutely stunned. Speechless. When I tried to reason with

her, she wanted no part of it. I got loud. She got loud. And the next thing I know, two security guards accompanied me to my office, watched me pack up my personal belongings, and then escorted me to the front door. I felt like a criminal.”

“Did you threaten her in any way?” Dupree asked.

“I called her a bitch and yelled something, but honestly don’t remember what I said. I was a little shell-shocked.”

“The way I understand it,” Dupree said, “you said, ‘You haven’t seen the last of me, bitch’. Do you remember saying that?”

“Look, I don’t know what the hell I

said. But what I do know is that yes, she was a bitch, and no, I didn't kill her." Hansen paused for a minute, her hands trembling. "You know the worst part? I had just turned down a job offer from Hyland Laboratories that would have *doubled* my salary. *Doubled* my salary! What did my selfless loyalty get me? If I don't find a job soon, I'll be living in the streets in six months." Hansen let out a heavy sigh. "You want to know why I passed on this opportunity with Hyland? Because I truly believed in what Dr. Crawford was trying to do. I had heard so many wonderful things about her, that she was very generous and a genuinely nice person. And that may be the case in her personal life. But I can tell you this

—and you can verify my story with anyone who worked for her—in the work environment, she was a different animal. An unforgiving tyrant. A woman so driven by her passion to find a new treatment for cancer that she operated Horizon like a fucking concentration camp. Everybody, and I mean everybody—even Dr. Mason—trembled in their boots when she walked by.” Hansen was noticeably upset. “I moved here from my hometown in Virginia, left my family and lifelong friends to work with Dr. Crawford. And where am I now? Alone and soon I’ll be standing in the breadline.”

Dupree eyeballed T.J. and she could tell by the look on his face that he too

remembered that Dr. Mason had told them that Hyland Laboratories attempted to partner with Horizon, but Dr. Crawford had vetoed the idea.

“Tell me, Ms. Hansen,” T.J. said, “can you think of anyone who would want to physically harm Dr. Crawford?”

“Well, I think most of her employees had fantasies about flattening the tires on her car. But murder her?” Hansen paused again and looked past the detectives at something in the distance. “All I can say is that this woman was on the threshold of discovering something revolutionary. Something that would turn the whole medical industry on its ear. Lots of people in healthcare stood to gain a great deal if Dr. Crawford’s

theories proved true. But there were also those who would lose—and lose big time.”

“Can you explain why?” Dupree asked, reasonably sure she knew what Hansen would say.

“Cancer research, cancer treatment, cancer prevention is a multi-billion dollar enterprise. Do you have any idea how many people are employed just because there is no real cure for cancer? Do you have any idea how much the pharmaceutical industry makes treating cancer patients with chemotherapy drugs? Can you even begin to imagine how many hundreds of research centers there are worldwide just like Horizon that are funded by the American Cancer

Society, the National Cancer Institute, other non-profit organizations, and private investors? How about radiology, oncology, surgery? If Dr. Crawford's clinical research validated her theories, if she had developed an effective treatment for cancer, the entire landscape of cancer research and treatment would dramatically change. I don't buy into conspiracy theories. But when the stakes are this high, anything is possible."

There was a long stillness as both detectives processed Hansen's little speech.

"Do you really believe that there are people or organizations in healthcare that would actually try to suppress the

cure for cancer?” T.J. asked.

“In my opinion, money and power could have corrupted even Gandhi and Mother Teresa.”

Dupree glanced at T.J. and noticed a strange look on his face.

“One more question and we’ll be out of your hair,” Dupree said. “I don’t mean to insult you but I have to ask if you’ve ever been arrested.”

Hansen laughed. “I don’t even kill spiders.”

“Me neither,” Dupree said. “I let my cats take care of them.”

Dupree reached into her purse and handed Hansen a business card. “If anything at all comes to mind—no matter how seemingly insignificant—please

give me a call. We appreciate you taking the time to speak with us.”

Hansen opened the door for the detectives. Dupree stopped and turned around. “One more thing. Did Dr. Crawford and you have any prior conflicts?”

Hansen hesitated for a long time. “I don’t know if I would call our little spats conflicts, but to put it crudely, let’s just say that Dr. Crawford regularly chewed on my ass.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

After interviewing Hansen, Dupree and T.J. compared notes.

“Peculiar gal,” T.J. said. “Not how I pictured a scientist. And that accent just doesn’t fit.”

“That was my immediate thought as soon as she opened her mouth,” Dupree agreed.

“Interesting coincidence that Hyland Laboratories not only tried to partner with Horizon, but also tried to recruit Hansen,” T.J. said.

“I think it’s more than just interesting.”

“I can’t envision Hansen involved in a conspiracy to commit murder,” T.J. said. “Just doesn’t seem the type.”

“Neither was Ted Bundy.”

“Not quite a fair comparison.”

“All I’m saying,” Dupree said, “is that if you want someone dead, you don’t have to look like a murderer to commit murder. You just need a motive and a set of balls.” Dupree’s thumbs went to work on her iPhone.

“And you’re point?”

“Given the right circumstances, good people will do bad things.”

“Seriously?” T.J. said. “You actually believe that Hansen is capable of such a thing?”

“My point is that as harmless as

Hansen may seem, it is *possible* that she somehow is complicit in Dr. Crawford's murder. Remember the Carson homicides? How certain were we that this fragile, old lady wasn't capable of hurting a flea? Turned out that this sweet woman who looked like she could win first prize for grandmother of the year, hacked up her neighbors with an axe, just because their German shepherd kept digging up her tulips. If messing with your neighbor's flowers can get you chopped up into little pieces, maybe getting fired can make you hungry for revenge as well."

"Revenge, yes," T.J. said. "But murder?"

Dupree talked while she still typed on

her iPhone. “Been around dead bodies long enough to know that nothing would surprise me.”

“Okay,” T.J. said. “Let’s get real crazy here. We know that the bald guy videotaped on the surveillance cameras at the crime scene was the killer. So, let’s assume that Hansen hired him to murder Dr. Crawford. Do you know what kind of money we’re talking?”

“Hey,” Dupree said, “Hansen lives in a pretty posh condo. Just because she’s crying poverty doesn’t mean it’s true. Besides, how do we know that the bald guy didn’t have something to gain from murdering Dr. Crawford and taking her computer? And...could be that Hansen wasn’t flying solo.”

“Good point,” T.J. admitted. “First thing tomorrow after our morning briefing, I’ll get a complete background check on Maggie Hansen. Criminal records. Employment history. Credit reports.”

“And if we find anything suspicious,” Dupree said, “I’ll contact Judge Marshall and I’m sure I can twist his arm for a subpoena to check her banking records. I’d like to know if there are any unusual transactions.”

Dupree started the car and drove towards the condo exit, still holding her phone while driving.

“Interesting that Dr. Mason also pointed out that certain people or corporations would benefit from stealing

Dr. Crawford's research records and putting her in an early grave," Dupree said.

"True," T.J. agreed. "But more often than not, homicides usually come down to the most obvious possibility. This whole case might be something as simple as a mugging, sexual assault, or a carjacking gone badly."

"I think it's something bigger," Dupree said. "Something much bigger." She handed the iPhone to T.J. "Don't you just love smartphones? The Internet at your fingertips 24/7."

T.J. seemed not to understand why Dupree gave him her phone. Then he looked at the screen. "Holy shit."

"Hyland Laboratories," Dupree said,

“the company that allegedly offered Hansen a job and tried to partner with Horizon, is the number one manufacturer of Camadyacin, the most widely used chemotherapy drug in the world.”

Dupree eased her car into the heavy traffic and stopped at a red light. “So, where are you buying me that cocktail?”

Dupree sat across from T.J. and tasted her drink. She clicked her glass against his bottle of Heineken. “Thanks for the drink. They taste so much better when someone else picks up the tab.”

She hated the bar scene, all of the games and the lies and the antics. Lonely women searching for “Mr. Right,” and

hopeful men looking for “Ms. Right-Now.” Why would any woman search for a quality man in a bar? Then again, she’d read somewhere that in this day and age, more women than men were on the prowl for one-night stands. It was probably an article in *Cosmo*. Maybe all the steamy romance novels she’d read and the romantic comedies she’d watched on TV with storybook endings were nothing more than fairytales.

Sitting across from T.J., nursing her drink, Dupree once again realized how very little she knew about him personally. Sure, she had heard the gossip about his supposed unsavory reputation with women, and his daily accounts of conquests. But she had no

idea *who* he was, where he came from, or what made him tick. Strange, she thought. How is it possible to work with someone closely day after day for half a year and not really know them?

“I owe you an apology,” Dupree said. “You probably think I’m a fourteen-carat-jerk for lecturing you when we went to interview Dr. Mason, and I’m sorry. I have no right to judge your lifestyle or any part of your personal life. But when it interferes with our job duties, I can’t turn my head the other way. Someday I’m going to need you to watch my back and you’re not going to be there. If this was an isolated incident or a once-in-while-thing, I could let it go, but—”

“I’m not going to bullshit you, Amaris. I have no argument and no defense for my irresponsible actions. I’m truly sorry.” He took a long swig of his beer.

Dupree studied T.J. with probing eyes. He waved to the cocktail waitress and she promptly came to their table. T.J. looked at Dupree.

“Another?” he asked.

Normally, she was a one-drink-gal, but felt a little wound up today. She nodded. “I can handle one more.”

For over an hour, the two detectives talked about their homicide investigation, trying to fit all the pieces in place and noting where pieces were missing. Dupree, quite to her surprise, was nursing her third lemon drop; T.J.

gulped the last mouthful of his fourth beer. Dupree hadn't been this tipsy in years and she actually enjoyed the feeling. It was refreshing to let down her guard. Refreshing and dangerous.

"So, T.J., don't you think it's about time we get to know each other?"

He looked confused. "In case you haven't noticed, we've been working together for six months."

"And that in itself means we know each other? I mean *really* know each other?"

"Where are you going with this, Amaris?"

"I'm only trying to point out that our entire relationship is superficial; business only. I know little if anything

about you, and you know less about me.”

“That’s horseshit.”

“Want to bet another cocktail?”

“You’re on.”

“Okay, smart ass,” Dupree said. “Let’s play twenty questions.” She tapped her index finger on the side of her temple. “When is my birthday?”

He chewed on his lip. “It’s coming soon. In August.”

“August what?”

He shrugged. “Sometime between the 1st and the 31st.”

“Strike one,” Dupree said. “Do I have any siblings?”

“Um, I think so.” More lip chewing. “You’ve got a brother and sister?”

“Good guess. I’m an only child. Strike

two.” She hesitated for a minute, not sure if she should ask this question. But her head was spinning and her tongue flapping freely, so why stop now? “Have I ever been married?”

T.J. rested his chin on folded hands. “Okay, you made your point. I owe you another drink.”

No way could Dupree deal with drink number four. “I’ll take a rain check on that, thank you.”

“Come on,” T.J. taunted. “You can handle one more.”

She’d parked her car in the underground garage in her apartment building, and she and T.J. had walked to Wicked Willy’s in the Village. So having to drive wasn’t an issue for

Dupree. However, the compelling question was whether or not she could *walk* back to her apartment without stumbling like a brown-bag juicehead. But in spite of the alarm going off in her brain, she abandoned her common sense.

“Okay. *One* more and I mean it.”

“You order for both of us. I need to make a little trip.” T.J. excused himself and weaved his way through the crowd toward the bathroom.

While waiting for T.J. to return, Dupree studied the bustling crowd, disappointed at herself that she would go against the grain of her strong feelings, sit in this meat market with T.J., and drink herself into oblivion. Fifteen years ago, yes. But that was another life; one

she'd tried to forget. What was she trying to prove?

T.J. returned promptly and his beer was waiting for him. "So, partner, now that you've made your point and proven that I know nothing about you personally, isn't it time I get to know the *real* Amaris Dupree?"

"Only if I get to know the *real* Theodore Jamal Brown."

"Deal."

"One condition," Dupree said. "If we're going to share life stories, no holding back or filtering. Balls to the walls or nothing."

"I wouldn't have it any other way," T.J. said.

Dupree had never shared her dark and

dubious life story with anyone. Bits and pieces to select people, yes, but never the unabridged version. Maybe speaking the words to another human being would actually be good therapy.

“My saga is a not-so-uncommon story,” Dupree said. “Good kid gone bad. My dad left my mother and me when I was only three years old. Never saw him again. Mom did a great job of managing the household and teaching me strong values. We lived in a beautiful red brick home in Brooklyn. I wasn’t a bad kid, but something happened when I reached my teens. It was as if some demon possessed me on my thirteenth birthday.” Dupree paused and took a sip of her drink. “How my mother dealt with

me without sending me to a boot camp for out-of-control kids is still a mystery.” She paused for a few seconds, not sure she should continue. But the numbing effect of the alcohol was making her feel uninhibited. T.J. seemed to recognize the awkwardness of the situation, but didn’t utter a sound. She noticed that he hadn’t taken his eyes off her face.

“Well,” Dupree continued. “Things heated up just before my seventeenth birthday. My mother and I were at odds every single day. So, I did the only logical thing. I got pregnant by my drug-dealing, pot-smoking, loser boyfriend, left my mother high and dry, and moved in with the father of my baby. We lived

in a slummy apartment in the projects and ate food you wouldn't feed to a hyena. But I never got into the drug scene. Somehow, I found the strength to stay clean. My boyfriend begged, pleaded for me to have an abortion. That's when I knew he and I had no future together. No way was I going to kill my baby.

“There I was, not even seventeen years old, out in the streets with all my worldly belongings stuffed in a backpack, a three month old baby in my womb, and thirty-five dollars in my pocket. I thought about going home, feeling certain that my mother would have taken me in without a second thought. But I was too proud and too

foolish to do the right thing.”

Dupree’s eyes began to gloss over.

“You don’t have to continue, Amaris. Really.”

“I’ve come this far. Besides,” she forced a smile, “think you’re getting off the hook so easily? When I’m finished, it’ll be your turn.”

“I lived in the streets for four terrifying days. How I survived without getting gang-raped or even murdered amazes me to this day. Back then, New York wasn’t like it is today. With no money left and no options, I went to a local police station. I knew if I told them about my mother, they’d put me in a patrol car and take me home. So I lied about my situation and even gave them a

fake name. But I did tell them I was pregnant. They asked lots of questions and I gave them bullshit answers. But they bought it. Next thing I know, they drove me to a shelter for pregnant teenagers. Saint Catherine's Home. The people who ran that place were remarkable people. No questions. No demands. No judgments.

“They told me they would provide care for me while I was pregnant. But once I had the baby, I could no longer live there. One of their counselors asked me what my plans were for my baby. I thought long and hard and asked them if I should keep it or give it up for adoption. This was not a decision anyone could make for me. So, right after I found out I

was carrying a little girl, I decided that she could have a better life if a loving couple raised her as their own.”

Now the cascade of tears began. Dupree covered her face with both hands.

“Why don’t we go outside and get some fresh air?” T.J. suggested.

“I don’t need fresh air. I *want* to finish my story.”

T.J. folded his arms across his chest and eased back.

“I agreed to give up my daughter for adoption through an anonymous program. The adoptive parents would pay all my medical bills and pay for me to get into a decent apartment. Because it’s illegal in New York to accept money from

adoptive parents, we actually structured their payment to me as a loan that I agreed to pay back. I never met the adoptive parents and agreed that once the adoption took place, I would forfeit all my rights to ever see my daughter again. The counselors at Saint Catherine's tried desperately to talk me out of this decision, but my mind was made up. I was certain that my daughter would have a better life without me in it. Of course, because I was not of legal age, I needed my mother's consent. I won't even begin to tell you the details of that conversation, but even though it broke her heart, she signed the release.

“When my daughter was born, the nurse asked me if I'd like to hold my

baby. I wanted to. *Really* wanted to. Just once I wanted to see her face and take a mental snapshot I could remember forever. But I thought it best not to touch her. I was afraid that once I held her in my arms, I'd never let her go. I did get a glimpse of her face and tiny hands and feet when they were cleaning her. But once they whisked her away, that was the last time I ever saw her."

Dupree's eyes again filled with tears.

"I don't know what she looks like, where she lives, or if she even knows I exist. I tried to make contact with the adoptive parents through the adoption agency, but of course the records were confidential and they could not disclose any information. I placed personal ads in

the *New York Times* periodically for the last ten years, hoping that by some miracle my daughter would see the ad and connect the dots. But—”

It took a few minutes for Dupree to regain her composure. Her cheeks were wet with tears and she guessed that she looked a sight with her mascara trailing down her face. She noticed that people passing their table looked at her, shaking their heads, probably thinking that T.J. and she were a couple and T.J. was having the “big talk.”

“Mind if I ask you a few questions?” T.J. said.

“You really want to hear more?”

He nodded. “Did you ever consult an attorney to find out if you have any legal

recourse?”

“Spoke to a few who specialized in adoptions, but they discouraged me even more.”

“How about a P.I.?”

“Hired two of them and spent a lot of money for nothing.”

T.J. looked as if he was searching his brain for more questions.

“Now that my daughter is an adult, my only hope is that she makes an effort to contact me. But again, she may not even know I exist.”

They sat quietly for a few minutes, neither making eye contact.

“So, tell me, Amaris, did you ever reconcile with your mother?”

Dupree focused on her empty cocktail

glass, her hands curled into fists. “The next time I saw my mother, I was nineteen and she was lying in a hospital bed, dying of breast cancer in a hospice facility. You want to talk about guilt? I apologized for hurting her so badly and for giving up her only grandchild. And I made a commitment to her. I promised that I would turn my life around and would make her proud of me. She was too weak to respond, but she squeezed my hand. Ten minutes later...she passed.”

“I’m so sorry,” T.J. said. He reached across the table and laid his hand on top of hers. “It looks to me like you kept your promise.”

“I worked two jobs, buried myself in

student loans, and five years later, I earned a master's degree in criminology from Saint John's University. I made the police force when I was twenty-five, busted my ass for six years, and then made detective. That was five years ago. The rest is history.”

“That is quite a story. The only word that comes to mind is ‘wow’.”

“Well, T.J., you now know more about me than any living human.” For the first time since she began her story, she could feel the tension slowly draining from her body. “I need a favor.”

“Name it.”

“Can we postpone your autobiography for another time? I’m mentally exhausted.”

He looked relieved that she made this request. “I was hoping you’d ask that. I really don’t know if I could handle it right now myself.”

His comment sparked Dupree’s curiosity, leading her to believe that his story might be as colorful as hers. “Let’s get out of here.”

T.J. paid the tab and they went outside into the sultry evening air. As always, 5th Avenue was humming with activity. They moved slowly, side by side, neither uttering a sound.

Dupree stopped and pointed to a high rise building. “That’s it. The place I call home.”

“Nice digs. Way cool to live in the heart of the Village.”

“Thanks to my mother.” Dupree felt a little awkward, like T.J. and she had just gone on a first date. “I’d invite you up, but my eyes are drooping.”

“Maybe another time,” T.J. said.

“Goodnight, T.J. Thanks for being such a good listener.” She inched toward him and kissed him on the cheek.

“Sweet dreams, Amaris. See you in the morning.”

As she walked towards the main entrance to her apartment building, she stopped, turned her head, and watched T.J. walk away. She felt a bit awkward after kissing his cheek and hoped he didn’t think it meant more than an innocent gesture.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Severely hung over, choking down some cop-coffee as quickly as the hot beverage would allow, Dupree entered the main meeting room. Quite to her surprise, T.J. and John Butler, Dupree's favorite CSI agent, were sitting next to each other, coffee in one hand, bagel in the other. Maybe her little chat with T.J. had gotten through to him. She hadn't seen him in the precinct this early in months.

Dupree glanced at T.J. and immediately felt uneasy, as if it was the morning after a one-night-stand, regret

dominating her thoughts. She almost felt embarrassed that she'd shared her entire history with T.J., unedited and without reservation. She suspected that their relationship would never be quite the same from this day forward. Now that he knew so many intimate details about her, how could it ever be the same?

Trying to shake off her feeling of anxiety, Dupree offered a salute with her mug of coffee. "Mornin' guys. I thought all cops ate donuts for breakfast."

"Not when the captain brings in fresh bagels," Butler said.

"What's the occasion?" Dupree asked.

"I think he got laid last night," T.J. said. "How's your head this morning?"

“Need you ask? Next time I stop for one drink with you, I’m sticking with tonic water.”

“T.J. tells me you two had quite a night,” Butler said.

Quite a night?

Given T.J.’s alleged reputation with women, it suddenly occurred to Dupree that Butler might be thinking that the two of them had hooked up last night. Trying to make light of Butler’s comment, Dupree forced a smile. “Let’s just say that I haven’t been that toasted since my high school prom.”

“So I’ve heard.” Butler looked at his watch and stood. “I’d love to chat with you two fine detectives, but I have to earn my keep. I’m meeting with the M.E.

in a few minutes to discuss the autopsy results for Dr. Crawford. Talk to you later.”

“Wish I could join you, but T.J. and I have a crazy-busy day. Call me as soon as you finish with the M.E.”

“Will do.”

As soon as Butler left the room, Dupree looked at T.J. “Please tell me that you didn’t—”

“Give me a little credit, Amaris. I’ll take your story to the grave.”

“Thank you.

T.J. opened a manila folder. “Got some interesting information for you this morning. Some boring but some that might perk you up.”

“I’m listening,” Dupree said.

“I thoroughly checked out Dr. Mason and he’s a model citizen. Lives in a spectacular home in the Hamptons, he pays his taxes on time, belongs to Gulfstream Country Club, been married twice, he’s a widower, has no kids, and no criminal record. He retired from his private practice a couple years ago and joined Dr. Crawford at the Horizon Cancer Research Center.”

“I hope that’s the boring part because I’m yawning here,” Dupree said.

“Here’s the fun stuff,” T.J. said. “Little Miss Maggie Hansen—our straight-laced scientist? She may not kill spiders, but has no problem kicking the shit out of humans.”

“Say again.”

“First off, back in her college days, she got into an argument with her roommate and beat her silly. Roomie ended up in the hospital, and Hansen was arrested and charged with assault. For whatever reason, Hansen’s roommate didn’t press charges, so she got off with a slap on the hand. But get this: the fight was over a guy.”

“I’m not getting the connection,” Dupree said.

“Well, fasten your seatbelt because I’m not done yet. On a hunch, I called Dr. Mason this morning and caught him just as he was leaving the office. He said he had to catch a flight and didn’t have time to talk. But I convinced him to give me a few minutes. So, I asked him why

Crawford fired Hansen. He confirmed that the employment records clearly state that she was fired because she did not meet the deadline to complete the critical report Hansen told us about. But here's the kicker. Remember Jonathan Lentz, Dr. Crawford's ex-boyfriend? It seems that while he was dating Dr. Crawford, he and Hansen had a little fling. Lentz and Hansen met at a holiday get together at Dr. Mason's home. Apparently, Lentz and Hansen really hit it off. Ultimately, their little affair caused great conflict between Hansen and Dr. Crawford. So much so that Dr. Crawford eventually ended her relationship with Lentz."

"You've really done your

homework,” Dupree said. “So it would seem that to save face and preserve her dignity, Dr. Crawford couldn’t just fire Hansen. She needed a reason.”

“Obviously, this whole triangle relationship thing wouldn’t be motive enough for Hansen to murder Dr. Crawford. In fact, Dr. Crawford probably fantasized about murdering Hansen. However, when you add to the equation that Hansen was bitter because Dr. Crawford fired her, she supposedly passed on a job offer from Hyland Laboratories, and said nothing about the assault charge...”

“We need to get Hansen down here,” Dupree said. “Pronto.”

“I’m on it,” T.J. said.

Dupree looked at her watch. “It’s only eight-thirty in the morning and already you got this background info on both Mason *and* Hansen?”

“Hey,” T.J. said. “I rolled on this yesterday.”

“I’m impressed,” Dupree said. “Great detective work.”

CHAPTER NINE

“Maggie Hansen will be here at noon,” T.J. said, looking as proud as someone who’d earned the Medal of Honor. “She came up with a dozen excuses why she couldn’t come to the precinct, but I convinced her that she wouldn’t be happy with the alternative.”

“Great.” Dupree looked at her watch. “That gives me just enough time to powder my nose and puke.”

“Still out of sorts, hey?”

The night had been long and restless. Dupree was still not sure she’d made a wise decision sharing her story with T.J.

But what could she do now? Only hope that he did not betray her confidence. “I’m not the gal I used to be.”

“Well, this should make you feel a little better.” He removed a folded piece of paper from his inside jacket pocket and handed it to Dupree. “The search warrant came through for Dr. Crawford’s apartment.”

“Fantastic. Right after we interview Hansen, let’s head over there.”

“I’m with you.” T.J. turned toward the door but Dupree tugged on his shirtsleeve.

“Are we okay?” Dupree said. “Me and you? I mean my story and all the dirty details of my life don’t change anything between us, right?”

“I did talk to the captain about finding another partner, but no, nothing has changed.”

Dupree was relieved that T.J. could keep things lighthearted. Tension between them would seriously compromise their partnership. The last thing she wanted was for things to get even more complicated. “And by the way, Buster, don’t think for one minute that I’m letting you off the hook. You better stick to our agreement.”

“Agreement?”

“Don’t *even*,” Dupree warned. “You owe me an autobiography. In-depth and personal.”

“Really?” T.J. couldn’t suppress the grin. “I can’t be held accountable for any

commitment I might have made while under the influence.”

“Let me phrase it in a more compelling way,” Dupree said. “If I *don’t* get the story—the *whole* story, not some made-up bullshit—you and a pair of your most prized possessions will be parting company and your voice is going to be an octave higher. Are you getting a visual?”

Before T.J. could answer, Butler hustled toward them.

“Just finished with the M.E. It shouldn’t surprise you that Dr. Crawford died of a gunshot wound to the head. In fact, the M.E. found three .22 slugs in her brain. They entered cleanly through her left temple. It appears that the killer

must have pressed the weapon hard against her head so that the right side was held motionless against the rear door. Because the bullets didn't exit, they did as much damage as a high caliber bullet might do. Maybe more. The M.E. said part of her brain looked like red oatmeal. Probably died instantly."

"Was she sexually assaulted?" Dupree asked.

"Negative. In fact, there's no sign of a struggle. Not even a speck of dust under her fingernails. No bruises. Nothing except the bullets in her head. "

"Anything else?" T.J. asked.

"You got what I got," Butler said. "Have a lovely day."

Considering all of the lies Hansen had told, Dupree didn't believe that she would actually come to the precinct at noon—if at all. But as she reviewed the documents associated with the investigation, T.J. showed up with Hansen by his side.

“Thank you so much for coming, Ms. Hansen,” Dupree said, standing and offering her hand.

Hansen ignored the gesture, noticeably irritated. “Is this going to take long? I have a busy afternoon.”

Dupree could think of at least a dozen one-liners, but maintained her professional demeanor. “We’ll make it as quick as we can.”

Dupree and T.J. led Hansen down a long hall to an interview room. Except for a small beat up table and four chairs, the dimly lit room was pretty much empty. In the center of the table were two miniature microphones—one facing the detectives, the other pointing toward Maggie Hansen. Dupree glanced up at the video camera mounted on the wall near the ceiling to be sure the red light was flashing.

“Do I need a lawyer?”

“Do you want one?” T.J. asked.

Hansen seemed to be weighing the option. “I can request one at any time, correct?”

“Absolutely,” T.J. said.

“Okay, let’s get this over with,”

Hansen said.

T.J. eyed Dupree and she knew that he was signaling her to take the lead.

“Do you know a Jonathan Lentz, Ms. Hansen?”

The question didn't even faze her. “I do.”

“What is your relationship with him?” Dupree asked.

“We had an affair.”

“Can you be more specific?”

“We met. We liked each other. So we fucked. That's not a crime is it?”

Dupree could tell that this would be a difficult interview. “When you two met, did you know that Mr. Lentz was romantically involved with Dr. Crawford?”

“*Involved*? They were dating, but no one considered it a *real* relationship.”

“Why do you say that?” Dupree asked.

“Because Dr. Crawford didn’t have time for a relationship. She didn’t have time for anything but her research. Jonathan was really frustrated. When we met at the holiday party, we both felt an instant chemistry.” She rolled her eyes. “What is it with these frigid broads that they think they can keep a man without spreading their legs? I mean really. Isn’t this the twenty-first century?”

“Sounds to me,” T.J. said, “like you resented Dr. Crawford.”

“You mean pity? As I told you when we first spoke, I admired what Dr. Crawford was trying to do

professionally. But working for her was hell.”

“Did you believe that Mr. Lentz would end his relationship with Dr. Crawford to be with you?” Dupree asked.

“I’m not an idiot. I knew that I was just a temporary plaything to Jonathan. But that was okay. Because all he was to me was a good lay.”

Hansen rolled up her shirt sleeves and wiped one across her forehead. “Doesn’t the city pay for air conditioning? This place is like a sauna.”

Dupree noticed faded black and blue marks on both of Hansen’s wrists. “Tell me, Ms. Hansen, what are those marks

on your wrists?”

For the first time since entering the interview room, Hansen actually looked amused. “Oh, they’re just the remains of a memorable evening.”

That Hansen would answer the question so casually puzzled Dupree. She had expected a more challenging response.

“Can you elaborate?” Dupree said.

“Let me put it this way. Johnny enjoyed being creative in the bedroom, so even though I wasn’t totally comfortable with his requests...”

“For how long did Mr. Lentz and you...date?” Dupree asked.

“Until he said that he wanted to reconcile with *her*.”

“I sense a great deal of hostility in you,” T.J. said. “Perhaps enough to make you want to hurt Dr. Crawford?”

Hansen stood up, knocking her chair backwards. “I think this interview is over.”

“We’re *not* finished, Ms. Hansen,” Dupree said. “Now *please* sit down.” Dupree gave her a frigid stare.

Hansen hesitated, but then picked up the chair and sat down.

“Let me rephrase the question,” T.J. said. “Did you think about physically hurting Dr. Crawford?”

“You two really don’t pay attention, do you? Like I said before, I would guess that everyone who worked for Dr. Crawford fantasized about smacking

her.”

“But you had more motivation to harm her than your colleagues did.”

“What the *fuck* is that supposed to mean?”

“Well,” T.J. said, “Dr. Crawford fired you, she reclaimed her boyfriend, and you passed on a career opportunity with Hyland Laboratories that would have doubled your salary. If that isn’t the Triple Crown, I don’t know what is.”

Hansen’s eyes were seething. Dupree expected another outburst.

Before Hansen had a chance to calm down, Dupree kept the pressure on. She never bought into the good-cop-bad-cop strategy. Through her interrogative experiences, bad-cop-bad-cop was

much more effective. If you can rile a suspect's emotions and keep the pressure on, sometimes they say something stupid—something that incriminates them. And once the words slip off their tongue, they're already a matter of record.

“Have you ever beaten up another person?” Dupree asked.

Hansen actually forced a laugh that was more mocking than sincere. “Forgive the cliché, but I wouldn't hurt a fucking flea. I am a *total* pacifist.”

“I think that Tammy Chambers would disagree,” T.J. said. “You might know her as Tammy Holtz.”

The color drained from Hansen's face. “That was a...long time ago. We

were...just kids. I don't even remember what the fight was about.”

“Let me refresh your memory,” T.J. said. “Tammy and you were roommates and were dating the same guy. Starting to come back to you?”

“Okay, okay, so we got into a bit of a pushing match—”

“You broke her nose, Ms. Hansen,” Dupree said. “Sounds like more than a little spat.”

“I didn't do *anything* to hurt Dr. Crawford. So, if you have evidence to the contrary and want to charge me with something, go ahead and do it. Otherwise, this interview is over.”

“Just one more question,” Dupree said, “and you can be on your way.

When we spoke to you last time, you led us to believe that you were a few months away from poverty. Are your bank records going to support that statement?"

"I'm done with this conversation!" Hansen stood up and made a beeline for the door, slamming it behind her.

"Geez," T.J. said. "She didn't even say goodbye."

"And I was just getting warmed up," Dupree said. "Any thoughts?"

"She's one screwed up scientist, but I don't think she has the stomach for murder."

"But she still might have dirt under her fingernails," Dupree added. "Let's go check out Dr. Crawford's place."

T.J. and Dupree cruised up and down Plaza Street West until they found a parking spot reasonably close to Dr. Crawford's building. As soon as they reached the front door, the unusually tall doorman they'd seen before opened the door and greeted them with a warm smile.

He tipped his hat. "You two are the detectives who were here the other day, aren't you?"

"We are," Dupree said. "We'd like to speak with Mr. Cardone, please."

Before the doorman had a chance to pick up the telephone and page the superintendent, Mr. Cardone stepped off the elevator. He was about to head in the other direction, but when he spotted the

two detectives he did an about-face.

“Good afternoon, detectives.” His voice sounded cheery. “I hope you’re staying cool on this muggy day.” He planted his hands on his hips. “I would suspect that you’re here because you have the warrant for entry into Dr. Crawford’s apartment?”

T.J. handed Cardone the warrant. Cardone unfolded it and carefully studied it. “I’m not going to waste your time reading all the fine print. I’ve seen what I need to see. Follow me, please.” T.J. and Dupree stepped into the elevator with Cardone. The superintendent pushed the button for the twenty-second floor.

“Have you made any headway on the

murder investigation?” Cardone asked.
“Any suspects?”

“Sorry,” Dupree said, “but we really can’t discuss the investigation.”

“I understand.”

Along the way to Dr. Crawford’s floor, the elevator stopped several times and passengers got on and off. Cardone knew each and every one of them, and addressed the passengers by name. After what felt like a ride to the top of the Empire State Building, they finally reached their destination. Cardone led them down a long corridor until they reached 22C.

Cardone unlocked the door. “I don’t think you detectives need my assistance. Take as long as you like, but please turn

the deadbolt clockwise when you leave to be sure the door locks. Good luck.”

The detectives slipped on latex gloves.

Dupree turned the doorknob and pushed open the steel door. T.J. and she stopped cold before stepping over the threshold.

“Looks like someone beat us to the punch,” Dupree said. “This place looks like a tornado blew through it.”

Dupree speed-dialed Butler’s phone number. He picked up on the first ring. “Hey, John. It’s Amaris.”

“What’s up?”

“I need a CSI team dispatched to 1550 Plaza Street West ASAP. It’s in the Park Slope area. T.J. and I just gained entry to

Dr. Crawford's apartment and somebody turned the place upside down. Call me when you get here and I'll meet you in the lobby."

"We'll be there as soon as we can. I know I don't have to remind you, but please don't touch—"

"Save your speech for the rookies."

When Dupree hung up and turned around, T.J. was still standing in the doorway perusing the main living area.

"Well, it seems that whoever murdered Dr. Crawford," Dupree said, "wasn't satisfied with her computer and external drive. Or they didn't find what they were looking for."

"Should we go in and poke around before the crew gets here?" T.J. asked.

“Of course.”

Dupree and T.J. gingerly navigated their way into the apartment, finding it difficult to weave through the rubble without disturbing anything. The sofa was turned upside down and the fabric on the underside of the sofa was torn open. Like fallen soldiers, several lamps lay on the floor. A desk was turned on its side, the drawers pulled out, lying on the floor with the contents scattered about. A flat screen TV lay on the floor, its screen shattered. They wandered into bedrooms, bathrooms and looked in closets. But nothing struck either of them.

“Wow,” Dupree said. “It almost looks like whoever did this was more than

looking for something.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you think that a thief would take her jewelry? There’s a pile of it lying on the bedroom floor and a few pieces look expensive.” Dupree, moving towards the kitchen, pointed. “Look at that Nikon camera sitting on the kitchen table. Why would a thief leave that behind?”

Dupree walked over to the refrigerator and studied the front of the door. It was covered with everything from photos, to little pieces of paper with phone numbers, to magnets from the local pizza joint, insurance agent, and a real estate broker. There was also an assortment of sticky notes attached to the

side of the refrigerator. Dupree studied each and every one of them. About to walk away, a light blue sticky note caught her eye.

“Check this out.”

T.J. made his way to the kitchen.

“Remember what Lentz told us about Dr. Crawford believing that someone in a white Ford was following her?”

“What about it?”

Dupree pointed to the blue sticky note
“White Ford Fusion. JAF-9401.”

CHAPTER TEN

Dupree was amazed that she could get a cell phone signal while T.J. and she rode the elevator down to the lobby of Dr. Crawford's building. She called Brenda—her go-to-gal—and asked her to run the plate number for the Ford Fusion. When the elevator doors opened, David Cardone, the superintendent, was standing near the entrance speaking to the doorman. As soon as Cardone noticed the detectives, he abruptly ended his conversation and walked over to them.

“Well, detectives, did you find

anything unusual in Dr. Crawford's residence?"

"Other than the fact that it looks like Godzilla and King Kong had a little party up there," T.J. said, "everything looks fine."

T.J. explained to Cardone what they'd found.

"I don't understand," Cardone said. "No one has been in there since Dr. Crawford's murder."

"I'm going to disagree with you on that one," Dupree said. "The place is completely trashed."

"I don't know how this happened," Cardone said. "If it's as bad as you say, whoever broke in must have made a racket."

“Based on the condition of the place,” Dupree said, “I’d say that your assumption is correct.”

“But this doesn’t make any sense,” Cardone said. “First of all, nobody gets into any residence without a key. Our deadbolts are nearly impossible to jimmy. And second, Dr. Crawford’s neighbors, two senior citizens who have zero tolerance for noise, complain about *everything*. I don’t know how Dr. Crawford’s apartment could have been ransacked without her neighbors hearing anything.”

“I guess we’ll have to speak to the neighbors and see what they have to say.”

“I’m afraid that’s not going to be

possible, Detective Dupree. You see, the Johnsons left early this morning for a European vacation and won't return for five weeks."

"Terrific," Dupree said.

Just then, the doorman opened the front door for John Butler and two other CSI agents.

"Nice to see you could make it," Dupree said. She turned toward Cardone. "This is John Butler, one of our forensic experts. He and his team are going to need access to Dr. Crawford's apartment so they can dust for fingerprints and search for anything unusual."

"You can take it from here, John," Dupree said. "T.J. and I have bigger fish

to fry.”

“Must be time for your midday snack,” Butler said. “You two have the good life.”

“That we do,” T.J. said. He turned towards Dupree. “What’s your pleasure, partner? Sushi? Italian? Thai?”

“Let’s try that new seafood restaurant in the Village.”

“Perfect!”

Just as Dupree and T.J. were about to leave, Dupree remembered something. “Mr. Cardone, I noticed surveillance cameras in the hallway not far from Dr. Crawford’s residence. Can we get a copy of the videotapes for the last forty-eight hours?”

“That’ll take a little maneuvering, but

sure. I'll get them ASAP."

"If John Butler's still here," Dupree said, "just give them to him. If he's not, you still have my phone number, correct?"

"Sure do, Detective. As soon as I give your colleagues access to Dr. Crawford's apartment, I'll contact the security company and see how quickly I can get you the videotapes."

"Tell them it's a police matter and it's urgent," T.J. said.

Dupree and T.J. headed for the front entrance and the doorman promptly opened the door. Dupree looked at Butler. "Call me if you stumble on anything worthwhile, John."

He saluted her like a boot camp

recruit. “Roger that, Sir.”

“Butler’s a real ball buster, isn’t he?”
T.J. said.

“Yeah, but you gotta love the guy,”
Dupree answered. “He knows his job
inside and out.”

Dupree and T.J. waited in the idling
car with the air conditioner on full blast.
Knowing that Brenda would be calling
any minute with info on the Ford Fusion
plate number, Dupree thought it best that
they just sit tight.

“Feels like it’s flirting with triple
digits today,” T.J. said.

“One-oh-two to be exact. The
humidity isn’t making it any better.”

“Do you have plans for the holiday?” T.J. asked.

At first, Dupree didn’t answer. She just studied her fingernails. “Every year on July 4th, I participate in the Making Strides for Breast Cancer five-mile walk in Central Park—in memory of my mother.”

“I thought all the Making Strides events across the country were coordinated for May or September,” T.J. said. “Why the hell would they schedule the walk in the middle of summer?”

“I think it’s because Rita Sinclair, founder of the Sinclair Memorial Hospital, which specializes in treating breast cancer, opened the facility on July 4th. I guess it’s in commemoration of her.

Besides, it kicks off at six a.m., long before the crushing heat sets in. It's more of a casual walk than a marathon. And there are a dozen booths set up along the way providing water, Gatorade, and dampened washcloths. Far as I know, no one's ever died from the walk, so unless someone has a heat stroke, the local American Cancer Society will continue organizing the event for July 4th."

"I'm impressed, Amaris. Quite the noble gesture on your part."

"It's not really that noble." She chewed on her lip. "It's the one day a year I get the double whammy."

"I don't understand."

"I told you my mother died of breast cancer. But what I didn't tell you is that

my daughter was born on the 4th of July eighteen years ago. The 4th has never been a good day for me. Obviously. In fact, after I complete the walk, I usually stay home by myself and spend the day crying, drinking, and feeling sorry for myself, asking the same haunting question: Why did I give up my baby? I keep praying that by some miracle, she'll find me or I'll find her. But for all I know, she may not even know I exist."

"I'm so sorry, Amaris. I wish there was something I could do."

Neither spoke for a few minutes. Something struck Dupree that had never crossed her mind before. What if—she could barely reflect on the thought—her daughter wasn't even alive? A chill

shivered through her body as if her blood had turned to ice. She couldn't even imagine such a devastating possibility. Still, she couldn't dismiss it.

"How about you?" Dupree asked.

"Big plans for the 4th?"

"Nothing special. Just driving to Jersey for a barbeque. My parents have a little bash every 4th of July."

"Sounds great." Dupree wished that she had a family to bond with on the holidays.

"Here's a thought," T.J. said. "Why don't you drive to Jersey with me and join the party? I'd love for you to meet my family. I'm not leaving until noon so it would give you plenty of time to finish the Making Strides walk and freshen up."

How about it?”

“Thanks for the offer, but I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“Would you really rather be alone?”

“Actually, I would.” She thought about that for a minute, tempted to accept his offer, but was afraid at some point she’d completely breakdown and didn’t want to subject anyone to her private pity party.

“Okay, partner, I won’t push it. But if you change your mind—”

“I won’t.”

Just then, her phone sang, “Set Fire to the Rain,” by Adele.

“Hi, Brenda. What’s cooking?”

“I ran the plate number through DMV and the registered owner is Ivan Tesler.

His last known address is—”

“Hang on Brenda, let me get something to write on.” Dupree pointed to the glove box. “There’s a pad and pen in there,” she said to T.J. “Hand them to me, please.”

“Okay, Brenda, shoot.”

“The DMV records show him at 751 Cedar Street, Unit 3, in Yonkers. I also checked with the Tax Assessor’s office and he doesn’t have an account with them so he’s probably a renter.”

“Thanks for getting back to me so quickly.”

“Hey, Girlfriend, that’s what I do. You didn’t ask for this, but I ran his name through the New York and FBI criminal records database, and also

through the AFIS archives. He's been a busy boy. Been arrested and charged with assault, breaking and entering, auto theft, resisting arrest, and petty larceny. But get this: he's *never* been convicted."

"Must have a hell of an attorney."

"Or he's connected to somebody powerful."

"I appreciate your help, Brenda. Have a nice 4th." For the first time since beginning the investigation, Dupree felt as if she'd uncovered a significant lead. But she tried to harness her enthusiasm. How many times in the past had a supposed good lead taken her to a dead end street?

From her past experiences, Dupree estimated that the ride from Park Slope to Yonkers could take as long as two hours.

“Ready for a long trek?” Dupree said to T.J. who had already reclined his seatback.

“Not really, but do I have a choice?”

“Sure. You can catch a cab. Or better yet, thumb a ride.”

“Funny girl. Have you ever thought about being a stand-up comedian?”

“No, but I guess I might consider it when my twenty years are up.”

T.J. brought the seatback to its upright position. “Seriously? You’re going to go the twenty-years-and-out route? Taking your measly pension and running with it?

I figured you for a lifer.”

“That’s the current plan but you never know what tomorrow might bring. Circumstances change. Objectives change. Life situations change.” Dupree glanced at T.J. and noticed a stern look on his face. “And how about you? What’s your plan?”

He seemed nervous, fidgety.

“Everything okay?” Dupree asked.

“Ever since we met for a few drinks and you told me your story, I’ve had a strong urge to share mine with you.”

It seemed like an inappropriate time, but who was she to judge T.J.’s motives? Dupree reached over the center console and squeezed his arm. “Hey, I’ve got broad shoulders and empathetic

ears. Besides, we've got a long ride, so if you feel like talking, I feel like listening."

"Where do I start?"

"Makes no difference. Just start."

She could see that his mind was racing, maybe searching for the right words.

"I grew up in Long Branch, New Jersey, not far from the Atlantic. I can't give you a hard-luck story about a poverty-stricken childhood, or a detailed account of my rebellious teenage years. You see, Amaris, I lived an abundant life. My father was a doctor—a cardiologist to be more specific—and my mom was a high school guidance counselor. I wanted for nothing. In fact,

my parents spoiled me rotten.

“Although they pushed me hard to attend college, I made up my mind to join the Navy when I graduated from high school. My big dream was to become a Navy Seal. I passed all of the fitness and underwater tests, and aced the written exam. Once I was accepted into the program, they shipped me to the Naval Special Warfare Center, Coronado, near San Diego. That’s when I found out what it’s like to be in hell. From beginning to end, the training lasts for twenty-five weeks. Most guys drop out within the first four weeks, when your shoulders feel like they’ve been pulled out of their sockets, when your knees make popping sounds you never

heard before, when your muscles ache and throb so fiercely, you live on pain pills.”

T.J. closed his eyes, his face looked as if he were in pain right now. “Week number twenty is what got me. I tore my ACL and it was lights out. They booted me from the program. No second chances. Twenty friggin’ weeks of brutal training. Five weeks away from the finish line, and I crapped out.”

“Wow,” Dupree said. “I can’t even begin to imagine what that must have felt like.”

“So close. So damn close.”

Neither spoke for a long, awkward few minutes.

“That had to be the worst experience

of your life.”

“Not even close.” He dropped his chin to his chest.

Dupree was completely absorbed, feeling that the rest of the story was going to be difficult for T.J.

“My parents, once again, tried to convince me to attend college. But I wanted no part of it. My brain was too messed up. So, for the next few years, I hopped from job to job—construction, car sales, bank teller—never really finding anything that felt like the right fit. Then something amazing happened. I met a woman who absolutely knocked me off my feet. I know it sounds so cliché, but if there is such a thing as love at first sight, then Haley and I were living proof.”

T.J. paused and gazed out the windshield. By the uptight look on his face, Dupree had a sense that he was dealing with some powerful emotions.

“Haley and I got married less than a year after we met. My parents offered some financial assistance, so we bought a small fixer-upper home in Jersey City. Haley was a legal assistant and I settled in a job selling BMWs. I wasn’t crazy about it, but I was a pretty fair salesman, the money was really good, and we were living a decent life.”

T.J. appeared to be deep in thought, as if he were playing a game of chess and couldn’t figure out his next move. He seemed gripped by some powerful anxiety.

“The BMW dealer I worked for put together a weekend tent sale. I liked these events for the money, but hated the hours. Friday, Saturday, and Sunday from eight a.m. to midnight. I had an awesome day on Saturday. Sold eight cars and earned over six grand in commissions. I couldn’t wait to get home and share this with Haley. We never had a real honeymoon so we were saving for a Caribbean cruise.

“By the time I wrapped up my last deal of the day, I didn’t leave the tent sale until one a.m. I was going to call Haley and let her know I was on my way, but I figured she was probably passed out in front of the TV waiting for me to come home, so I didn’t want to

disturb her.

“When I walked in the door, the TV was on and the volume way too high. But I knew my Haley. She could sleep if a bomb went off under her pillow. I checked out the couch, certain I’d find her curled in the fetal position. But she wasn’t there. I turned off the TV and couldn’t figure out why she’d left it on and went up to bed.”

T.J. tightened his fists.

“I tiptoed into our bedroom. There was enough light spilling in from the hallway for me to barely see that Haley was lying on her back sleeping on the bed. But she wasn’t under the covers. At first glance, it didn’t hit me, but then I remembered that Haley *hated* sleeping

on her back. She had always been a side-sleeper. I figured that she must have been really tired and didn't care what position she was in as long as she was sleeping.

I flipped on the nightlight in the master bath just so there was enough light for me to see what I was doing. As I began to undress, I glanced over at Haley..."

T.J. wiped the corners of his eyes with his hands and his voice was unsteady.

"I noticed that she was completely naked. I went to her and gently touched her arm. That's when I saw it...my necktie wrapped around her throat. No pulse. No breathing. When I turned on the light, I could see by the bruises on

her breasts and upper thighs...that she'd been ...raped." He paused. "Now I understood why the TV was blaring. They didn't want anyone to hear her..."

Dupree didn't utter a sound, her mouth wide open. She tried to swallow, but couldn't come up with even a drop of saliva. She recalled the rape-murder. It had been in the headlines for weeks and had made national news. "I...I don't know what to say, T.J."

"Forensics determined that it was more than one assailant. Probably three." He looked out the side window. "They also discovered that Haley was about six weeks pregnant."

At this point, Dupree wished there was a way to ease his pain, but all she

could do was show him as much empathy and compassion as possible.

“Odd how composed I remained after discovering her body. My brain completely shut down. I could feel nothing—not even hatred for the animals who’d killed her. But then, a few months later, it walloped me. My emotions woke up and I went into a total tailspin. Had it not been for my parents, I’d be in a padded cell wearing a straitjacket.

“I didn’t do much for the next few months except watch TV and constantly ask God, ‘why her?’

“Once I cleared out the cobwebs, I felt a strong pull towards law enforcement. So, I got a degree in criminology, landed a job as a beat cop,

and eventually made it to detective. Maybe that's why I'm so intense when I'm interrogating suspects. When I look into their eyes, I ask myself, 'was it you?'"

Dupree still didn't know what to say. In a situation like this, what *could* she say? Right now, all she wanted to do was hold T.J. tightly and cry with him.

"Working as a cop, trying to make some sense of it all, hoping to make a difference, just didn't seem enough. I needed to do more. So, a few months back, shortly after we became partners, I volunteered to work at the Rape Crisis Center in Harlem. I'm not really qualified to be a counselor, but they're so desperate for help they accepted my

application. I helped them out on an ‘on-call’ basis. As it turned out, they always called me for graveyard shifts—midnight to four a.m. Needless to say, working the demanding schedule as a detective and then dealing with the Crisis Center, my body and brain were on total meltdown. That’s why I was always coming in late and walked around like a zombie.

“When you finally called me out on my poor performance, I realized that I couldn’t continue this pace or I’d jeopardize my career. So, I stopped volunteering.”

Dupree’s stomach twisted into a knot. Guilt ridden, feeling as if it was her fault that he quit volunteering for something

he felt so passionately about, she thought she would throw up. “T.J., I...I didn’t mean—”

“It’s not about you; it’s about me. I’m glad you kicked me in the ass. I was headed on a crash course and needed someone to shake some sense into me. You did exactly that, and that’s what partners are supposed to do.”

“Is there any way you can work just a few hours a week?” Dupree asked, feeling stupid as soon as she asked the question.

“It wasn’t just the impossible schedule that got to me. Can you even begin to imagine what it’s like to spend sixteen to twenty hours a week dealing with rape victims?” He fixed his eyes on

Dupree's. "Each woman I spoke to reminded me of Haley, made me relive the nightmare. Had I not resigned, I would have ended up in Bellevue."

If ever there was an awkward silence, Dupree thought, this was it.

"So, Amaris, maybe now you understand why I didn't carry my weight for such a long time, why I played the role as some carefree playboy. It was my way of hiding the truth. I'm sorry. I placed you in an impossible situation."

"T.J., I have no words to express—"

"I understand."

"Does anyone else in the department know about this?"

"Other than my parents, you're the only soul on Earth."

Having shared the intimate details of their lives, Dupree felt a visceral connection to T.J.—something she'd never felt before. Maybe now, their partnership would reach a new level of mutual trust and respect.

“Well, there you have it, Amaris. The whole agonizing story. Unabridged and unedited.”

For the remainder of the ride, the few words they shared were strictly incidental.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Dupree and T.J. finally arrived at Ivan Tesler's apartment. Dupree looked up and down the street but didn't see a white Ford Fusion. That didn't necessarily mean he wasn't home. Most of the big homes in this neighborhood had multiple apartments and some of the garages were behind the structures, hidden from the street.

To the left of the front door, Dupree saw an intercom system with four call buttons and the name of each resident glued to the side of each button.

"Interesting," Dupree said. "There's

no name next to unit 3.”

She pushed the button.

Nothing.

She pushed it a second time.

“Who is it?” The man’s voice crackled through the small speaker.

“New York City Police. We’re looking for Ivan Tesler.”

No response.

Dupree pushed the call button again.
“Hello.”

Still no answer.

“I’ll stay here,” Dupree said, “You go around back.”

T.J., showing his athleticism, didn’t even use the steps. He held onto the wobbly railing with one hand, braced himself, and like a gymnast, sailed over

the railing and landed a perfect 10 on the driveway. Watching T.J. hit the asphalt, thinking about the ACL he had torn, Dupree didn't quite understand why he'd risk another knee injury. He took off, sprinting toward the back of the home. When she heard T.J. yelling, she hopped down the front steps and jogged to the driveway. T.J. was nowhere in sight. Dupree drew her handgun, pulled back the slide, and cautiously moved towards the backyard.

“T.J.,” she yelled, picking up the pace.

“Back here!” he shouted. When Dupree reached the end of the driveway, she cautiously came around the corner. About twenty feet away, she saw a man

lying face down on the grass, just past the end of the sidewalk. T.J. straddled the man's body and was in the process of cuffing him. Dupree eased off the trigger and holstered her handgun.

“What have we got here?” Dupree asked, slightly out of breath. She recognized Tesler from his rap sheet.

“I caught him hopping out of the back window and tackled him just before he made it to the fence.”

T.J. stood the man upright. “Detective Dupree, meet Ivan Tesler—in the flesh.”

The man was tall and lean, his hair greasy. It hung in his eyes and over his ears. Pockmarks covered his cheeks. Tesler's jeans looked like they'd never been washed and printed on the front of

his grease-stained T-shirt were the words, “Bad Ass Motherfucker.”

“It doesn’t bode well that you tried to run away,” Dupree said.

“Why are you pigs always hassling me?”

“Maybe because your rap sheet is thicker than a New York City telephone book.”

“What the hell is a rap sheet?”

With that statement, Dupree guessed that Tesler probably wasn’t a scholar.

T.J. pushed the man forward. “Let’s take a ride, Bad Ass.”

“Hey you,” Dupree said, “Why the hell did you jump over the porch railing? Weren’t you afraid of reinjuring your knee?”

“The Navy doesn’t agree, but my orthopedic surgeon says my knee is one-hundred percent.”

“Well, you sure proved that.”

With Ivan Tesler restlessly fidgeting in the back seat, his wrists still handcuffed, Dupree and T.J. headed back to the 40th precinct. Their car was not equipped with a protective cage separating the front and back seats, so for most of the ride, T.J. sat sideways and kept his eyes on Tesler. Although neither of the detectives talked much during the ride—they didn’t want to unintentionally disclose anything about the investigation—Tesler had no problem expressing his

irritation.

“Are we almost there?” Tesler repeatedly asked. “I really have to take a piss.”

“Go ahead. Let it go,” T.J. had answered. “The upholstery is Scotch-Guarded. Just don’t shit your pants.”

Dupree just shook her head.

She couldn’t wait to get Tesler in an interrogation room. Although she had no strong evidence to link Tesler to Dr. Crawford’s murder, at the least, he was indirectly involved. Why else would he have been following her?

Just as Dupree was searching for a parking spot, Adele once again was singing “Set Fire to the Rain” on Dupree’s cell phone.

“Go ahead, John, make my day.” She did her best Dirty Harry impersonation.

“Sorry, Clint, but I’ve got nothing for you. We dusted every flat surface, doorknob, door jamb, counter top, drawer handle—everything in the entire place—and other than Dr. Crawford’s and Jonathan Lentz’s prints, we found nada.”

“Terrific,” Dupree said. She could understand why Lentz’s fingerprints showed up, but it seemed odd that nobody else’s did. Based on what she already knew about Dr. Crawford and the fact that she probably didn’t do much entertaining, finding no other prints seemed reasonable. She glanced at Tesler, not wanting him to hear any more

of her conversation with Butler. He was dancing around in the backseat as if he'd drunk a pot of espresso. Obviously, he really had to pee. "Where are you, John?"

"In the lab."

"T.J. and I just pulled in the garage. We'll see you in a few minutes."

"I'll be waiting with bated breath."

Dupree eyed T.J. and shook her head ever so slightly, signaling him that Butler and company hadn't found any prints. He acknowledged with a tight-lipped nod.

T.J. got out of the car, opened the rear door, pulled on Tesler's arm, and not-so-gently yanked him out of the backseat. With one detective on either side of Tesler, they led him to the entrance.

Once inside, they walked the suspect down a long hallway and stopped in front of the bathroom door.

“Still have to go potty?” T.J. asked, his tone sounding like a parent speaking to a child.

“Like a fucking racehorse.”

“You escort our friend here to the little boy’s room,” Dupree said. “Once he’s done with his business, sit his ass down in room 3. I’ll be in the lab talking to Butler.”

Just as Dupree turned to walk away, Tesler said, “Hey, Detective.”

Dupree turned, cocked her head, and stared at him.

“I’ve got a great idea.” Tesler flashed a dirty little grin and exposed a mouthful

of tobacco-stained teeth. “Instead of this homo playing with my dick, why don’t you hold it and help me pee?”

Dupree glanced at T.J. and knew that he wanted to backhand the asshole, but he kept calm.

“You really want me to hold it for you?”

“Sure do.”

“Tell you what, Mr. Tesler. You just lost your bathroom privileges. We’re going to sit you and your piss-filled bladder down in an interrogation room all by yourself, and we’ll be back to speak with you in about an hour. Feel free to piss and shit all over yourself. How’s that, Mr. Bad Ass?”

Tesler’s defiant look faded to alarm.

“You *can* ’t do that.”

“Watch us.” Dupree grasped one of his arms and T.J. held onto the other. With her free hand, Dupree pushed on the center of his back, and moved him down the hall. She stopped in front of room 3 and opened the door.

“Have a seat, Bad Ass,” Dupree said. “And don’t worry about making a mess. The chair is aluminum and the floor is water-resistant vinyl. Piss as much as you like.”

“Stop! Please! I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to—”

“Should we give him another chance?” Dupree asked T.J.

“I don’t think he deserves it.”

Tesler squeezed his knees together,

obviously in pain and ready to let loose.

“Are you finished fucking around with us?” Dupree asked.

“I swear.”

Dupree nodded and T.J. led Tesler to the bathroom.

Chuckling to herself, Dupree made her way to the lab. How many times had she encountered a “Bad Ass” like Tesler—defiant, uncooperative, and rebellious—only to learn that even tough guys can be humbled?

She found John Butler viewing the surveillance tapes from Dr. Crawford’s apartment building. Before speaking to him, Dupree looked around the room, totally intrigued with twenty-first century forensics. Much of the equipment was

foreign to her. As a homicide detective, she had little time to learn the intricacies of crime scene investigation. She knew the basics, of course. But the highly technical stuff she left to guys like John Butler. Some detectives spent more time in the lab than in the field. But not Dupree. She enjoyed working the streets, loved the chase.

She snuck up behind Butler and squeezed the top of his shoulders. He was so intensely studying the surveillance tapes and startled by Dupree's sneak attack that he nearly fell backwards.

“You scared the friggin’ crap out of me, Amaris. Are you trying to give me a heart attack?”

“Sorry, John. I just couldn’t resist.”

“I owe you one,” Butler warned.
“And you know I’ll get even.”

Of this, she had little doubt. “So what’s the deal?”

“Unless the murderer has a twin, the guy who ransacked Dr. Crawford’s apartment is the same guy that killed her.” Butler pushed a few buttons.
“Check this out.”

Dupree stood behind Butler and watched the video in slow motion. “So he has the same build as our suspect and he’s wearing a Yankees’ cap and dark sunglasses.”

“But we can’t see the back of his neck,” Butler added, “because just like in the garage, he’s wearing the collar up

on his leather coat.”

“Still with the leather coat,” Dupree said. “In sweltering heat no less. This guy is right out of a Soprano’s episode.”

“With or without seeing his neck, he is obviously our guy.”

Dupree and Butler silently watched the video again, looking for anything that might offer a clue.

“Well,” Butler said, “at least we know that he used Dr. Crawford’s key to unlock her door.”

“But how did he get in the building and past the front desk? And what the hell was he looking for that would force him to turn the place upside-down?”

“We can verify this with Cardone, the super,” Butler said, “but this building

has tenant parking underground, and I'd bet a king's ransom that when the killer snatched Dr. Crawford's keys, he also got a bonus: a key to the elevator in the garage."

"Makes sense," Dupree said.

Butler wagged his finger at Dupree. "When have I *ever* been wrong?"

"I'll make a list and give it to you in the morning."

Dupree heard heavy footsteps behind her. She turned and saw T.J. "How's Bad Ass doing?"

"Warm and comfy," T.J. said. "His bladder is much happier now."

Butler looked at T.J. "I'm not even going to ask."

Dupree updated T.J. on the

surveillance video.

“Maybe Bad Ass knows who the bald guy is,” T.J. said. “Why don’t we go rough him up?”

“Let him stew for a while,” Dupree said. “It’ll give him a little time to think about his grim future.”

Dupree and T.J., their desks side by side, took a few precious moments and worked on their daily reports, a part of homicide work that Dupree hated. Detectives had to document *everything*. From the odometer reading on their Crown Victoria, to expense reports, to a thorough recap of the day’s activities. Dupree often wondered how soon before

the hierarchy of law enforcement would require detectives to record their bathroom breaks.

Dupree glanced up at the clock. "I think he's had enough time to marinade."

"I'm ready whenever you are," T.J. said.

Dupree picked up the manila folder holding all the details of the investigation and tucked it under her arm. When they unlocked the door and entered the interrogation room, the strong stench of body odor hit the detectives in the face. Dupree guessed that Tesler's body hadn't seen a bar of soap in a long time. Tesler sat stone-still, his hands securely handcuffed to the metal ring screwed into the front of

the wooden table. T.J. removed the cuffs and Tesler, noticeably relieved, massaged his wrists. Dupree and T.J. sat down and assumed their positions opposite Tesler. Dupree looked up at the video camera to be sure the red light was flashing.

“Mighty kind of you to remove the handcuffs,” Tesler said, his tone edged with sarcasm. “What did you think I was going to do, crash through the locked door like Superman?”

“Tell me,” T.J. said, “why did you run away when we buzzed your intercom and said we were New York City police?”

“Is this where you guys go through your good-cop, bad-cop routine?”

“Actually,” Dupree said, “we’re both bad asses, just like you. We just don’t have T-shirts to brag about it. Now answer the question: why did you run?”

“Cuz I’m sick and tired of cops hassling me. Every time a bike gets stolen in the neighborhood, you come knocking on *my* fucking door.”

“Maybe that’s because your criminal history is a city block long. You aren’t exactly a Boy Scout,” Dupree said.

“I ain’t never been convicted of nothing.”

“Well,” Dupree said, “that’s about to change.”

Tesler sat forward and grinned. “You guys are fishin’ in the wrong pond. I ain’t done nothing.”

“What kind of car do you drive?” T.J. asked.

“A Ford Fusion. Always buy American. Don’t want any part of Jap or Nazi cars.”

Dupree opened the folder. “What’s your license plate number?”

“I ain’t got it memorized. But I’d be happy to go look and get back to you.”

“What do you do for a living?” Dupree asked.

“I’m an unemployed brain surgeon.”

Dupree looked at T.J. “We’re wasting our time with this nitwit. Let’s just throw him in a cell, go have some dinner, and come back in the morning. I think he needs some time to think.”

“But tomorrow is the 4th of July,” T.J.

said

“You’re right. I guess we’ll come back in a couple of days.”

T.J. and Dupree stood. Before they even took a step, Tesler said, “You can’t just leave me here. You ain’t charged me with nothing and you got no grounds to arrest me. I know my rights.”

“Your rights?” Dupree said. “Then I guess you know that we can hold you for up to seventy-two hours.”

“That’s fucking bullshit!”

“Let me enlighten you, Mr. Bad Ass,” T.J. said. “When you jumped out the back window, you went from person of interest to suspect in the matter of a felony. In other words, we own your ass for another seventy hours, and we don’t

have to charge you or arrest you. If you'd like to call your attorney, we'd be happy to arrange that."

T.J. picked up the handcuffs lying on the table, stepped behind Tesler, and handcuffed him.

"Wait!" Tesler yelled.

"It's too late," Dupree said. "This is not like baseball; you don't get three strikes."

"We don't need some jive-ass-punk busting our balls," T.J. added. "We've got better things to do."

They stood Tesler upright.

"I'm sorry! I'll cooperate. I swear."

"I'm not convinced," Dupree said. She tightened her grip on Tesler's bicep. "What do you think, T.J.? Should we

give this pinhead another chance?”

“I’d rather have dinner and come back on the 5th.”

Dupree pretended she was carefully weighing the two options. “Are you going to answer some questions, or would you rather spend the next three days locked in a cage?”

“I just want out of here, so ask me what you need to and I promise I’ll lay straight with you.”

“Okay,” T.J. said. “Let’s test that promise. How do you earn a living?”

“I don’t have a regular day job. I go to garage sales and estate sales. I don’t buy nothing expensive. But if I can pick up a lamp for ten bucks and sell it for fifteen, I’m happy. I paid my dues though. Lost

my ass on lots of stuff. But then I learned what things I can turn for a profit and what ends up in the trash. It's a real art. I'm sure you heard the saying, 'One man's junk is another's treasure'."

"So," Dupree said, "buying and selling odds and ends generates enough income to pay your rent, buy food and clothes, drive a twenty-five-thousand-dollar car, and pay for insurance?"

"Except for buying the car, I live a pretty simple life. I have a little money set aside and that gets me through the rough times."

"And of course," T.J. said, "as a model citizen, you file a tax return every year and pay your fair share to the feds and the state, right?"

Tesler didn't utter a sound.

"You know what I think?" T.J. said. "I don't believe that one truthful word came out of your mouth all day. So, I'm going to ask you one very simple question, and I want you to think long and hard about the answer, because if any more bullshit comes out of your mouth, you're going to get acquainted with the inside of a prison cell for a long time."

Dupree had witnessed T.J.'s interrogation tactics many times. It amazed her how he could turn a hard-ass suspect into a sniveling crybaby.

"Okay, Mr. Bad Ass, here's the question: Who hired you to tail Dr. Lauren Crawford?"

Tesler's body froze; his eyes were wide and he was blinking furiously. Dupree watched him closely and could see his Adam's apple rising and falling as he forced one swallow after another.

"Um... I don't know what you're talking about. I never heard of no Dr. Crawford."

Tesler was noticeably anxious, frightened actually. Dupree wasn't sure if he was rattled because of the legal consequence or something more sinister.

"Well, partner," T.J. said to Dupree, "I think we're done for the day."

"What about me?" Tesler asked. "Are you releasing me?"

T.J. laughed out loud. "Oh, we're going to release you all right." He

looked at the wall clock. “In about sixty-eight hours when you’ve had some time to ponder your pathetic future, we’re going to release you to an IRS special agent. And when they’re finished with you, they’ll toss you to the New York State Department of Taxation.”

T.J. stood, slammed his palms on the table, his face inches away from Tesler’s. “When the tax folks are finished reaming your ass, believe me, you’ll never be constipated again. Say goodbye to your apartment, furniture, whatever money you’ve got socked away, and that nice shiny car. But here’s the best part. After they’re done with you, we get to charge you as an accessory to murder.”

Tesler popped up like a jack-in-the-box, almost stumbling backwards. “Accessory to *murder*? What the *fuck* are you talking about?”

“We know that you were tailing Dr. Crawford,” Dupree said. “And reporting back to the killer. That connects you to the crime as an accessory.”

T.J. eyed Dupree. “What do you think? Ten, fifteen years?”

“Actually, considering the stature of Dr. Crawford and the incredible loss to the scientific and medical community, I think the D.A. will go for twenty-five to life.”

“We’ll send in an officer and he’ll show you to your new quarters. See you in a couple days.”

As soon as they stepped into the hall, Dupree softly clapped her hands. “Bravo, partner. I think you just earned a nomination for an Academy Award.”

“Don’t nominate me yet. Not until we get a name out of Mr. Bad Ass.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

As if God Himself had waved His hand and ended the oppressive heat wave, the morning of the Making Strides for Breast Cancer walk was nearly perfect. The temperature hovered at seventy degrees, the humidity surrendered to dry, refreshing air, a light breeze blew out of the northeast, and the sky was blue and cloudless. The relief from the gripping heat could change in a heartbeat, but Dupree hoped it would remain comfortable at least until she crossed the

finish line.

The crowd, spirited and energized, appeared to be the biggest Dupree had ever seen. She stood in front of the portable stage, side by side with other supporters, and watched cancer survivors one by one hold a microphone, take center stage, and tell a brief story about their journey from cancer to remission. As each survivor ended her speech, the roar of the crowd and robust applause was nearly deafening. The height of the frenzy came when a man stood on stage and reminded everyone that breast cancer did not play favorites. When he announced that he'd been cancer free for nine years, the crowd howled with cheers.

Dupree struggled through the walk with greater difficulty than years past, but made it to the finish line. When she got back to her apartment, she drank a quart of Gatorade, picked up her two cats, set them on her bed, and curled up next to them.

She couldn't stop thinking about T.J.'s story, unable to imagine what it must have been like for him to discover that someone had raped and strangled his wife. And even worse, to learn that it wasn't just one assailant. What horrific images did T.J. have to deal with every day of his life? How did he find the strength to move on after experiencing something so unimaginable?

Although nowhere near as traumatic

as T.J.'s ordeal, Dupree knew all too well what it felt like to be wounded by the loss of a loved one, to lie in bed every night wishing that she could go back in time and make peace with her mother long before cancer had swept her away. And of course, not a day went by that Dupree didn't think about her daughter, how foolish she had been to give her up, not knowing anything about her, what she looked like, or if she was healthy and happy.

Today, yet another painful 4th of July, it took Dupree ten minutes to cry herself to sleep.

In the middle of the night, just about

three a.m., Dupree, parched and dehydrated, made her way to the kitchen for some water. She filled the tall glass from the plastic jug in the fridge, and nearly guzzled the glass empty. As she poured another glass, Ben wandered out of the bedroom. Attracted to any unfamiliar object, he went into the foyer, and sniffed something sitting on the carpeting, just inside the door. From where she stood, it looked like a letter-size envelope, one of those cardboard envelopes with a little tab at the top to zip it open.

Dupree walked over, picked it up, and carefully examined the front of the envelope. It had been delivered to her through a company called Express

Delivery Service. It was addressed to: Detective Amaris Dupree. Across the bottom of the envelope in big, bold letters it said: URGENT MATERIAL ENCLOSED.

Obviously, the courier had delivered it to the front desk in the lobby and when one of the staff members saw that it appeared to be urgent, instead of calling her in the middle of the night, someone had slipped it under her door. About to zip it open, she noticed the sender's name in the upper left hand corner.

She froze.

Shocked, alarmed, and utterly perplexed, Dupree gawked at the name with teary eyes. Her hands were trembling so severely, she almost lost

her grip on the envelope.

The sender's name was Mary Dupree, her dead mother.

Disoriented and overwhelmed with alarm, she wrapped a robe around her shivering body, put on a pair of slippers, and took the elevator to the lobby, envelope in hand. Mirrors were mounted on the back wall of the elevators, and when Dupree saw her reflection, she did her best to tame her wild hair, but it proved hopeless.

Charlie was working the overnight shift, sitting behind the front desk reading a *Sports Illustrated* magazine—swimsuit edition. She immediately caught his eye.

“Is everything okay, Ms. Dupree?” he

said as he dropped the magazine and stood up.

She pointed to the envelope. “Know anything about this, Charlie? Someone stuffed it under my door.”

He ran his finger down the front page of the log book they used to track all visitors and deliveries. “Well, it was delivered a little before eleven p.m., which is very unusual. Most couriers stop their deliveries at nine p.m. This envelope was delivered just before I started my shift. I hope it was okay for us to put it under your door. Someone from the earlier shift must have done it. I’d be happy to do a little checking and let you know for sure.

“That’s not necessary, Charlie. Thank

you. Did the delivery guy sign the log book?"

"Sure did."

"Can I have his name, please?"

Charlie studied the log as if he were examining Dead Sea scrolls. "It's hard to read but it looks like Juan Vargas."

"Thanks, Charlie."

Once back in her apartment, Dupree fell into her leather recliner holding the mysterious envelope in her hand. She wanted to open it, but didn't have the courage. What if it was a toxic poison? After much thought, she felt her paranoia was a little over the top and decided to open it. If it was a harmful substance, it wasn't going to leap out of the envelope like a poisonous snake.

She slipped on a pair of Playtex gloves, and slowly zipped open the envelope. Very carefully, she looked inside and found a plain white envelope. She held it up to the light and could see something inside, which appeared to be a three-by-five piece of paper or index card. She shook the envelope and could not see any foreign substance inside.

Dupree tore the end of the envelope, careful not to disturb or damage its contents, reached in, and pulled out a piece of paper folded in half. She could see something written on the paper. She held it in her hand for several minutes, feeling silly that a little piece of paper could make her so anxious. Then, she opened the note and gasped.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

After a horribly restless night, and a pounding headache this morning, Dupree couldn't take her mind off of the unexplained envelope. Either someone from her past—a criminal she had put behind bars—or someone associated with the Crawford murder was trying to intimidate and distract her. She didn't want to admit it, but whoever sent the letter had accomplished their goal. She'd placed the envelope and note inside a plastic bag and set it on her

nightstand. She glanced at the note and couldn't help reading it one more time.

Ever eat cat stew?

The mere thought of it both frightened and infuriated her. And of course, seeing Mary Dupree as the sender spooked her almost as much as the note inside the envelope.

Her cop instincts made her feel strongly that the envelope had something to do with the Crawford investigation. It now seemed obvious that the momentum of the investigation was leading T.J. and her closer to the killer.

Time for her to get her act in gear. She took a ten-minute shower, dressed, fussed with her hair the best she could, kissed both of her kitties on the head,

and headed out the door with the plastic bag and its contents.

In desperate need of high-test coffee, Dupree decided to swing by Starbucks on her way to the precinct; caffeine always worked better than pain killers. In Manhattan, there were three possible choices for parking a car: finding a free spot on the street, which was as rare as a royal flush, stuffing quarters into a metered street spot, or using a private parking lot that charged a minimum of ten bucks an hour. Dupree was in no mood to cruise up and down the street, so she pulled into a small lot and the attendant was happy to hand her a parking ticket.

As she approached the entrance to

Starbucks, only a short walk from where she'd parked, Dupree thought about scrapping the idea altogether and settling for some nasty cop-coffee when she saw ten or more people in line waiting to place an order. Just as she was ready to turn around, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed two vaguely familiar faces. Sitting at a table for two, tucked away in the corner, holding hands like two high school sweethearts, she saw Jonathan Lentz and Maggie Hansen. Their body language and facial expressions were clearly those of two people who were more than just friends.

Interesting.

She thought about confronting them, if for no other reason than to see the looks

of horror on their faces and to hear their lame excuses about why they were together. But that would not be wise. What would it accomplish? She decided to contact each of them individually and ask them to come to the precinct to answer a few more questions. That's when she'd blindside them. The element of surprise always gave cops an edge. At this juncture, Dupree wasn't quite sure how she'd handle the situation, what questions she'd ask. They hadn't broken any laws and had the right to be in a relationship. Considering that Lentz lived in Queens and Hansen in Prospect Heights, it seemed odd to Dupree that their rendezvous was in the Village. Under the circumstances, meeting

someplace away from their turf made sense.

Dupree did an about face and scurried to her car before Lentz and Hansen had a chance to see her. She grudgingly paid the attendant ten dollars for the five minutes she'd parked there. Ready to drive off, she thought it might be a good idea to hang around and wait for them to leave. After all, the parking lot still owed her fifty-five minutes. Who knows? Maybe they'd do something to spark her curiosity. Not wanting to leave T.J. wondering why she hadn't yet made it to the precinct, Dupree called him on his cell.

"Got everything under control there, partner?" Dupree said. She thought about

telling him about the letter but decided to wait until they were face to face.

“Did you get caught in traffic or meet an old boyfriend?” T.J. said.

“Neither. I stopped at Starbucks for a latté and stumbled upon something interesting.”

“Do tell.”

She told him about seeing Lentz and Hansen.

“Ain’t that a kick in the pants,” T.J. said.

“I’m going to stick around until they leave. I want to see if they part company with a peck on the cheek or they lock lips. You mind waiting for me?”

“Got plenty to keep me busy,” T.J. said. “I’ll keep Tesler on ice until you

get here.”

“Great. Talk to you soon.”

Dupree eased back and rested her head against the headrest. When she felt her eyes drooping, she decided to sit upright to help her stay alert.

After sitting in her car for nearly thirty minutes, getting constant dirty looks from the parking attendant, Dupree spotted Lentz and Hansen strolling out the front door of Starbucks, holding hands. She scooched down in the driver’s seat and watched them walk to the far side of the same lot where she had parked. The lovebirds approached a white car. A giant-size SUV obstructed Dupree’s view, so she could not see what type of vehicle they were driving. She could just

barely see the top of Lentz's head disappear and assumed he'd gotten into the car.

Dupree waited patiently for them to back out so she could get a better look at the car. And then. But one minute led to two and after five minutes, she could only assume that they were making out or engaged in a deep conversation. What else could they be doing? Finally, she saw the white car slowly inching its way out of the spot. Once backed out, Dupree could see that Lentz was the driver and Hansen was sitting in the passenger seat. Dupree checked out the back of the car, shocked to see that Lentz was driving an Audi A8. And it looked showroom new. Dupree didn't know a lot about cars, but

she suspected that this particular model came with a hefty price tag.

Lentz headed for the exit. Dupree removed the digital recorder from her purse, turned it on, and recited the license plate number. With intentions of following them, she eased her car forward, but just before she had a chance to turn towards the exit, a four-door F-150 crew cab sitting next to her backed out of his spot, preventing Dupree from driving towards the exit. He moved the big truck so slowly and cautiously it seemed as if he was driving a ten-wheel dump truck. By the time the man maneuvered the big truck and pointed it where he wanted to go, Lentz and Hansen were gone.

Damn!

As Dupree pulled out of the driveway and merged into traffic, the Audi nowhere in sight, she thought about the hard luck story Lentz had shared with T.J. and her.

Not bad for a schmuck working two jobs, living in a crappy apartment in Queens, and barely making ends meet.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

David Taylor, CEO of Ritter-Stone Pharmaceuticals, gathered with his colleagues behind closed doors in Taylor's expansive den. He'd always felt that calling his thirty foot by forty foot retreat a den, seemed overtly understated. The room was rich with custom designed furniture, solid cherry covered walls, hand-carved crown moldings, and it was exquisitely decorated. It was a haven where a busy executive could sit in front of a crackling

fire on a cool evening with the latest edition of Forbes magazine, pour himself a snifter of Louis XIII cognac, light up a Montecristo cigar, and unwind from the demands of his stressful career. This fourteen thousand square foot mansion was one of six homes he owned around the world. But of all his homes, even the villa in Tuscany, this was his favorite; a tranquil, remote hideaway.

“How was your flight, Ed?” Taylor asked Mason.

“No complaints. How could anyone take issue with flying first class? Of course, I wasn’t thrilled with flying a helicopter from San Juan here. But it sure beat one of those puddle jumpers. I appreciate the accommodation.”

“That’s the one drawback with Anguilla. Unless you come to the island by boat, you can only fly directly from Puerto Rico in a turbo-prop plane. Not the most comfortable way to travel.”

“Anguilla is a beautiful island,” Mason said. “From the air, it looks like a Thomas Kinkade painting.”

“Indeed,” Taylor said.

He pointed to the other two men seated at the long table. “That’s Warren Price, CEO of Global Pharmaceuticals, and next to him is Clarence Sadowski, CEO of Fowler-Paine.”

“It’s my pleasure to meet you gentlemen,” Mason said.

“First of all,” Taylor said, “let me extend our deepest sympathy for the

tragic death of Dr. Crawford. I was stunned when I heard of her murder.”

“She was a real pioneer,” Sadowski said. “Light years ahead of anyone else in medical research.”

“Her death,” Price said, “must have placed your entire operation in a tailspin.”

“You have no idea,” Mason said. “Forgive the vulgarity, but Horizon went from a well-oiled machine to a cluster-fuck.”

“Well, hopefully,” Taylor said, his eyes locked on Mason, “we can come to terms and help put Horizon back on track.”

“That’s why I’m here,” Mason said.

The room was quiet for a few

moments.

“With all due respect,” Mason said, “and no reflection on anyone here, I feel pigeonholed, like I no longer have the option to select a partner based on due diligence and objective evaluation. I’m not suggesting that you gentlemen and your respective companies would not be extraordinary partners. Only that I’m really backed in the corner and the clock is ticking.”

“We appreciate your situation,” Taylor said. “But we also have a major concern. If we agree to a partnership, the last thing we want is competition. How can we be sure that whoever stole Dr. Crawford’s computer hasn’t already hired an I.T. whiz to access the hard

drive and retrieve all the data? In this day and age, even the most secure encryption system can be hacked.”

“Every encryption system has vulnerabilities,” Mason agreed. “However, Dr. Crawford’s computer employs a unique failsafe. If anyone enters the wrong codes or makes an attempt to override the passwords, the hard drive will crash, and none of the data will be recoverable. Dr. Crawford was obsessed with protecting every piece of her data, no matter how inconsequential. She insisted that every computer in the research center be set up with this system.”

“That’s reassuring, Ed,” Taylor said, “but it’s still something for us to be

concerned about.”

“Let’s get down to brass tacks and try to strike a deal,” Price said.

“Before we do,” Taylor said, “I have to confirm something with you, Ed. A while back, Hyland Laboratories was trying to negotiate a deal with Horizon. As I understand it, Dr. Crawford vetoed this joint venture. Is that correct?”

Mason blinked with surprise. “I don’t know who your sources are, but I applaud them. Only Michael Adelman, CEO of Hyland, Dr. Crawford, and I were involved in these talks. No one else at Horizon or Hyland was privy to this information.”

“In the new millennium,” Taylor said, his tone somewhat arrogant, “no

communication is so private that it can't be compromised."

For several minutes, a lull fell over the room.

"So tell me gentlemen," Mason said. "If we agree that a joint venture makes sense for both of us, what can you contribute to Horizon?"

"Prior to this meeting," Taylor said, "my colleagues and I spent a great deal of time determining what our role might be and what kind of deal we feel would be equitable for both Horizon and us. No matter how promising, at this juncture no one knows for sure if Dr. Crawford's theories will prove true. There is a great deal of risk for us. That said, we're still prepared to invest a considerable

amount of money to fund this project.”

“And what do you deem a considerable amount of money?” Mason asked.

“Our three companies combined are willing to invest twenty-million dollars in this project. We also want to move the facility to a different location with state of the art equipment. We all feel strongly that we should hire at least another twenty five people. We want to accelerate the research, get the approval of the FDA, and begin marketing and distribution in less than two years. In return for our financial and professional support, we want fifty-one percent control of Horizon.”

“Your proposal far exceeds my

expectations,” Mason admitted. “But I just don’t know if I can give anyone controlling interest in this project. In all fairness, as generous as it sounds, I have to speak to Michael Adelman from Hyland before I make a decision.”

“We understand, Ed. You have to make the best choice for Horizon. But maybe we can sweeten the deal and move forward. Would you mind giving me a few minutes to speak with my colleagues?”

“Not at all.”

Taylor pointed to the door. “You can make yourself comfortable in the living room while we talk. It won’t take very long.”

Mason left the den and waited

patiently in the living room. After what seemed like only five minutes, Taylor opened the door and invited him back in.

“If we can come to terms,” Taylor said, “our attorneys can draft the contracts in a few days. In the meantime, as a good faith gesture, my colleagues and I are willing to wire one-million dollars into any account you designate.” Taylor wagged his index finger at Mason. “Let me be clear. This is in no way a bribe or meant to be anything underhanded. Even if you decide not to partner with us, you still keep the money.” Taylor winked. “Consider it an *incentive*.”

Mason’s mouth hung open. “I don’t know what to say, David. Your

willingness to—”

“Just say that we have a deal so we can wrap this up and kick things into high gear.”

“As tempting as your generous offer is, in clear conscience, I can’t accept any money directly. Ethically, it would really bother me.”

“I understand,” Taylor said. “In fact, I really admire your integrity. Not too many people on this planet would turn down a million dollars—no strings attached.”

Mason stood and extended his hand toward Taylor. “Right after I meet with Michael Adelman, I’ll make a decision.”

Taylor offered his hand. “I look forward to working with you, Ed.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

By the time Dupree arrived at the precinct, her aching temples had settled down. She found T.J. sitting at his desk, with his face buried in paperwork. Nonchalantly, she opened her desk drawer and slid the envelope inside. She intended to drop it off at the lab as soon as she spoke to T.J. about it.

“Good morning,” Dupree said.

T.J. looked up at her. “How was your latté?”

“Place was too busy. Besides, I didn’t want the lovebirds to see me.”

“See anything else interesting?”

“Only that Lentz may not be as poor as he claimed to be.” She folded her arms across her chest. “Our boy was driving a sparkling new Audi A8.”

“That car sells for over 50k,” T.J. said

“Actually,” Dupree said, “I checked the Internet and it retails for over sixty.”

“Think he stumbled upon a windfall?”

“Maybe he had a big payday. I got his license plate number so I’ll ask Brenda to run it for us.”

“If Lentz or Hansen owns the Audi, we’ll have good reason to request a subpoena to access their bank accounts,” T.J. said.

“My thought exactly.” Dupree rested her butt against T.J.’s desk. “And it

wouldn't be a bad idea to subpoena their cell phone records.”

“Do we have enough justification to get both?” T.J. asked.

“I think I can convince Judge Marshall. He's been very cooperative in the past.”

“What's that all about?” T.J. asked. “Got nude pictures of him and a teenage boy?”

“Let's just say that I helped his daughter out of a very sticky situation a few years back, so he feels somewhat indebted to me. As long as I don't abuse our relationship, or ask him to really push the legal envelope, I pretty much can rely on him to help me out.”

“Nice to have a connection on the

bench.”

“It doesn’t suck.”

T.J. stood. “Ready to rough up Tesler?”

“Before we do, can we chat in private?”

“Of course.”

They entered a vacant interview room and sat opposite each other. T.J. drummed his fingers on the table. “What’s up?”

She gave him all the details of the letter she’d received.

“Cat stew?” T.J. said. “How disgusting. Have you spoken to anyone from Express Delivery?”

“I will as soon as the lab checks it out for prints or whatever else they can

find.” She looked past T.J., her mind racing with so many possibilities—none of which were particularly appealing. “Any thoughts?”

“It seems more than likely that someone involved in the Crawford murder sent it to keep you off balance.” More finger drumming. “But there are other possibilities. Over the last ten years you’ve put a lot of criminals behind bars, and not all of them served long terms in prison. Maybe someone who just got out or a friend of someone still locked up wants to mess with your head.”

“I know it wouldn’t be difficult to find out my mother’s first name, but how many people other than personal friends

know I have two cats?”

That seemed to stump T.J. “Hm. Never thought of that.”

“Well,” Dupree said, “at this point all we can do is speculate. Why don’t you grab Tesler while I bring the envelope to the lab and I’ll meet you back here in a few?”

Dupree was already waiting in the interview room, seated at the table, when T.J. walked in with Tesler. Dupree gave Tesler a onceover and noticed that he looked like a homeless man who hasn’t had a decent meal or shower in weeks.

Amazing what a few days in the

slammer can do.

Rather forcefully, T.J. sat Tesler down opposite Dupree and took a seat beside her. Dupree made sure that the microphones were positioned properly.

“So, Mr. Tesler,” Dupree said, “how do you feel about your new accommodations? Think you’d be content in a twelve by twelve cage for the next twenty or twenty-five years, eating cafeteria food, and showering with a bunch of horny convicts?”

“I ain’t done nothing wrong, and you can’t prove shit. So either let me go, or charge me with something. I got nothing more to say to you two assholes. If you don’t let me go, I want to see a lawyer.”

Dupree was surprised that nearly

three days in jail and the prospect of being charged with accessory to murder hadn't taken the fight out of Tesler. He was tougher than she'd thought.

"Well, then, Mr. Tesler," Dupree said, "I guess you're free to go."

She removed the handcuffs.

T.J. looked at Dupree as if she'd lost her mind.

Tesler stood. "How the fuck do I get home when I got no money and no car?"

"Not a problem, Mr. Tesler," Dupree said. "There are two IRS tax fraud investigators waiting for you outside the door. I'm sure they'd be happy to give you a ride—but it might not be to your home." She forced a laugh. "They're not particularly fond of tax evaders."

The color drained from Tesler's face.
“Are you fucking with me?”

“Open the door and see for yourself,” Dupree said. “But if you walk out that door, no deals, no second chances, no mercy. You're going down.”

“So, you threw me to the dogs just because I make a few bucks selling odds and ends out of my trunk?”

“No,” Dupree said. “We threw you to the dogs because you've been busting our chops since the moment we met.”

Tesler stood silent for several minutes, staring past the two detectives, his hands deep in his pockets. “Can you give me some time to think?”

“Three days wasn't enough?” T.J. asked.

“It’s different now that my nuts are in a vice.” Tesler twisted his neck from side to side. “Can you call off the dogs for a little while?”

Dupree glanced at her watch. “We’ll be back in a few hours. I’ll keep the IRS guys on ice. But remember this: when we get back, the bullshit is over. We want to know *everything* you know. Or else.”

After Dupree and T.J. returned Tesler to lockup, they headed for Brenda’s cubicle.

“Nice play with the IRS investigators,” T.J. said. “You had me going there for a few minutes.”

“Try to keep up, okay?”

T.J. laughed. “I guess that’s why we call you the Velvet Hammer. You walloped the shit out of Tesler before he even knew what hit him. Kudos to you.”

“Once he’s had a little more time to think,” Dupree said, “hopefully he’ll spill his guts.”

“I think he’s going to sing like a blue jay.”

Brenda’s chubby fingers were dancing on her computer keyboard when Dupree and T.J. approached. She stopped typing and swiveled her seat toward the detectives. Brenda stood just under five-foot-tall and carried an extra thirty pounds. On the corner of her desk she kept a candy bowl full of chocolate

treats. In theory, they were there for her colleagues to enjoy. But Brenda, addicted to chocolate, grazed on the candy all day long.

“Well, if it isn’t the lovely Amaris Dupree and her worldly sidekick, Prince Charming.”

“Hey, Brenda,” Dupree said. “How goes it?”

“You know what they say about the police department. They beat the horse that works and let the lazy one sleep. I guess I’m the stupid horse that works. Barely have time to go wee-wee.”

“We can come back a little later if you’re too busy,” Dupree offered.

“No matter when you come back, I’ll likely be busy, so what can I do to help

you?”

Dupree removed the digital recorder from her purse and pushed play.

“Audi A8, Jonathan Lentz is the driver. Plate number KMZ-9255. Check with Brenda”

“Can you run that plate number through DMV and tell me what you come up with?” Dupree said.

“Right away,” Brenda said.

Dupree and T.J. waited while Brenda worked her magic. Her fingers banged on the keyboard as if she were angry with it.

After two minutes, Brenda pointed to the computer screen. “Voila. 2014 Audi A8. Pearl white. Plate number KMZ-9255. Registered and titled to Jonathan

F. Lentz, 3548 118th Avenue, Queens, New York. No bank liens. That what you need?"

"You're the bomb, Brenda," Dupree said. Lentz seemed the most unlikely to own such a car. She felt certain that somehow ownership of the A8 connected to the investigation. Dupree looked at T.J. "Feel like taking a ride to Queens?"

"Wouldn't miss it for the world."

"You drive and I'll call Judge Marshall on our way to Lentz's to see if I can get him to move quickly on a subpoena." Dupree grasped T.J.'s arm. "Oh, and one more thing: I'd really like to get there in one piece, so can we keep it under a hundred miles an hour?"

T.J. smirked. “You spoil all my fun.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

“So, you think we’ll find Lentz home in the middle of the morning?” T.J. asked.

“That’s where we found him last time, no?” Dupree answered. “We don’t know where he works, but I did run into him at Starbucks in the middle of the morning romancing Hansen. So, I have a strong feeling we’ll find him on his sofa, eating chocolate bonbons, and watching soap operas. Personally, I think the guy’s a big bag of wind. I actually bought into his hard-luck story when we last spoke

to him. I felt sorry for the loser. Just goes to show what a poor judge of character I am.” She grinned. “Present company excluded, of course.”

T.J. turned onto 118th Avenue and slowed to a crawl across the street from Lentz’s place. In front, Dupree spotted the new Audi. T.J. pulled to the curb marked, “Commercial Loading.” He flipped down the visor to alert the local parking enforcement agent that he was on official police business.

T.J. pointed to the A8. “Nice wheels. Guess you were right. He’s probably home.”

The detectives walked toward the Audi and Dupree looked in the rear side window. Boxes and clothing filled the

backseat, piled so high that they obstructed the driver's view of the rear window. She looked up and down the street and saw a U-Haul a few spaces down from the Audi. "Looks like our boy might be moving up in the world."

"Well," T.J. said, "considering his pricey new car that makes sense."

Just as they were about to ring the door chime, Lentz opened the door holding a heap of clothing. By the fear in his eyes, Dupree thought he looked like the proverbial little boy caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Good morning, Mr. Lentz," Dupree said in a cordial manner. "Can we assist you in any way?"

"Um, no, I...I think I can handle it."

He stood frozen, his eyes darting back and forth between Dupree and T.J. “Mind if I throw these clothes in the trunk?”

The detectives stepped aside. “No problem,” Dupree said. “When you’re finished, we’d like to have a word with you.”

“Sure thing,” Lentz said. His voice cracked ever so slightly.

After loading his trunk, Lentz hopped up the front steps and stood in front of the detectives. “What can I do for you?”

“Mind if we talk inside?” Dupree asked. “It’s rather confidential.”

“No problem.” Lentz opened the front door. Dupree and T.J. followed Lentz up the stairs to his apartment. When they

walked in the door, Dupree met T.J.'s glance and knew he was thinking the same thing: the place looked like a missile testing site.

"I'd ask you to have a seat," Lentz said, "but as you can see, there's really no place to sit." His cursory smile cued Dupree that the last thing he wanted was to make them comfortable.

"Looks like you're moving out," T.J. said. "I really like your new car. Nice ride."

"Well, I'm moving in to a new apartment—sharing it with a friend. And that's freed up some money."

"*Some* money?" T.J. said. "You must be a whiz at managing your income. You might want to consider changing careers."

Maybe become a financial advisor.”

“The last time we spoke,” Dupree said, “you claimed you were pretty much living from paycheck to paycheck, struggling to survive. Do you really expect us to believe that moving in with a friend—something you haven’t even done yet—gave you enough money to buy an A8?”

“My friend floated me some money.”

“Enough for you to buy an Audi?” Dupree said. “Cash money?”

Lentz looked at his watch. “I’d love to chat with you two fine detectives a little longer, but I’ve got a full plate today.” He picked up a small cardboard box marked “fragile,” tucked it under his arm, and headed for the door.

“The friend you’re moving in with wouldn’t happen to be Maggie Hansen, would it?” Dupree asked.

Lentz lost his grip on the box and nearly dropped it.

“Be careful now,” Dupree warned. “That box is marked ‘fragile’.”

“Look,” Lentz said. “Maggie and I are really close friends. Is there some obscure law prohibiting two people of the opposite sex from being friends and living together?”

“No,” Dupree said. “But there *are* laws against lying to detectives investigating a homicide.”

“Call Maggie and see for yourself. She’ll confirm my story.”

“We’ll be sure to do that,” Dupree

said. She moved closer to Lentz and locked her eyes on his. “Tell me, Mr. Lentz, when you meet a female *friend* for coffee, are you in the habit of holding her hands?”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“I saw Hansen and you in the Village this morning, sitting in Starbucks, making goo-goo eyes like a couple of high school kids.”

Lentz tugged on his shirt collar.

“So, what do you think?” T.J. said.

“Want to continue jerking us off or should we drag your ass down to the precinct and talk to you there?”

“I’ve got nothing more to say without my lawyer present.”

“Lawyer?” T.J. said. “If you’re so

innocent, why would you need a lawyer?"

"Because that's my legal right."

"Really?" T.J. said. "So, you know a little about the law?"

"Enough to know that I have the right to an attorney."

"Well," Dupree said, "once a judge signs the subpoena to give us access to your bank records and cell phone activity, you might indeed need a lawyer." She pursed her lips. "You need to come with us. *Now.*"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

When Dupree and T.J. got back to the precinct, T.J. escorted Jonathan Lentz to interview room 1, while Dupree headed straight for the lab.

Delighted to find him on the job this early, Dupree spotted Butler as soon as she entered the lab.

“I kinda figured I’d run into you sometime today,” Butler said.

“Well, John, you are quite the chic magnet so it’s hard for any woman to stay away from you.”

“Yeah, right. Maybe thirty pounds ago. But that was another decade.”

“Nah, you still got it, John.”

“Wish my wife felt that way.”

“Every honeymoon has to end sometime,” Dupree said.

“Yeah, but I never dreamed Judy and I would be sleeping ass-to-ass before our fifth anniversary.”

Dupree laughed. “Well, at least you’re still sleeping in the same bed.”

“Whoop-de-do,” Butler said. He picked up a plastic bag with the envelope inside. “I wish I had some good news for you, but there’s really not much to go on. The note itself is clean. Whoever wrote it and stuffed it in the envelope knew what they were doing.

The large envelope has lots of prints on it, including yours, which shouldn't surprise you. We ran the prints through the data base and the only two matches we found were for a Nate Winston and Juan Vargas. Neither has a criminal record. The only reason they're in the system is because both have pistol permits. Do you happen to know either of them?"

"Nate works at the front desk of my apartment building." She thought for a moment, remembering her conversation with Charlie, the overnight security guard. "Oh yeah, Vargas works for Express Delivery. He delivered the envelope."

"Sorry I don't have more for you,"

Butler said. He squeezed Dupree's shoulder in a comforting way. "Be careful out there, Amaris."

Dupree half-jogged to the break room, poured herself a cup of coffee, and joined T.J and Lentz in the interview room. She glanced at T.J., her lips tight, cheeks flushed. She could tell by his reaction that he understood the lab struck out with the envelope.

"How long are you going to hold me here?" Lentz asked. "You have no evidence to charge me with *anything*."

"Not yet," T.J. answered. "Of course, that could change in a heartbeat once my partner and I finish our little chat with Maggie Hansen. Did I mention that she's in the other interview room?"

Lentz's eyes opened wide, but he didn't react. Dupree recognized that Lentz was trying hard to conceal his concern and was doing a pretty good job. But when he started nervously fidgeting, she knew that T.J. had struck a raw nerve.

"Can I get you some water, coffee, a stale donut?" T.J. offered. "Or maybe you'd like to call an attorney."

"You're a real friggin' comedian, Detective. I know my rights."

"Do you really?" T.J. said. "If you think I'm violating those rights, you can file a grievance."

"Sit tight, Mr. Lentz," Dupree said. "My partner and I have to go powder our noses. If you have to take a whiz, just

knock on the door and someone will escort you to the little boy's room."

"Gee, thanks. How long before you come back?"

"Don't know," Dupree answered.

Dupree and T.J. headed for lockup. "Did you make any progress with Tesler?" Dupree asked.

"He still needs some time to think about his dubious future."

"He may not have a future."

T.J. touched her arm. "Sorry about the envelope."

"Me too."

They led Ivan Tesler to an empty interview room. T.J. sat but Dupree remained standing. She kept her eyes locked on Tesler's. She saw fear in his

eyes.

“Well, Mr. Tesler, you’ve had plenty of time to think. What’ll it be? Want to talk to us or would you prefer the IRS?”

“If I tell you what I know, what’s in it for me?”

“As long as you haven’t committed a felony, we can make a deal with the IRS not to press charges for tax evasion and convince the district attorney not to charge you as an accessory to murder.”

Tesler thought about that for a minute. “So if I admit that somebody paid me to tail her, is that a felony?”

“If your only part in this was watching her,” T.J. said, “no, it’s not a felony.”

Tesler combed his fingers through his greasy hair and licked his lips. “If he

hears I ratted him out, he'll slit my fucking throat." Tesler covered his face with both hands and cleared his throat several times. "His name is Oscar. Never got his last name, but he's definitely Italian. A real scary type. Strange thing is, he's got a twisted sense of humor. I mean this guy could crack jokes at a funeral. He used to be a regular at the Night Owl on Walnut Street in Yonkers, a few blocks away from my place. But I haven't run into him in a while. I heard that he had a run in with the owner and it almost came to blows. Anyway, I'm a pretty fair pool player, but the first time I met Oscar, he mopped up the floor with me. Guy's the best pool shark I've ever seen. Took my

rent money and laughed all the way to the bank.

“He’s not the sociable type, mostly keeps to himself. But we kinda hit it off and got to know each other. Whenever I’d run into him, he’d kick my ass at pool, and then we’d share a few beers and shots of Jack. His treat. Booze always loosens up the tongue.” Tesler took a gulp of water. “He told me stories about his prison time, about the number of skulls he cracked open. I think he even scared the shit out of the guards. As it worked out, he ended up in a cage cuz his full-time job was breaking kneecaps for some loan shark and the cops finally nailed him. Been out of jail for a while.”

“Do you have any idea what prison he

was in?" T.J. asked.

"Some joint in New York. Don't know the name." Tesler paused for a minute as if he'd lost track of where he left off in his story. "Anyway, one day he asks me if I'd like to make a quick buck—said it was the easiest job in the world. Being the kind of guy who doesn't usually have two nickels to rub together, I was interested. He tells me about some lady he wants me to keep an eye on. I figured it was an old girlfriend and he wanted to find out who her new boyfriend was so he could cut his balls off. I didn't ask no questions, and he didn't tell me much about her."

"What exactly did he want you to do?" Dupree asked.

“Wanted me to watch her every move. Follow her from morning to night and report back to him.”

“Did you have any idea who you were watching?”

“Not until she was killed and I saw her picture on TV.” He paused and shook his head. “Terrible thing. I puked for two days just thinking about it.”

“How did you communicate with Oscar?” T.J. asked.

“Mostly by telephone. One of those prepaid throwaways you buy at Walmart.”

“Do you remember what number you called?” Dupree asked.

“Only the area code: 914.”

“Tell us about the last time you spoke

to him,” Dupree said.

“The night before she was killed, Oscar called and asked me to meet him at the Night Owl. By the time I got there, he was pretty shit-faced. He said something major was going down real soon. Said that he hit the big time, that he could afford to rent a nice place in Manhattan. It didn’t mean shit to me. I had no idea what he was talking about. He told me to wait until tomorrow night, park across the street from where she worked, and to call him the minute she left work. When I called him, he said that my work was complete and told me to get rid of the cell as soon as our conversation ended. He also warned me that if for some reason I didn’t dump the

phone, or if I told anyone about our little deal, he'd come looking for me with a meat cleaver."

"And all this time," Dupree said, "you had no idea he was up to no good?"

"I knew that whatever he was doing wasn't on the up and up and guessed somebody was getting their ass kicked, but it never dawned on me that Oscar would..."

"Can you give us a description of him?" Dupree asked.

"He shaves his head and usually wears a baseball cap. He has a ratty goatee and doesn't trim it very often." Tesler cracked his knuckles. Beads of perspiration sprouted on his forehead. "He's a big bastard. Got a body like a

professional wrestler. Real hulky.”

Tesler’s description peaked Dupree’s interest. Except for the goatee, which he could have shaved off just before murdering Dr. Crawford, Oscar could very well be the guy in the surveillance tapes.

“Anything unique about the way he looked?” T.J. asked. “Any tattoos, birthmarks, physical deformities, unusual clothing?”

“There’s two things I remember. First, he almost always wore a long leather coat—even when it was hotter than hell.” He pointed to the back of his head. “And the other thing is, Oscar had a weird looking birthmark on the back of his neck. Looked like the number eight.”

Dupree and T.J. exchanged glances.

“Are you sure you can’t remember his last name?” Dupree asked.

“Fraid not. But maybe you should talk to Jake Sullivan, the Night Owl bartender. He seemed pretty chummy with Oscar.”

“We’ll do that. Do you have any idea where Oscar lives?” T.J. said.

“I told you everything I know. Now when the fuck can I go home and get some decent food?”

“I’ll get you out of here,” T.J. said. “But first we have to process some paperwork.”

“How long’s that gonna take?”

“Not long.”

“Do you want to go keep our other

guest company,” T.J. asked Dupree, “or wait until I finish with Mr. Bad Ass?”

Tesler glared at T.J. but didn’t say a word.

“I’ll wait,” Dupree said. “Two heads are better than one.” She grinned. “Even when the second head is yours.”

“Cute. Real cute.”

Feeling zombie-like, her brain on overload, Dupree found her way to her desk. Her head was spinning with facts, statements, suppositions, and details of the interviews she’d had with numerous people over the last week. Complicated murder investigations, of course, were not uncommon, but there seemed to be so

many angles to this one. It felt like a five-hundred piece puzzle. Except for Mrs. Crawford, everyone T.J. and she had spoken to was a suspect or accomplice at some level. Although on the surface, Dr. Mason appeared to be legitimate, Dupree's cop-instincts—generally reliable—whispered in her ear that he might somehow be connected to the murder. Then there was Hyland Laboratories' attempt to hire Maggie Hansen. The timing seemed rather convenient. Not to mention the fact that Hyland, manufacturer of the most widely prescribed chemotherapy drug in the world, had a great deal to lose if Dr. Crawford's theories proved valid. And there were many other pharmaceutical

companies that could also lose a significant amount of money as well. What drastic steps might they take to secure their bottom line? How far would they go? Dupree also could not overlook the bad blood between Dr. Crawford and Maggie Hansen, the affair Hansen had had with Jonathan Lentz, and Dr. Crawford firing Hansen. Dupree, of course, could not dismiss Lentz and Hansen's rendezvous at Starbucks, or his sudden windfall to afford an expensive car. Every fact surrounding this odd couple seemed suspicious. Tesler claimed that Oscar had paid him to tail Dr. Crawford, but maybe Tesler's role was more significant. Considering Tesler's testimony, the images on the

surveillance cameras showing a bald guy fitting Oscar's description, and the odd figure eight birthmark, Oscar, no doubt, was the shooter. But not for one minute did Dupree believe that Dr. Crawford's murder was a one-man operation. Lots of questions, but few answers.

Dupree could see T.J. still processing Tesler's release, so she took advantage of the break in the action and went to see Brenda. As always, Brenda's fingers were dancing on her keyboard, apparently unaware that Dupree was standing right next to her. Funny thing about Brenda, Dupree thought, one might guess that she was pissed off at the world by the way she beat on the

keyboard. But Dupree knew better. Brenda had helped her numerous times and never once gave her a hard time. She was an integral part of the department.

Without pausing or even looking at Dupree, Brenda said, "Good afternoon, Detective. What can I do to make your day a little brighter?"

"Got a couple of hours to talk?"

Brenda gave her a consoling smile. "That bad, huh?"

"Not really. I'm just a little weatherworn. Once this investigation is over, I'm taking a vacation and going someplace nice."

"Well, you sure deserve it," Brenda said, swiveling her chair around. "How you put up with your male counterparts

every day without slapping one of them upside the head is beyond me. What a collection of crybabies.”

“Men will be boys,” Dupree said. “I guess I stopped paying attention to their childish behavior a long time ago.”

“All I can say is that you’re a better person than me.”

Dupree let out a hearty laugh. “Not so sure about that.”

“Well,” Brenda said, “don’t think either of us can fix the problem here and now, so how can I help you today?”

“This is asking for a miracle, but is there any way to search the New York State prison system by first name only and look for someone who served time but is no longer incarcerated?”

Brenda placed her hands on her hips. “Girl, this here computer can do anything but bake fresh cornbread.” Brenda laughed out loud. “I only hope his name isn’t Joe or John.”

“Actually, it’s Oscar.”

“Oscar? Guess his parents didn’t much like him. Anything else you can tell me?”

“He’s likely Italian, was probably in a New York prison for assault and battery or aggravated assault, and he shaves his head.” Dupree thought for a moment. “Depending when his mug shot was taken, he might have had a full head of hair and a beard like Santa. We have him on surveillance tapes, but we can’t see enough of him for facial

recognition.”

Brenda folded her arms. “This is going to take some time, Sugar.” She gazed up at the wall clock. “How about you come back in an hour?”

“Sure that’s enough time?”

Brenda nodded. “No problem.”

“You rock, Brenda.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself. I might come up with a goose egg.”

Dupree held up her hand with her fingers crossed. “Let’s hope not.

Dupree headed back to her desk and told T.J. about her conversation with Brenda.

“Good thinking,” T.J. said.

Dupree looked past T.J., deep in thought. She nervously fussed with her

hair.

“You’re still concerned about that letter, aren’t you?” T.J. said.

“Sure am. I contacted the courier, hoping they’d have some info on the sender, but all they could tell me was her name: Mary Dupree.”

“I know it spooked you, Amaris, but you live in a secure building with twenty-four hour security. No way anyone’s going to get into your apartment.”

Dupree appreciated T.J.’s effort to ease her anxiety. But they both knew that a determined criminal could break into Fort Knox if motivated enough. After all, didn’t Oscar break into Dr. Crawford’s apartment? Didn’t her apartment have

twenty-four hour security? She wanted to call him out on it. But why minimize his thoughtful attempt to support her? “Whoever sent that letter might have a different agenda than just breaking in. Besides, how did they know I have cats?”

“Don’t know. Just be cautious and mindful of your surroundings. Whoever sent the letter is just trying to distract you from the investigation.”

“Well,” Dupree said, “mission accomplished.”

She tried to conceal her fear, but figured her face told a different story.

“Ready to rough up Lentz?” T.J. said

“Looking forward to it.”

Dupree picked up an eight-by-ten

manila envelope off her desk and tucked it under her arm. Trailing behind T.J. towards the interview room, Dupree tried to mentally prepare herself for what she suspected would be a significant interview.

T.J. reached for the doorknob and was about to turn it when Dupree saw him look at the manila folder under her arm. “What’s in the envelope?”

“Just trying to go two for two.”

T.J. opened the door shaking his head. “Huh?”

“You’ll see.”

T.J. shrugged and entered the room. Dupree followed close behind. They found Lentz right where they’d left him, but by the look on his face, Dupree was

certain he was way past the point of moderate irritation.

“Are you detectives serious or what? You make me sit here like a criminal and I haven’t done a damn thing.”

“I apologize, Mr. Lentz,” Dupree said. “Detective work is unpredictable.”

“I couldn’t give a shit less. I want a lawyer, and I want one right *now*!”

“Sure thing,” Dupree said. “Do you have someone in mind, or should I contact the Public Defender’s office?”

“I have my own lawyer. Just get me a telephone.”

“No problem,” Dupree said. “But can you just give me a minute to share something with you?”

Lentz looked at his watch. “You’ve

got one minute.”

Dupree held up the manila envelope. “Remember when I told you that a subpoena to release your bank account information and cell phone records would be coming soon?”

Dupree saw Lentz swallow hard, but he didn’t say a word. His eyes were locked on the envelope.

“Here it is, Mr. Lentz. By noon tomorrow, we’ll have a complete summary of your banking activity and a list of every call you made and received on your cell phone.”

He licked his lips and cracked his knuckles.

“Now I want you to listen to me very carefully,” Dupree said. “You can try to

bullshit us all you want. But in the end, we know that you are somehow linked to Dr. Lauren Crawford's murder. We're not saying that you pulled the trigger or directly harmed her. But you're connected. If not today, maybe tomorrow, or maybe next week, you'll be facing serious charges. Charges that will get you ten, maybe fifteen years in a twelve by twelve cage. If you come clean right now and tell us everything you know, we'll talk to the DA and help you any way we can. But this is a one-shot deal. Take it now or roll the dice." Dupree mocked him with an exaggerated grin. "Know what else? You're a pretty attractive man, Mr. Lentz, and I'm sure, absolutely certain that the inmates are

going to find you very appealing. Get my drift? Or do I have to explain?"

This was the moment of truth Dupree had faced with dozens of suspects. It was a game of poker. Dupree claimed to have the ace of spades. Now it was time for Lentz to fold or call her bluff.

"Can I call my lawyer now?"

His defiance stunned Dupree. She thought for sure he'd cave in. She didn't believe so, but maybe his bank records and cell phone activities wouldn't reveal anything incriminating.

"You're free to go," Dupree said. "But we'll be talking again real soon."

Without uttering another sound, Lentz glared at Dupree with contempt, sprang up like a jack-in-the-box, bolted for the

door, and slammed it after he walked out.

Dupree looked at T.J., shaking her head. “That went well.”

“Either he’s got nothing to hide,” T.J. said, “or he’s an idiot.”

“Guess we’ll just have to wait and see.” Dupree glanced at her watch. “Let’s go talk to Brenda.”

On the way to speak with Brenda, neither Dupree nor T.J. said a word to each other—a rare phenomenon. Dupree guessed that the case had drained T.J. as much as it had her. Since becoming a homicide detective, she’d worked on dozens of difficult cases. Some that involved multiple murders, mutilated bodies, children beaten to death, gang-

related shootings, and snitches killed execution style by the mob. All of the murders disturbed her, of course, but this investigation heightened her anguish. At first, when she recognized that this case was like no other, she wasn't quite sure what distinguished it. But now that some time had passed and she'd learned more about Dr. Crawford and her groundbreaking cancer research, Dupree realized why the case meant so much to her.

Her mother had died of breast cancer and Dr. Crawford had worked tirelessly searching for a cure, or at least a more effective treatment that would extend a patient's life while preserving their quality of life. This was the connection.

This was why Dupree would not rest until she solved the case. With Dr. Crawford gone, who would finish her work? How many more people would senselessly die from this horrible disease if no one carried on with the research?

And then there was another issue Dupree tried desperately to flush out of her mind, but like a nagging migraine, it just wouldn't go away. She didn't want to admit it, didn't want to feel envious or resentful, yet she could not lie to herself. It seemed that Dr. Crawford had enjoyed the kind of mother-daughter relationship Dupree longed for. When Mrs. Crawford spoke of her daughter, she glowed with pride. When the heartbroken woman told

Dupree that her daughter called twice a day, every day, and that they had dinner together twice a week, Dupree could only feel envy. She imagined what it would be like if she and her daughter enjoyed the same intimacy. Yes, Dupree had good reason to embrace this investigation. It was more than just doing her job. Right or wrong, it was now personal.

“Earth calling Amaris,” T.J. said, startling Dupree. “Are you visiting another dimension?”

“Sorry, just lost in my thoughts.”

They found Brenda about to bite into what looked like pastrami on rye.

“I guess we’re just in time,” T.J. said.

“That looks yummy,” Dupree added.

“Is that from Katz’s Deli?”

Brenda nodded. “Ain’t nothing like it on the whole damn Earth.”

“How did you get it? They’re all the way downtown,” Dupree said. “I know they deliver but not to the Bronx.”

“You should know by now I’ve got connections.” She winked. “Can’t share all my secrets with you, Sweetie.”

Brenda set down her half-eaten sandwich and wiped a napkin across her mustard-covered lips. “I know it’s not ladylike, but there’s no way to eat a sandwich like this according to the rules of etiquette.”

Dupree laughed. “Why don’t you finish your lunch and we’ll come back in a little while.”

Brenda pointed to the empty chair right next to her. “You set your cute little behind right there. My vittles can wait.”

Little behind? Dupree sat down and T.J. stood behind her.

Brenda pointed to the Excel spreadsheet displayed on the computer screen. “I ran the name ‘Oscar’ through the database and searched all convicted felons charged with assault and battery or aggravated assault released from prison over the last ten years. I would have gone back a few more years, but that’s as far as the database goes. In New York, I found twenty-seven Oscars—didn’t think there were that many in the whole damn world. Eleven of them had Italian-sounding last names.”

Brenda clicked on page two of the spread sheet and pointed again to the computer screen. “Three of the Oscars live in New York City.”

“Are there mug shots in the database?” T.J. asked.

“I’m getting to that. Keep your pants on.”

She opened several pages, hit the right keys, and like magic, all eleven images appeared on the screen. One by one Brenda reviewed their rap sheets. She pointed to the screen. “This guy here.” Brenda zoomed in on his name. “Oscar Cassano might be of particular interest.”

Brenda zoomed in on Cassano’s rap sheet and criminal record. “He’s been a busy boy. In and out of prison for a good

part of his adult life and even spent a year in a juvenile detention center when he was a teenager. Every offense involved violence. His last stint was supposed to be in Auburn State Prison. But he was terrorizing a few new inmates—beat the tar out of one of them—so they shipped him off to Attica. And I don't think I have to tell you that that prison is a supermax facility.”

“I thought that only lifers or criminals convicted of murder were sent to Attica,” T.J. said.

“Actually,” Dupree answered, “It's not normal procedure, but in rare cases the courts will send a particularly violent criminal there even if he hasn't committed murder.” Dupree turned

towards Brenda. “How much time did he serve and when was he released?”

Brenda studied the monitor and scrolled down the page. “Served five years and they released him about two years ago.”

“Do we have his last known address?” Dupree asked.

Brenda pointed to the screen. “2020 Webster Avenue, east of Walnut in Yonkers.”

T.J. tapped Dupree on the shoulder. “I don’t have the best memory, but didn’t Ivan Tesler say that our boy Oscar here used to be a regular at a bar on Walnut?”

Dupree nodded. “A watering hole called the Night Owl.”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking,

partner?" T.J. said.

"Yes. Let's pay Mr. Cassano a surprise visit."

"So you want me to drive?" T.J. asked.

"Not a snowball's chance in hell."

Dupree stood and brushed the wrinkles out of her slacks. "As always, Brenda, you are my hero. Thanks for all your help."

"That's what they pay me for, Sugar. Good luck."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The ride to Yonkers took less time than Dupree expected. She turned onto Webster Avenue and Dupree perused up and down the street but found only one tight parking spot barely big enough for a compact car. She pulled next to a blue Nissan Ultima and slowly cranked the wheels as she backed her way into the spot.

T.J. laughed. “You’re shitting me, right? You’d be lucky to squeeze a Smart Car into that spot, let alone this boat.”

“You just watch me.” Having lived in the city all her life, and with street parking at a premium, Dupree had had lots of practice squeezing into small spots. Without having to abort the mission or start over, she carefully parked the car two inches away from the curb without touching a bumper.

“I gotta tell you, Amaris. I’m impressed. I’d have bet a king’s ransom you couldn’t do it.”

“Never, ever bet against a determined woman.”

“How do you want to play this?” Dupree asked. “If our guy is home, I don’t think he’s coming with us without a fight.”

“You go around to the back and I’ll

knock on the front door,” T.J. suggested.

They stepped out of the car and made their way toward the duplex. 2020 Webster Avenue stood on the left. Just as Dupree was about to move down the long driveway, T.J. stopped her. “No heroics, there, Annie Oakley.”

Dupree winked. “Got it covered.”

Dupree made her way toward the back of the duplex. To avoid being seen by Cassano, she hugged the structure as she moved, ducking under the windows.

Once near the back door, Dupree drew her weapon and stood with her back pressed against the building, just to the side of the entrance. Standing there, she listened for any sound coming from the front of the house—any sign that T.J.

had engaged the perp. As she stood there, a little shaky, she noticed that the backyard looked as if it had been professionally manicured. The lawn—freshly cut—looked like carpeting. Vibrantly-colored flowers lined the perimeter, and perfectly trimmed hedges bordered the neighbor's yard. Not what she expected. Then again, maybe Cassano rented the place and his landlord was fussy about the way his property looked.

“Amaris?” T.J.'s voice echoed from around the corner of the house and startled Dupree.

“I'm here.”

T.J. appeared just as he holstered his weapon. “Either he's not home or he

doesn't like company. What now?"

"The Night Owl is a few blocks away and it used to be Cassano's hangout. Maybe we'll get lucky and find him there."

"Or," T.J. said, "maybe Jake Sullivan, the bartender, knows where we can find him."

Dupree spotted a small, gravel-covered lot next to the Night Owl. Not that Yonkers was the most upscale community in the New York City area, but it seemed more like a beer joint one might find in a rural town outside of Amarillo, Texas. The ramshackle structure looked in desperate need of a

bucket of paint and a window washer.

Dupree chuckled when she saw a mural painted on the side of the building. A giant owl was roosting on a Harley Roadster, giving the thumbs-up sign with its wing. Of course, considering the obvious mentality of the clientele who would patronize such a place, it seemed entirely possible that the owl was flipping everyone off.

They stepped inside the tavern. Dupree noticed the occupancy sign over the front door limiting the number of patrons to fifty, but based on a quick scan and headcount, she guessed that there were no more than fifteen patrons milling about. A few occupied the bar area. Two guys, dressed like hardcore

bikers, played pool, and a couple other guys were shooting darts. Clearly defiant against the public no-smoking regulations, half the patrons were puffing on cigarettes and the two pool players sucked on cigars. The buzz of barroom chatter hushed to a whisper once the patrons spotted them. They gawked at the detectives, evidently aware they were cops.

Dupree and T.J. moved toward the bar. The bartender, tall and wiry with a long ponytail hanging to the center of his back, immediately greeted them.

“Hi, folks. I’m Jake. A little out of your element, no?” He chuckled. “What can I get for ya? A pitcher of Kool-Aid, a Perrier—maybe a Shirley Temple?”

“I think we’re just fine.” Dupree elbowed T.J. “Do you have the phone number for the Department of Public Health programmed in your cell?”

T.J. pulled his phone out of his pocket. “I think I do.”

“Hey, now,” Jake said, “let’s not get carried away. I was just messing with you. I know you’re not regulars so I figured you must be the law.”

“Apparently,” Dupree said, “you have no respect for the law or this place wouldn’t have a cloud of blue smoke hovering in the air. Now, Jake, can we have a little chat or would you like us to make the call?”

“Please don’t do that,” Jake pleaded. “How can I help ya?”

Dupree looked around and could see that everyone in the bar was paying very close attention to their conversation. She spoke softly. “We understand that you’re close friends with Oscar Cassano. Does he come in here often?”

Jake didn’t answer immediately. But the question clearly rattled his nerves. “Sorry, I never heard of the guy.”

“Really?” Dupree said. “Interesting you should say that because another patron of yours told us that he used to play pool with Cassano in here regularly.”

T.J. placed his elbows on the bar and peered at Jake. “He claims Cassano and you are bosom buddies.”

“Look it, I said I don’t know anybody

by the name of Cassano and I don't."

"We're wasting our time with this joker." She looked at Jake. "We'll be back in a little while. Don't go anywhere."

Dupree and T.J. turned and moved towards the front door.

"Wait!" Jake yelled.

"Is your memory working better now?" T.J. asked.

"Okay, okay," Jake said. "I *am* pretty good friends with Oscar."

"Then why did you deny it?" Dupree asked.

"Cassano is trouble. Big trouble."

"Explain," T.J. said.

"I heard some guys talking about something big going down and it

involved Cassano.”

“That doesn’t tell us shit. Be more specific,” Dupree said.

“All I know is that it had to do with a robbery.”

“So you knew Cassano was going to be involved in a crime and did nothing?” T.J. said “I didn’t want to get involved.”

“Well, then,” Dupree said, “the way I see it, you *are* involved. You’re an accessory to a felony.”

“Please,” Jake said. “I had no idea—”

“I think you better come with us,” T.J. said.

The color drained from Jake’s face. “If you take me with you, I’ll have to throw everyone out and lock the doors. If the owner finds out, I’m out of a job.

Isn't there anything I can do to make things right?"

Dupree eyed T.J. "What do you think, partner? Should we give this schmuck a break?"

"Nah. There's nothing he can do for us. We should cuff him and drag his ass to the police station."

"Please," Jake said, his hands shaking uncontrollably. "The next time Oscar comes in, I'll call you right away. I swear. I mean, he's the one you really want, right?"

T.J and Dupree didn't say a word, acting as if they were considering his offer. Dupree reached in her handbag, removed a business card, and set it on the bar. "Two things. First, if we find

out that Oscar showed up and you didn't call us? I guarantee you'll regret it. Second, I want you to display no smoking signs near the front door, behind the bar, in the bathrooms, and near the pool table. And if *anyone*—and I mean *anyone*—lights up, throw them out on their ass. Understood?"

"Yes, Ma'am."

"Now gather up your barflies and tell them the smoking party is over."

On their way back to the precinct, traffic was impossible. Dupree tried a different route, but it seemed that half the city was trying it as well.

"Think Jake will come through?"

Dupree asked.

“Not a chance.”

“What’s the expression? Thick as thieves?”

T.J. laughed. “Guess there’s a code of ethics among criminals.”

“It was worth a try,” Dupree said. “I’m thinking we should stake out Cassano’s place. What do you think?”

“Tonight?”

Dupree nodded. “Bring a thermos of coffee. It may be a long night.” Just then, her cell phone rang. She reached in her purse and pulled it out. When she glanced at the display, Dupree recognized the phone number and turned on the speaker. “What’s the good word, Brenda?”

“Did Captain Jensen call you yet?”

“I talked to him yesterday and gave him an update on the investigation, but haven’t spoken to him today. Why?”

“There’s a nice surprise waiting for you on your desk.”

“A box of Godiva dark chocolate truffles? You shouldn’t have, Brenda.”

“Better than chocolate.”

“The only thing better than chocolate is—”

“How about the bank records and cell phone activity for Jonathan Lentz?”

“Seriously?”

“Yep.”

“How the hell did they get the bank and mobile carrier to release the records so quickly?”

“Hey, Sugar, this is the new millennium, the world of electronics, e-mail, and text messaging. You hit a few keys on your computer, contact the right people, twist a few arms, and voila, it’s like magic.”

“Your name is going to the top of my Christmas list.”

“Hey, all I did was give you a head’s up.”

“Thanks for letting me know.”

“I’m on my way out. See you in the a.m., Amaris.

Dupree dropped the cell in her purse.
“Time to get back to work.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Dupree and T.J. got back to the precinct a little after four p.m. There were a few lingering detectives—mostly finishing paperwork—and half a dozen administrative people. But for the most part, the majority of staff members were gone for the day. Dupree had learned early on that the life of a detective was not a nine-to-five job. She could remember investigating particularly difficult cases and working fifteen or twenty hours a day. Having an almost

obsessive desire to crack a case, along with what felt like gallons of strong coffee, seemed to be the only two things that kept her going. It was cause for a celebration on the rare occasion she got more than five hours shuteye. For the most part, she functioned on power naps and closing her eyes for ten minutes while sitting on the toilet.

After Dupree had parked the squad car, she'd made a beeline for the precinct employee entrance, leaving T.J. several paces behind her. She could feel the adrenalin pumping as she made her way to her desk, anxious to review Lentz's bank statements and cell records. Lying on her chair, she saw the bright green envelope with the word,

“CONFIDENTIAL” printed across the top in big, bold letters. Below that it read, TO: Detective Amaris Dupree. FROM: Amy Sutherland. Dupree didn’t know Amy but at this particular point in time, she loved her!

T.J. finally caught up to her. “Where’s the fire?”

“I’m just dying to see Lentz’s bank statement and cell phone records.”

“Well,” T.J. said, “let’s use one of the interview rooms so we can have some privacy.”

Interview room 2 was unoccupied, so the two detectives walked in and sat side by side. Dupree used her index finger as if it were a letter opener and tore open the envelope. Inside, she found

a cover letter from Amy Sutherland, a copy of the subpoena signed by Judge Marshall, and six 8 ½ by 11 pages, four with a list of cell calls Lentz had received and made, and two with a recap of all his banking transactions for the last sixty days.

“That’s strange,” Dupree said. “We got Lentz’s records but not Hansen’s.”

“I’ve seen that happen before,” T.J. said. “I’m sure they’ll come through in a day or two.”

She handed T.J. the bank statement. “Check this out while I look at the phone records.”

Both detectives, neither saying a word, examined the documents as if they were cramming for a final exam in

astrophysics. After several minutes, T.J. was first to break the silence.

“This ought to perk up your ears.” He pointed to Lentz’s bank statement. “On July 1, Lentz deposited one-hundred-fifty-thousand dollars in a savings account.”

“So, he deposits a hundred-fifty K the day after Dr. Crawford was murdered?” Dupree said. “Very interesting coincidence. Wouldn’t you say?”

“Let’s check out his cell records and see if anything jumps off the page,” Dupree suggested.

“Our boy called an 888 number in Silver Spring, Maryland a bunch of times.” She ran her finger down the list and counted. “Twenty-three calls to be

exact. In less than thirty days.”

“Did he receive any calls from that number?”

“Nope. Even if he had, that particular 888 number might show up as a different number. It’s like making a call from your office. The caller ID for the person you’re calling is going to show the main trunk number, not the specific extension.” She studied the received calls more carefully. “Here we go. Ready for this? Lentz received fourteen calls from a particular number with a 301 area code. Guess where.”

“Silver Spring?”

“Bingo,” Dupree said.

“So, apparently, Lentz and someone in Maryland were phone buddies.”

Dupree removed her iPhone from her purse. “Let’s conduct a little experiment.” She turned on the speaker and first dialed the 888 number Lentz had called twenty-three times. “Better to call from my cell than from an office phone. I’ve got it programmed to display ‘PRIVATE’ on the caller ID display so it doesn’t disclose my cell phone number.”

They listened to the phone ring three times.

“Thank you for calling the Food and Drug Administration. You may find additional information by visiting our web site at www.fda.gov. Please listen carefully—”

Dupree disconnected. “Tell me *that*

doesn't make the hair on the back of your neck stand up."

"I don't even know what to think at this point," T.J. said. "Why would Lentz call the FDA so many times?"

"Let's see if we can find out." Dupree punched in the number beginning with area code 301, from where Lentz had received fourteen calls. "If it's a business number, I would guess that it's an automated answering system."

One ring. Two rings.

"You have reached the office of Dominic Gallo, deputy director for the Center for Drug Evaluation and Research. At the tone, please leave a detailed message and a contact telephone number, and I will return the

call as soon as I am available—”

Dupree glanced at T.J. and could tell by the dumbfounded look on his face that the voice message had stunned him as much as her.

“Didn’t Dr. Mason tell us that Dominic Gallo was the guy from the FDA working with Dr. Crawford?” T.J. asked.

“Sure was.”

“Are your wheels spinning as fast as mine?” T.J. said.

“Mr. Lentz has been a busy boy and has a lot of explaining to do.”

“If they were up to no good—and it’s obvious they were—why would Gallo be stupid enough to make all these calls from his office phone and leave a trail?”

“Well,” Dupree said, “either he never expected that anyone would connect the dots, or he made a serious technical error. Sometimes smart people do dumb things. If they didn’t, our job would be a lot harder.”

“What’s the plan?” T.J. said “We need to get to Lentz as soon as possible and it can’t wait until morning. Besides that, we were planning to stakeout Cassano’s place tonight.”

“It’s like all hell’s breaking loose at once,” T.J. said.

“Isn’t that how *all* investigations go?”

T.J. nodded. “Yep.”

Dupree refocused her eyes on the phone records. Running her index finger slowly down the column, she stopped.

“This number looks familiar.” She turned the list towards T.J. and pointed. “212-555-1010. I know that number but don’t know why.”

“There’s only one way to find out,” T.J. said.

Before he even finished his sentence, Dupree hit the speaker button and thumbed the number into her cell phone.

“Horizon Cancer Research Center, how may I help you?” Her voice was soft and pleasant.

Dupree and T.J. exchanged looks of bewilderment.

“May I speak with Dr. Mason, please?”

“May I ask who’s calling?”

“Detective Dupree.”

“One moment, please.”

The woman placed Dupree on hold and the room was filled with the sound of classical music. “Bach or Beethoven?” Dupree asked T.J.

“Actually, I’m a rocker. Beatles, Stones, Aerosmith, Zeppelin. I should have been born a boomer.”

“Never would have guessed.”

“Not all blacks are into Flo Rida or P. Diddy.” He smiled and winked. “Some of us actually like white music.”

“Hello, Detective, this is Dr. Mason.”

“Hi, Doctor.” She glanced at her wristwatch. “I’m surprised you’re working this late.”

“Just tackling a few critical issues.”

“How have you been?”

“I’d be much better if you told me you’ve apprehended Dr. Crawford’s killer.”

Dupree didn’t want to share any sensitive information with Mason. At least not at this juncture. “We’ve made some progress but we’re not quite there yet.”

“Well, I hope you make an arrest soon.” He paused. “What can I do for you?”

“I know you have a very demanding schedule, but is there any chance my partner and I can swing by your office and speak to you privately?”

“When?”

“Anytime tomorrow would be fine.”

“Let me bring up my Outlook

calendar. Hm. Let me see. Actually, I have a little window of time tomorrow around noon. Would that work for you?"

"That would be perfect."

"Okay, then, see you tomorrow. Have a great night."

"You as well, Dr. Mason." She pushed "END" and dropped the phone in her handbag.

"That was easier than I thought," Dupree said to T.J.

Dupree stood, nervously tapped her foot, and folded her arms across her chest. "Here's an idea. Let's head over to Cassano's and stake out his place. Hopefully, we'll find him home, coming or going. On the way there, I'll call Captain Jensen, fill him in on the

situation, and ask him to send a couple of our colleagues to pick up Lentz and bring him to the precinct. We certainly have enough evidence to hold him without charging him. Does that work for you?"

"Sounds like a solid plan."

"Tomorrow, we can meet with Dr. Mason at noon, and maybe we'll even find time to pee."

T.J. gave her a thumbs up.

CHAPTER TWENTY

“You’re going to be bouncing off the windshield in a few minutes,” T.J. warned. “Four shots? Really?”

“That’s how I drink my lattés,” Dupree answered. “Would you rather hear me snoring?”

“Good point.” T.J. took a long swig of his drink. “Who’s the captain sending to pick up Lentz?”

“Wells and Parisi.”

“They must be delighted. Especially Wells. What’s he got, three months

before he retires?”

“Something like that,” Dupree said.

She turned onto Webster Avenue and slowed to a crawl. Luckily, she found a parking spot directly across the street from Cassano’s duplex. Dupree noticed a light shining through the front window; drapes slightly opened. While she enjoyed her latté, she focused on the lighted window, looking for any sign of life. “What would you do if you could retire tomorrow and you were healthy and financially secure?” Dupree asked.

“First thing I’d do is go on an African photo-shoot safari. I’ve always wanted to see lions and tigers and elephants in the wild.”

“Why do you have to wait until you’re

retired?”

“Probably because I’d want to stay there for at least three or four weeks, and unless I took a special leave of absence, no way could I get that much consecutive time off.”

“Okay,” Dupree said, “You’re retired, healthy, in pretty good financial shape, and you just returned from an extended trip to Africa. Now what?”

T.J.’s face suddenly turned serious. “Well...ever since Haley was...”

He paused, noticeably searching for the right words.

“After Haley...died, I promised myself that someday I’d start a non-profit organization to support rape victims. I tried—a couple of times—but

you can't imagine how complicated it is. The documents, permits, federal and state requirements are overwhelming. It's amazing how hard you have to work to help people. It's an undertaking that would be difficult to manage while working full-time. So, my plan is twenty years and out. My pension will be vested by then and hopefully, if I continue packing away a good chunk of money every pay period, I'll have enough cash to enjoy three squares a day, keep the snow off my head, and still have enough left over to launch my charity."

Dupree didn't know what to say. Less than a week ago, T.J. was an obscure man. But now, with his most recent

admission, Dupree saw a man with character and nobility.

“So what do you think, Amaris? Am I chasing a pipedream?”

“I think you’re following your heart. And in my opinion, it’s an impressive goal.”

Dupree, her eyes still focused on Cassano’s front window, saw a shadow move. She held up her hand and pointed to Cassano’s home. “There’s someone inside.”

“If we knock on his door it’s going to spook him,” T.J. warned.

“Let’s sit tight for a while. Maybe he’ll step out for a pack of cigarettes or a bottle of hooch.”

“And if he doesn’t?”

“Then you’re going to kick in his front door.”

T.J. seemed to be lost in his thoughts and Dupree couldn’t stop thinking about what he’d told her. About to ask T.J. a question, Dupree’s cell rang. It rang three times before she found it hiding in the bottom of her handbag.

“Detective Dupree.”

“I hear you’re burning the midnight oil. It’s not going to get you a raise you know.”

Dupree immediately recognized John Butler’s voice. “Shouldn’t you be home with your wife and kids watching a Disney movie and sharing a bowl of popcorn?”

“Not when there’s a dead body that

needs some CSI expertise.”

“Well, you’re the right guy for the job,” Dupree said.

“I think this one’s going to peak your interest,” Butler said.

“All murders interest me.”

“Does the name Ivan Tesler ring a bell?”

Dupree turned on the speaker so T.J. could hear. “It sure does. Tesler’s a suspect in Dr. Crawford’s murder.”

“Not anymore.”

“Fill me in.”

“This is a strange one. We found his body sitting in a chair. Both of his legs and his left arm were bound to the chair. But it appears that he somehow managed to break his right arm free. He was

sitting right next to an end table in the living room and there was a telephone, pad, and pencil on the table. With his free arm, Tesler apparently called 911. But when they answered, all they heard was unintelligible yelling and screaming. This went on for several minutes. The 911 operator ran his phone number and gave his address to a couple of black and whites and asked them to check it out.”

“How did you know to call me?”

“He managed to scribble two words on that pad on the end table. ‘Oscar’ and ‘Dupree’.”

Dupree glanced at T.J. and she knew exactly what he was thinking.

“How was he murdered, John?”

“Ready for this one? Whoever killed him must have really had an axe to grind. The killer sliced up his entire body, from head to toe, with what was likely a razorblade. Now these weren’t cuts that would make him bleed out; they were surface cuts that barely broke the skin. But get this. Next to his body, we found an empty bottle of vinegar and an almost empty box of table salt. Best we can figure, the killer cut nearly every square inch of this poor bastard’s body and poured salt and vinegar into the wounds. I know it’s cliché, but it really happened. The guy must have suffered excruciating pain.”

“Any prints?” Dupree asked.

“Not on the bottle of vinegar or box of

salt, but we're still dusting."

Dupree's mind was racing. That Cassano was capable of such brutality spoke volumes about the type of lunatic they were dealing with. "Have you determined the cause of death?"

"Well, it seems that after the killer tortured this guy for who knows how long, he wasn't satisfied. For his final performance, he cut out Tesler's tongue and it likely didn't take long before the guy bled to death."

"That's wild, John, totally barbaric."

"I'm curious," John said. "Obviously, we figured out who 'Dupree' was on the scribbled note, but do you know what the name, 'Oscar' means?"

"Coincidentally, the name of the guy

we're staking out is Oscar Cassano. We like him for the murder of Dr. Crawford."

"I guess you can like him for Tesler's murder, too. Good luck, Amaris. If you need anything at all, just give me a holler."

Dupree disconnected the call and dropped the cell in her handbag. "I guess Tesler was almost right when he said Cassano would slit his throat if he suspected that he ratted him out."

"Well," T.J. said, "I suppose we now have justification to kick this asshole's door in."

"Now that we know just how violent he is, we need to call for backup," Dupree said.

Dupree made the call and requested two black and whites. She'd warned the dispatcher to tell the police officers to approach the area quietly—no sirens blaring or lights flashing.

“We’ve got this bastard cold,” Dupree said. “Once we arrest him, check out the birthmark on the back of his neck, run DNA tests on his blood, match it to what we found in the backseat of Dr. Crawford’s car, we’ve got him for murder one.”

“And there’s no reason for us to cut any deals with the DA.” T.J. added.

“I’m thinking we do,” Dupree said. “There is no way in hell that Cassano was a solo pilot on this murder. He was working for someone else. And I believe

that ‘someone’ is high on the food chain.” Prior to today, Dupree had considered that Dr. Crawford’s murder was part of a much bigger story. Now, she felt certain it was.

“I didn’t really think so, but now I’m on the same page.”

“Are you saying that I’m *right* and you’re *wrong*?”

“Of course not!” T.J. laughed out loud. “Just saying that...”

Before he could finish his sentence, a police car pulled parallel to Dupree’s squad car and the officer rolled down the passenger window.

“You guys need a little assistance?” the officer asked.

Dupree didn’t recognize the

policeman. She told him what was going down. Just then, another patrol car arrived on the scene.

“Let’s get this over with,” Dupree said.

Dupree asked the officers to move their patrol cars down the street a half block. If Cassano looked out his window, she didn’t want him to notice the black and whites. Dupree, T.J. and the four uniformed policemen huddled together and discussed their plan. Because Cassano’s home was half of a side-by-side duplex, they only needed to be concerned with guarding the front and back entrances, and the two windows on one side of the house. They agreed that T.J. and Dupree would knock on the

front door, while two policemen watched the back door, and two watched the windows on the side of the house.

Once the policemen were in position, Dupree and T.J. tiptoed up the front steps to Cassano's front door. Weapons drawn, T.J. knocked and Dupree stood ready to react.

No answer.

Again T.J. knocked—harder this time—but still no answer.

“The front door doesn't look like solid wood,” T.J. whispered. “If we kick it hard at the same time, just above the doorknob, I think we can break through.”

Dupree nodded. “On my count. One. Two. Three.”

Their timing was near perfect. The heels of their shoes hit the door simultaneously, a few inches above the doorknob. They heard wood splinter and Dupree could see that the door caved in slightly, but it held strong.

“Again,” Dupree said. “One. Two. Three.”

This time the force from their timed kick broke the lock, ruptured the door jam, and the door flew open. Cautiously, with T.J. slightly ahead of Dupree, pistols in the ready position, they entered the living room. Cassano was nowhere in sight, but Dupree noticed two overstuffed, wheeled suitcases sitting in the middle of the living room floor.

Dupree waved at T.J. and whispered, “Looks like our guy has travelling plans.”

“Hope he didn’t buy non-refundable plane tickets,” T.J. whispered, grinning.

Side by side, they moved deeper into the home, looking for any sign of life. Suddenly they heard a commotion coming from behind a closed door—glass breaking, two voices yelling. With great vigilance, they slowly opened the door. In front of an opened window, Cassano stood with the upper half of his body hanging out the window. In his back pocket, Dupree noticed a white envelope.

From outside the window, one of the policemen yelled, “Are you in there

detectives?”

“We’ve got him covered,” Dupree yelled.

Cassano pulled his torso back into the bedroom and turned around, a mocking grin was painted across his face. “Welcome to the party,” he said. “If I’d known you were coming, I’d a put on a pot of coffee and stopped by Donuts Delight.”

Amazing, Dupree thought. They were going to arrest this smart-ass, charge him with two counts of murder, and he didn’t seem the least bit concerned. She remembered what Tesler had said about Cassano’s twisted sense of humor. “Get on your knees and place your hands on the back of your head.”

Cassano, without arguing or making another wisecrack, fell to his knees and planted his hands as instructed.

“We noticed your suitcases,” Dupree said. “Taking an extended vacation?”

“No place in particular. Just thought I’d fire up the old RV and drive to California. I hear there’s still a gold rush there.”

“You’re a real fucking comedian,” T.J. almost yelled. “Well here’s something that might wipe that smug look off your face. You’re under arrest for the murders of Dr. Lauren Crawford and Ivan Tesler. You have the right to—”

“Save the speech,” Cassano said. “I ain’t saying anything more till I talk to a lawyer.”

Holding her pistol aimed squarely at Cassano's chest, Dupree moved closer to the big man. She stepped behind him, cuffed him, and snatched the envelope. She pulled out the contents and waved it in his face.

"Well, what have we here?" Dupree said. "A one-way airline ticket to Rome, Italy. And it's first class."

"So," T.J. said, "guess you're not driving to California for the gold rush, huh?"

"I was just screwing with you," Cassano said.

"No shit," T.J. responded. "Got family in Rome or are you just looking for asylum?"

"Like I said, I've got nothing more to

say without a lawyer present.”

“Get up,” Dupree ordered, clutching his arm and pulling him upward. It felt as if she were trying to lift a sumo wrestler. Cassano easily weighed two-fifty. Dupree, still standing slightly behind Cassano, noticed the figure eight birthmark on the back of his neck.

“Let’s take a ride, Oscar,” Dupree said.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

When Dupree entered the precinct at six-forty-five the next morning, drinking her morning pick-me-up, she did a classic double-take when she saw T.J.

He looked up and smiled.

“What did you do, sleep here last night?” Dupree said.

“Just trying to mend my ways.”

“Well, I’m certainly impressed.” Dupree checked out the wall clock. “So, what do you say we have some fun with Mr. Lentz?”

“Nothing would please me more.”

T.J. and Dupree walked down the long corridor towards lockup. There were four jail cells in the 40th precinct, only two were currently occupied—one for Lentz and the other for Cassano.

“I still don’t get it,” T.J. whispered. “Why would you lock up Cassano and Lentz in adjoining cells? We haven’t questioned Cassano yet, so if they *are* in cahoots, which seems obvious, this would give the two of them the opportunity to corroborate their stories.”

“Under normal circumstances, I would agree with you. But I have a strong feeling that this strategy is going to work in our favor.”

As they moved closer to lockup,

Dupree noticed that the two suspects were deep in conversation. By the harsh tone in their voices, Dupree sensed that it wasn't merely a chat between two strangers. It sounded more like a serious disagreement. She could tell by their body language that neither Cassano nor Lentz had spotted T.J. or her. She yanked on T.J.'s arm, who was one step ahead of her. When he looked back, ready to speak, she shushed him.

They listened carefully, but could not make out what they were talking about. Figuring that they couldn't get close enough to the suspects to hear their conversation before being spotted, Dupree and T.J. moved toward the cells.

“Well, well, well, what have we

here?" T.J. said. "Birds of a feather *do* flock together, hey?"

"Where's my lawyer?" Cassano barked.

"Relax. The public defender should be here in a couple hours."

"A couple *hours*?"

"Don't sweat it," Dupree said, "you'll still be here when he arrives."

"You're really funny, Detective. You know that?"

"What," Dupree said. "Suddenly you've lost *your* sense of humor?"

Dupree waved to the on-duty policeman. "Would you unlock number two, please?" She looked at Cassano. "You don't mind if we have a little chat with your pal, do you?"

Cassano didn't utter a sound.

The policeman promptly unlocked the cell and Lentz stepped out. First, T.J. cuffed Lentz, then, the two detectives led him to interview room 3.

"Aren't you going to ask me if it's okay for you to record this conversation?" Lentz asked.

"What makes you think this is going to be a conversation?" Dupree said. "Consider this more of a fight for your life."

Lentz folded his arms defiantly. "Let's get this over with so I can get the hell out of here."

"I wouldn't make any plans for the next twenty years," Dupree said.

"Unless, of course, you cut the bullshit

and tell us the truth.”

Noticeably distressed, Lentz said, “You guys just don’t stop harassing innocent people, do you?”

“Actually,” T.J. said. “We get a real kick out of it.”

“I have nothing more to say. You two know what I know.”

Dupree glanced over at T.J. and he nodded ever so slightly, signaling her to hit him hard.

“Who’s Dominic Gallo?” Dupree asked.

Lentz tugged on his collar and cleared his throat several times. His eyes were opened wide. Almost spooky. “He’s... my step-father.”

Dupree didn’t see that coming.

“Really? You two must be really close.”

“We are,” Lentz answered.

“So close that in a thirty day period, he called you fourteen times and you called him twenty-three times,” T.J. said. “Now *that’s* a close relationship.”

“So is there a law that limits the number of times family members can speak to one another?”

“Not at all,” Dupree said. “But there is a law that prohibits conspiracy to commit murder.”

“You two are real cute,” Lentz said, his voice edged with contempt. “Do either of you two jokers have even a shred of proof that I’ve committed any crimes?”

T.J. ignored his question. “How long

has your step-father worked for the FDA?”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“Tell us about your relationship with Dr. Mason from Horizon Cancer Research,” T.J. said.

Bombarding him with questions kept him off balance.

“I don’t have a *relationship* with Dr. Mason.”

“But you know him?” T.J. asked.

“Casually.”

Dupree stood and glared at Lentz. “Let’s review a few facts and see if it jogs your memory.”

Lentz nervously yanked on his shirt collar.

“On July 1st you deposited one-hundred-fifty thousand dollars in a savings account,”

Dupree said. “And your ex-girlfriend was about to make a major announcement to the press concerning her cancer research and an application she had prepared for the FDA. Your step-father, coincidentally, happens to work for the FDA. And you spoke to him thirty-seven times just before Dr. Crawford was murdered.”

Lentz laughed out loud. “You two have been watching way too many CSI reruns. What do you think, just because you introduce a few meaningless facts that I’m going to cave in and admit to anything? If that’s all you got, I’m out of

here.”

Lentz was correct: they really didn't have any compelling evidence, but during the entire interrogation, Dupree had been studying Lentz's eyes very carefully and she didn't like what she saw. She believed in the adage, “The eyes are the windows to the soul.” Lentz's eyes contradicted his words. During her many years of interviews and interrogations, Dupree had learned to examine the eyes of many a suspect. She couldn't quite explain it, but each of them who had lied shared a certain look, a common characteristic. It was time for her to act on her instincts. Dupree inched closer to Lentz, her face just inches away from him, her eyes searching his.

“There is one more *curious* fact,” Dupree said. “We haven’t spoken to your buddy Cassano yet, but I’d bet he’s a wealth of information. Want to know why? When someone’s facing a murder one charge and the death penalty, even a tough guy like Cassano can be brought to his knees. What do you suppose is going to happen when we put his nuts in a vice and make a deal with him? Think he’ll trade his life for the names of his accomplices?”

Lentz’s eye twitched and Dupree heard the air draining from his lungs. He combed his fingers through his hair and coughed in his hand.

Dupree felt certain she had hit the right nerve.

“If I talk, what kind of deal can you cut me?”

“That depends on how valuable the information is. If it helps us, we’ll talk to the DA about reducing the conspiracy to commit murder charge. ”

Lentz’s lip twitched; he was silent a long time before he spoke. “About a month ago, my step-father contacted me.”

“Dominic Gallo?” T.J. asked.

Lentz nodded. “He asked me if I’d like to make some fast money—serious money. Not having more than loose change in my pocket, I was all ears. He knew that I’d had a relationship with Lauren Crawford. When he asked me if I could find a way to steal her computer, it

about knocked me off my feet. I was ready to tell him to go fuck himself, but when he told me he'd be willing to pay one-hundred-fifty K for it, well, I guess he got my attention."

"So, he wanted *you* to steal her computer?" Dupree asked.

"Not exactly. He wanted me to *find* someone to do it—someone she wouldn't recognize."

"And what made him think that you would know anyone who'd be willing to commit such a crime?" T.J. asked "Well, I guess my background is a little more colorful than I let on. But I'm sure if you've done your homework you already know that." Lentz, for no obvious reason, let out a subdued laugh. "I know

a few people who don't exactly play by the rules. One of them, Jake Sullivan, probably my closest friend, is a bartender at a seedy little bar called the Night Owl."

Dupree and T.J. exchanged glances.

"Did you say the Night Owl?" T.J. asked "Yep. For whatever reason, it's a haven for ex-cons. Anyway, I spoke to Jake, explained the situation, and asked if he had anyone in mind. Without even hesitating for a minute, he pointed to a big bald guy playing pool."

"Oscar Cassano?" Dupree asked.

Lentz nodded.

"So," Dupree said, "you must have been a little shaken when Cassano ended up in the cell right next to you."

“Wanted to strangle the asshole. But I felt relieved to see him behind bars. Believe me, I was happy we weren’t in the same cell.”

“How did you approach Cassano at the Night Owl?” T.J. asked.

“I didn’t. Jake huddled with him and the next thing I know, Cassano tugs my arm, he says, ‘Let’s talk,’ and he leads me outside to the back alley. Gotta admit, I nearly shit myself. He is one scary dude.”

“How much did you offer him to steal the computer?” T.J. said.

“That’s the strange thing. My stepfather asked me to buy one of those prepaid cell phones—the kind they sell at Walmart or discount electronics

stores. He told me to give it to whoever agreed to steal Lauren's computer and tell him he'd be getting a call at a particular time with specific instructions and details of how he'd get paid. My step-father insisted that I not give Cassano his name."

"And you didn't question this at all?" Dupree asked.

"My only role was to find the guy. The rest was between my step-father and Cassano."

"You had no idea that Cassano had planned to kill Dr. Crawford?" Dupree asked.

Lentz's eyes glossed over. "I swear on my dead mother's soul, I didn't know. He agreed to snatch her computer and

that was it. I know that I'm a slime-ball, but I *never* would have done *anything* to harm Lauren. She dumped my ass, and I deserved to be dumped, but I still cared for her." He paused and covered his face with both hands.

Dupree and T.J. waited a few minutes for Lentz to regain his composure.

"If you suspected that Cassano was likely the one who murdered Dr. Crawford," Dupree said, "why didn't you contact the police?"

"Because I was scared to death that Cassano would come after me. The morning after Lauren was killed, Jake Sullivan called me. He said that Cassano had paid him a visit and asked him to contact me and give me a message."

“And the message was?” T.J. asked.

“If I fingered him in any way, he’d gut me like a pig.”

“Do you think that your step-father orchestrated this on his own?” Dupree asked.

“Probably not.”

“Who else is involved?” Dupree asked.

“He kept me in the dark so I really don’t know. But you might want to speak with Dr. Mason at Horizon.”

“Why do you say that?” Dupree asked.

“Because they had a pretty close relationship.”

“So, being part of this scam to steal Dr. Crawford’s computer didn’t bother you?” Dupree asked. “Especially after

what happened to her?”

“Sure it bothered me. Tore my heart out. But my step-father convinced me it was for the greater good. He swore that he had never intended that Lauren be harmed in any way.”

“But how would your step-father or anyone else for that matter, benefit from stealing Dr. Crawford’s computer?” Dupree asked.

“I honestly can’t answer that.”

“And you never asked that question?” T.J. said.

Lentz bit his lip. “No.”

“So, apparently,” T.J. said, “your step-father trusted that you would never share this information with anyone, particularly the cops.”

“Why would I? That would make me an accomplice. Besides, I’m cooperating so the DA will reduce the conspiracy to commit murder charge. That’s what we agreed on, right?”

“We’ll do everything we can to convince the DA to reduce the charges,” Dupree said. “However, you will have to testify in court.”

“I’ll do anything to ensure that Cassano gets what he deserves.”

A lull came over the room.

“A few more questions,” Dupree said. “First, do you know Ivan Tesler?”

“Never heard of him.”

“What’s Maggie Hansen’s part in this?” Dupree asked.

“Absolutely nothing.”

“Come on, Mr. Lentz,” Dupree said. “We know there was bad blood between Dr. Crawford and Ms. Hansen.”

“Sure there was, but I swear that she has no knowledge of anything.”

“Considering that you’re sweet on Ms. Hansen,” Dupree said, “how can we be sure you’re not trying to protect her?”

“Give me a lie detector test. I’m telling you the truth.”

Dupree believed him. In fact, she felt that his whole story was too bizarre to be fabricated.

“One final thing,” Dupree said. “We’re letting you leave, but don’t even *think* about leaving New York.”

“I’m not going anywhere.”

Dupree left T.J. sitting at the table and

escorted Lentz to the precinct exit. Just before he left the precinct, she stopped him.

“By the way, you know you can’t keep the money, right?”

“*What?*” Lentz’s face flushed red. “I don’t understand.”

“When you receive compensation for actions associated with a felony, the money is confiscated.”

“Hardly sounds fair.”

“*Fair?*” Dupree felt herself losing control. “Was it *fair* that one of the most brilliant research scientists of our time was senselessly murdered? Does it seem *fair* that thousands, perhaps millions of people will die of cancer because Dr. Crawford’s research is on hold? Does it

seem *fair* that Mrs. Crawford has to spend the rest of her life mourning her daughter's brutal murder?"

Lentz seemed to be evaluating her words, but didn't show any signs of regret. "Does that mean I have to forfeit the Audi, too?"

Dupree wanted to punch Lentz square in the jaw, but let her anger pass. "We'll be in touch real soon."

Dupree stomped away and whispered, "What a fucking asshole."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

“I almost lost it in there, T.J.,” Dupree admitted. “When Lentz was leaving he said something that made me see red.”

“Care to share it?”

She told him about her parting conversation with Lentz.

“I guess he didn’t love Dr. Crawford as much as he loved money,” T.J. said.

“What’s your read on his wacky story?” Dupree asked.

“Call me crazy, but I think he’s leveling with us. And you?”

“I’m right there with you, partner,” Dupree said. “Here’s what I think: when Gallo and his cohorts realized that Dr. Crawford was onto something that could completely change cancer research as we know it, they wanted a piece of the action. But Dr. Crawford wasn’t interested. So, they needed to get her out of the way.”

“So,” T.J. said, “you think that Gallo made a deal with Cassano to *murder* Dr. Crawford rather than just having him take her computer?”

“That’s what I think,” Dupree said. “Even if they got their hands on her computer, how could they know for sure that it contained the complete research data? It might have taken them years to

piece things together. But if they got rid of her and partnered with Horizon, they'd have access to the main servers and all the clinical trials, and every other piece of data. And I'll bet you dollars to donuts that Gallo's cohorts are big pharmaceutical companies with virtually unlimited financial resources."

"That would place Mason in an awkward situation," T.J. said. "He was in the perfect position to spearhead this whole conspiracy."

"Sure was."

"Both Dr. Mason and Maggie Hansen made a valid point that there may be drug companies out there—particularly those making millions on chemo drugs—who would benefit from suppressing Dr.

Crawford's findings," T.J. said. "Maybe that's what Gallo and company hoped to do."

"Good point, but I don't think so. They'd stand to make ten times more money by *completing* Dr. Crawford's research, patenting the drugs, and selling them for a gazillion dollars. I mean we're talking about a treatment that can extend the lives of terminal cancer patients, while preserving their quality of life. And in some instances, the treatment could actually cure certain forms of cancer. We're talking about a money machine."

Dupree looked at her watch. "Let's get some lunch before we head over to Horizon."

“Great idea. I’m starving.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

After having a quick lunch at Joshua's Deli, Dupree and T.J. headed for the Horizon Cancer Research Center in the Bronx.

"I can't believe you ate that entire corn beef sandwich," Dupree said. "And that's after you downed a half dozen kosher pickles."

"Hey, a growing boy needs his fuel."

"Well, if you keep fueling your body like that, make sure you've got a closet full of fat pants."

“Aren’t we the witty one today,” T.J. said.

“I’m just messing with you.” Dupree laughed out loud. “Some women actually like chubby men.”

Dupree was relieved that in spite of the seriousness of homicide investigations, T.J. and she could still enjoy a little humor. When a cop is all formal and uptight, it makes the job harder and keeps the blood pressure elevated.

After weaving through traffic for forty-five minutes, Dupree and T.J. pulled into the lot next to the ten-story building where Horizon’s facility was located. They walked in the front door, and without uttering a sound, flashed

their IDs as they passed the almost-sleeping security guard. Then they hopped on the elevator. When they stepped off the elevator, the perky receptionist promptly greeted them.

“Good morning,” Dupree said. “I’m Detective Dupree and this is Detective Brown. We have an appointment with Dr. Mason.”

The receptionist held up her index finger. “One moment please, while I call Dr. Mason.”

Dupree noticed that the activity level of the entire facility seemed much less intense than she remembered. During their last visit, the place was a virtual beehive. But today, it appeared that everyone moved around in slow motion

and Dupree noticed fewer employees.

Dupree spotted Dr. Mason heading her way.

“Nice to see you both,” Dr. Mason said. “I wish it were under different circumstances.” He motioned with his arm. “Please follow me.”

Trailing behind Dr. Mason, Dupree craned her neck left then right, and confirmed her earlier suspicions: Horizon Cancer Research Center was operating at half-throttle. When the three of them entered Dr. Mason’s office, the stale cigarette odor Dupree remembered from her last visit seemed even more pronounced. She wasn’t surprised. She could only imagine the amount of stress Dr. Mason would have had to endure

since Dr. Crawford's murder.

Before they could even sit down, Dr. Mason said, "Please tell me that you've arrested the killer."

"We do have someone in custody and I feel we have sufficient evidence to prosecute," Dupree said. "There are a few puzzle pieces still missing, but we're very close to charging the suspect with murder."

Normally, Dupree wouldn't so freely share this much information at this stage of an investigation. But considering the possibility that Mason may have played a role in the conspiracy, she wanted to see how he reacted. He remained rock solid. No flinching. No eye twitches. And no nervous swallowing.

“Fantastic! You can’t imagine the chaos that resulted from Lauren’s murder. Nearly everyone on staff is updating their résumés. They parade in and out of my office all day long and ask if I’ve found funding or if I’ve made a deal with a competent partner who can get us back on track.”

“And have you made any progress?” Dupree asked.

“I have. Thank God. In fact, I’ve all but decided to make a deal with Hyland Laboratories, the biggest pharmaceutical company in the world. They virtually have unlimited funds—I think they netted sixteen billion last year—and their flagship drug is Camadyacin, one of the most widely used chemotherapy drugs

for treating cancer. They have years of research experience and employ a drug development division second to none.”

“We’re so glad to hear that,” Dupree said. “Isn’t Hyland the company that tried to partner with Horizon awhile back, but Dr. Crawford nixed the deal?”

“That is correct.”

“And didn’t they also try to hire Maggie Hansen?” Dupree said.

“They did. But that’s ancient history.

“When do you expect to firm up the deal?” Dupree asked.

“As a matter of fact, Michael Adelman, the CEO of Hyland, will be in my office tomorrow morning at ten a.m. to discuss the partnership. He’s flying into New York from his home office in

Albany. Assuming that we can work out a few kinks, I'm hopeful we can come to terms." Dr. Mason nervously tugged on his collar. "There is a legal issue, however, that I need to address. Striking a deal with Hyland isn't as simple as signing an agreement. There is a grueling legal process we have to go through.

"Were you considering any other partners?" T.J. asked.

"Actually, three different pharmaceutical companies joined forces and wanted to form a partnership with Horizon as a team. Ritter-Stone, Global Pharmaceuticals, and Fowler-Paine made a generous offer, and I was really tempted to go with them. But they wanted controlling interest in the project

and that was never going to happen.”

Mason blinked excessively. “There was another issue that convinced me to go with Hyland.” Mason, noticeably uncomfortable, adjusted himself in the chair and swallowed several times. “They tried to bribe me.”

“In what regard?” Dupree asked.

“They offered me personally a significant amount of money to sign an agreement with them. They claimed, of course, that it was an *incentive* and made it clear that I could keep the money even if I decided not to consummate the deal. But clearly, they were trying to bribe me.”

“Mind if I ask how much they offered?” T.J. asked.

“One-million dollars.”

“Wow,” T.J. said. “No offense, but that had to be a tempting offer. I mean a *million* dollars.”

“My integrity is worth a lot more, Detective Brown. I had a very successful practice and invested wisely, so money in itself is not much of a motivator for me. Granted, if and when the FDA approves our findings, I expect to earn a fair share of the profits. But make no mistake about it. This is not about money; it’s about finding better treatments, and possibly a cure for cancer.”

Dupree looked in Mason’s eyes the whole time he was talking, searching for any sign that he was nervous or

uncomfortable. He passed the test.

“Dr. Mason,” Dupree said, “tell us about Horizon’s connection to Dominic Gallo?”

“He’s the Deputy Director of the Center for Drug Evaluation and Research, a wing of the FDA. In fact, I believe I told you when we last met that he had been working with Lauren for quite some time.”

“Excuse me for asking,” Dupree said, “but isn’t it a conflict of interest for a senior representative from the FDA to work directly with any organization researching and developing drugs?”

“You’re absolutely right, Detective. But not everything in the world is clearly black and white. Lauren had appealed

personally to the FDA commissioner and asked permission to work directly with a high-level representative from the CDER. At first, the commissioner turned her down flat. But when he learned the significance of her research and the potential to cure cancer, how could he not support her efforts every way possible?”

“Did Dr. Crawford ask specifically to work with Dominic Gallo?” Dupree asked.

“If my memory serves me correctly, I think it was the other way around. Dominic was very passionate about Lauren’s theories and wanted to work with her throughout the entire developmental process.”

“He sounds like a very dedicated man,” T.J. said. “Did he actually come to Horizon or communicate with Dr. Crawford more by telephone, text, and e-mail?”

“He was a regular visitor. In fact, he’s flying in from Maryland tomorrow morning to meet with Michael Adelman and me. He wants to help us solidify the partnership agreement and help us cut through as much red tape as possible.”

Dupree glanced at her watch. “Well, Dr. Mason, we’ve taken up enough of your time. Thank you so much for talking with us again. Good luck with your meeting tomorrow morning.”

“My pleasure, detectives. I hope you have a pleasant day.”

“Oh, one more thing,” Dupree said. “Are you acquainted with Jonathan Lentz?”

“I wouldn’t use the word, ‘acquainted’, but yes, I met him at my last holiday party.”

“Have you spoken to him recently?”

“As a matter of fact, he’s called a couple of times.”

Dupree could tell by the tone in Mason’s voice that Lentz’s calls were unwelcomed. “May I ask why he called?”

“He asked me to rehire Margaret Hansen.”

“And is that something you’re considering?”

He didn’t answer immediately. “At

this particular time I'd say, no, but nothing is carved in stone."

"Thanks again, Dr. Mason," Dupree said.

Dupree and T.J. couldn't get to the elevator fast enough.

"Talk about good timing," T.J. said as the doors closed. "Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"That we're coming back here tomorrow morning to bushwhack Mason, Adelman, and Gallo?"

"Exactly."

"Now let's get back to the precinct. It's time to squeeze Cassano's *huevos*," Dupree said.

"I'm drooling just thinking about it," T.J. said.

“You have no idea how many one-liners are popping into my head.”

“Get your mind out of the gutter.”

“Just hanging down there with you, partner.”

When Dupree and T.J. dragged their weary bodies through the front door of the precinct, they spotted Captain Jensen having a conversation with Detectives Mark Wells and Craig Parisi.

“What’s the latest?” the captain asked Dupree. “Commissioner McVay is up my ass all-day-long.”

“Wow,” T.J. said, “I didn’t know the commissioner was a proctologist.”

Jensen glared at T.J. “Best button your

lips, Detective.”

“Lots going on, Captain,” Dupree said. “I’ll have a full report by the end of the day.”

“Just give me the abridged version for now.”

Dupree told the captain everything T.J. and she had discovered over the last couple of days; Lentz’s connection to Gallo and Cassano; the unusual circumstances surrounding Tesler’s murder; Dr. Mason’s involvement with Hyland Laboratories and Gallo; the apparent romance between Lentz and Hansen. She gave him a recap of all the major facts, but decided to tell him privately about the suspicious letter she’d received.

Captain Jensen handed Dupree a plain white envelope. “This ought to make your day.”

At first, Dupree ignored Jensen’s outstretched hand, remembering the last letter she’d gotten. Feeling uneasy, she gingerly tore open the envelope and felt relieved to find Maggie Hansen’s bank statement and cell phone records. “You *did* make my day, Captain.”

“That’s just the beginning,” the captain said. “Parisi’s got an early Christmas gift for you.”

Parisi grinned from ear to ear. He stood and pushed his thinning hair out of his eyes. “Since Ivan Tesler’s murder, Wells and I, along with a few police officers, have been canvassing the

neighborhood, hoping that someone saw or heard something. We thought that it was a bust, but then Tesler's next door neighbor, a John Richardson called headquarters. He said that he saw a large man leaving Tesler's home at nine p.m., the night Tesler was murdered, and that the guy looked like he was in a hurry. That's about thirty minutes before Tesler called 911 for help."

"How can the neighbor be sure of the time?" T.J. asked.

"Because he claims that he walks his dog every night at precisely nine-o'clock and that he's been doing it for twelve years."

"Did he see what kind of car the suspect was driving, or get a license

plate number?" Dupree asked.

"Richardson said it was dark and he wasn't sure what the guy was driving. But it looked like a full-size Chevy pickup truck. When the suspect started the truck and turned on the lights, Richardson memorized part of the plate number."

"Hold on a minute," Dupree said. "Why would he even think to do that? What led Richardson to believe the driver of the truck was up to no good?"

"I asked Richardson the same thing and he told me the guy just looked out of place."

"Did you run the partial plate number?"

"I gave the info to Brenda—the

Wizard of Oz—and she worked her mojo.” Parisi grinned again. “Guess what? The truck is registered to Oscar Cassano.”

Dupree felt her heart thumping in her ears. “Thanks, Craig.”

“My pleasure. I hope you nail this son-of-a-bitch.”

Parisi went about his business and T.J. was busy shuffling through a pile of papers.

“Hey, Dupree,” the captain yelled. “Got a few minutes for me?”

She looked at her watch. “I can do better than that. I’ll give you five.”

She asked T.J. to sit tight and said she’d be back soon. She turned to leave, but T.J. stopped her. “Are you going to

tell him about the letter?”

“If I can get a word in edgewise.”

Dupree followed Jensen down the hallway to his office.

Once seated, Jensen picked up an envelope lying on top of his two-drawer file cabinet. “A FedEx driver delivered this about an hour ago. I was going to leave it on your desk until I noticed that the sender is Margaret Crawford. She’s Dr. Crawford’s mother, correct?”

Dupree nodded. Her hands began to tremble and she could barely swallow.

Jensen handed Dupree the envelope and her whole body recoiled as if he were handing her a rattlesnake.

“What’s the matter?” Jensen asked. She told him about the letter she’d

received from her “mother” and what the note inside said.

“There are a lot of sick fucks out there,” Jensen said. “Why didn’t you come to me sooner?”

“I had every intention to, but T.J. and I have been running our asses off.”

“Where is the envelope now?”

“I put it in a plastic bag and gave it to the techs in the lab. When they checked it over, they found several different fingerprints, which I pretty much expected.”

“Anything worth pursuing?”

“Unfortunately, not.”

Jensen set down the envelope and scratched the back of his head. “Do you really think this is from Mrs.

Crawford?”

“Highly unlikely,” Dupree said. “But I’ll give her a call just to be sure.”

Dupree pulled her cell out of her purse. She had programmed Mrs. Crawford’s phone number in her contact list. It was a brief conversation.

“The letter’s not from her,” Dupree said.

“Let’s have the techies check it out. Hopefully, they’ll pick up a print we can use. And by the way. I’m your fucking boss and I need to know *everything*. Got it?”

“Yes, Captain.” Dupree’s stomach twisted into a knot.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

“I told you this place would be quaint and charming,” Maggie Hansen said. She stood at the foot of the bed wearing only a lace bra and skimpy, pink panties.

Lentz couldn't wait to get his hands on her. He let his eyes wander off her just long enough to look around. The cottage looked like a small log cabin, rustic and cozy. Everything from the cathedral ceilings to the walls to the floors was built with solid wood logs, planks, and beams. On the night stand next to the bed

a bottle of Moët was chilling in a silver bucket of ice.

This is going to be a memorable day, Lentz thought.

He lay on the king-size bed stripped to his Jockey shorts. “How did you find a place like this—on Long Island no less?”

“I’m more resourceful than you give me credit for.”

“Well, all I can say is that you never cease to amaze me.”

“The party is just starting,” Maggie said. “Look what I brought.” She held up her hand and jingled a pair of handcuffs. “Maybe I can amaze you even more.”

“Are you feeling naughty?” Jonathan said. “Because I *do* know how to handle

naughty little girls.”

“Is that right? I guess we’ll just have to find out.” Maggie reached around behind her, unsnapped her bra, and let it fall to the floor. Jonathan’s eyes opened wide. Her breasts were absolutely perfect. He had seen them many times, but for some reason, today they looked exquisite.

“Like what you see?” Maggie teased.

“I’d like it more if you took off your panties.”

“I’d love to, but I shaved this morning and don’t want to get a chill.”

He could feel himself getting aroused. “Oh, I think I can keep you warm.”

Maggie eased her way onto the bed and straddled Jonathan. “Is Duke ready

to come out and play?"

If only she knew. She was obviously looking for trouble and he could surely deliver. "He's more than ready."

"Here's a thought," Maggie said. "Maybe, just for kicks, we should reverse roles."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, I'm always the one getting punished for being naughty. Maybe it's time I punish you." She slipped her hand down his underwear.

After a few minutes of moaning, Jonathan said, "What do you want me to do?"

"I want to handcuff you to the bed and tease Duke until he begs for mercy. And when it's time for the grand finale...let's

just say that I've got a special treat for him." She licked her lips.

From his past experiences with her, she had been the perfect student. She did exactly what he wanted and learned quickly how he wanted it. Like an explorer, she could navigate his body with skill and surgical precision. She could take him to the edge and bring him back. Over and over. Until he begged for mercy; pleaded to be satisfied. He felt more excited than ever before. Lentz was ready. Oh, so ready.

Maggie, still straddling Jonathan, reached towards the nightstand, opened the drawer, pulled out a pair of handcuffs, and jingled them just above Jonathan's face.

“Remember these?”

“How could I forget?”

She handcuffed Jonathan to the headboard so that both of his wrists were immobilized. Although excited, Jonathan felt a little apprehension, but quickly dismissed it. She hopped off the bed, snatched the bottle of champagne, and struggled trying to remove the cork. Finally, it popped and sailed across the room. She took a swig right out of the bottle.

“Want some?” she asked.

Jonathan nodded and surveyed her lovely curves. “I want more than some.”

“Patience, my dear.” She stood over him and slowly poured some champagne in his mouth.

“I never drank champagne like that before,” Jonathan said, “but I find it quite erotic.”

“Don’t go anywhere,” Maggie said. She went into the bathroom. When she returned, he could tell that she was hiding something behind her back. “Do you trust me, Jonathan?”

He did. To a point. But knew what she wanted to hear. “Unconditionally.”

“Let’s test that claim. I want you to close your eyes and open your mouth.”

“Now you’re scaring me.”

“If you trust me unconditionally, then there shouldn’t be anything to fear, right?”

Jonathan hesitated, but then squeezed his eyes shut and opened his mouth.

He could feel Maggie straddling him again.

“Are you ready?”

He nodded, still lying with his mouth open.

“No peeking,” Maggie said. Before he could even imagine what she had planned for him, he felt her stuff a rag or piece of terrycloth deep into his mouth. His eyes opened wide and he tried to fight but Maggie had been too quick. Panic crashed over him.

“You never should have betrayed Dominic Gallo.” Maggie held up the almost full bottle of champagne. “Are you ready to be punished, you naughty boy?”

With the additional information Parisi had shared with Dupree about Tesler's murder and its connection to Cassano, she was just itching to interrogate Cassano; so much so that she hadn't even looked at Hansen's bank statement and cell phone records. And of course, nothing dominated her thoughts more than the second letter she'd received.

Dupree half jogged to lockup with T.J. following behind.

"What's the rush?" T.J. asked. "Is this a fire drill?"

"Parisi charged my battery, so I can't wait to double-team our number one suspect."

Dupree told T.J. about the second envelope.

“Are you shitting me?”

“Wish I was.”

“I’m sorry, Amaris, I really am.”

“Hey, it comes with the territory. Wouldn’t be the first time some asshole threatened me. And it won’t be the last.”

“Yeah, but using your mother’s name...”

Without saying a word to Cassano, who was yelling expletives, Dupree asked the on-duty policeman to unlock the jail cell and cuff the suspect. Dupree tightly gripped Cassano’s arm and hustled him to an interview room. When they entered the room, Cassano and T.J. sat down at the table, but Dupree paced the floor with her arms folded.

“I talked to a public defender,”

Cassano yelled, “and you two assholes have violated my rights. You haven’t arrested me, haven’t read me my rights —”

“Let’s take care of business right now,” Dupree said. “You’re under arrest for the murders of Dr. Lauren Crawford and Ivan Tesler. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say or do can and will be held against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand these rights I have just read to you?”

“The only thing I understand is that you two pigs are in deep shit. You got nothing on me, and I ain’t saying

anything without my attorney.”

“Not a problem,” Dupree said. “I still have to know if you understand your rights.”

“All right, already, I *do* understand,” Cassano yelled. “Now get me a fucking lawyer! And not some snotty-nosed kid right out of college.”

“T.J., would you mind contacting Shawn Williamson and asking him to get down here right away?”

T.J. looked puzzled, but left the room without comment.

“Who the hell is Shawn Williamson?” Cassano asked.

“He’s a public defender.”

“Is he any good?”

“I guess you’ll find out when you’re

standing in front of a judge and jury.”

Cassano and Dupree engaged in a staring contest.

“You don’t mind if I wait here with you until your attorney arrives, do you?” Dupree said.

“Do whatever the fuck you want, but I ain’t answering no questions.”

Dupree found it difficult to maintain her composure but forced herself to remain polite. “Mind if I sit down? It’s been a long day.”

“Do you think it’s been a party for me, locked up in a rat trap like an animal?”

“It must be a real drag pacing the floor of a twelve by twelve jail cell, knowing you’re going to spend the rest of your life behind bars. But there’s

something even worse than life in prison.”

“And what might that be?”

“Dying by lethal injection.”

“Are you trying to scare me, cuz my knees are shaking.”

“I wouldn’t try to scare you, Oscar. You’re a real tough guy.”

“You’re not supposed to be questioning me.”

“I thought we were just having a conversation.”

Cassano focused his eyes on the handcuffs.

“I’m sure you’ve heard of Al Fiorino, former New York State senator,” Dupree said. “Well, his daughter, Isabella, is the District Attorney. She’s

really made a name for herself. Has more murder one convictions than any DA in the country. And she also holds the record for most executions.”

“Gee, thanks for the little history lesson. Do you offer math classes too?”

Oh, how she wanted to yank him by the shirt collar and smack him. “One thing interesting about Fiorino is that she refuses to prosecute for the death penalty without rock solid evidence because she hates to lose. Got an ego as big as the Goodyear blimp. You know what I mean, don’t you Mr. Cassano? She looks for evidence like a DNA match of blood samples, a sworn testimony from a reliable witness, a videotape of the actual crime scene showing a unique

birthmark, or fingerprints at the scene of the crime.”

Suddenly, Cassano didn't look so smug.

“But Fiorino likes to play the game, too. She's a born deal-maker and enjoys negotiating with criminals who cooperate and finger their accomplices. But here's the best part: She can take a poor sap facing two murder one counts and life in prison, or execution by lethal injection, and cut a plea bargain deal that gets them out of prison on good behavior in twenty-five years. Twenty-five years for *two murders*! Now, for a guy under thirty-five, a deal like that is a hell of a bargain, don't you think?”

It seemed to Dupree that Cassano had

run out of smart-ass remarks. Either that or she'd gotten his attention. Clearly, he was deep in thought. It was time to drop the hammer.

“I read a fascinating article in *Newsweek* magazine a few months ago. It was titled, “Execution by Injection far from Painless.” Apparently, a group of researchers from Florida conducted a thorough investigation into lethal injection. After extensive research, they concluded that since the Supreme Court approved capital punishment in 1976, 788 people have been put to death by injection in the United States, and as many as 90% felt pain, and 40% were conscious throughout the procedure. Now I have no idea how much you know

about lethal injection, but it's a three step process. First, a technician injects a solution that induces anesthesia. Then, a second injection is introduced that paralyzes the body. Third, an injection of potassium chloride stops the heart. It takes several minutes before the anesthesia numbs the entire body, so when the technician injects the paralytic solution, parts of the body are still very much awake. Sadly, the paralytic solution they use is like injecting lava into your veins. So, any body part that hasn't yet been anesthetized, feels like it's literally on fire. Here's the thing. The subject, no matter how much in pain, can't move, can't even twitch a finger. So, no one knows how much agony the

convict endures, but by all accounts, it's likely excruciating. I would guess that it's even more painful than slicing someone's body and pouring salt and vinegar in their wounds."

Dupree saw his eye twitch. "Oh, and one more thing: We know that you drive a Chevy pickup truck, license plate number QZZ-6851."

"So, what if I do?"

"We also know that your truck was parked in front of Ivan Tesler's house the night he was brutally murdered."

"Who says so?"

"Ivan's neighbor. He saw you leaving the scene about thirty minutes before Ivan called 911. Isn't that an interesting coincidence?"

T.J. walked in the interview room and closed the door. “Williamson should be here in about an hour.”

“You can wait here or in your cell,” Dupree said. “It’s up to you.”

Cassano wiped the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve. He nervously drummed his fingers on the table. “Fuck the public defender. I wanna make a deal.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Dupree and T.J. left Cassano in the interview room for a few minutes. At his request, they went to the staff break room and got him a soda. Before they headed back to face what they both thought would be an illuminating interview, they carefully examined Maggie Hansen's bank statement and cell phone records. Dupree figured that the longer they let Cassano stew, the looser his tongue might be.

"Let's see," Dupree said. She ran her

index finger slowly down the page. “Three calls to Albany, New York. And check this out. Four calls to international area code 345 in the Grand Cayman Islands.”

“Now *that* sparks my curiosity,” T.J. said.

Normally, Dupree would take the time to make calls herself to determine who a suspect was communicating with, like she’d done with Lentz’s phone records. But at this time, she had more important issues to deal with. “Let’s have Brenda run all the numbers and see what comes up.”

T.J. studied the bank statement. “Nothing unusual here. No deposits, four ATM withdrawals, and seven checks

issued to various payees. Last balance was nine-thousand-twenty dollars.”

“Well,” Dupree said, “I don’t know where she fits into this puzzle, but she’s anything but squeaky-clean. I guess we’ll just have to see how the rest of the investigation unfolds.”

T.J. looked at his watch. “Ready for this?”

“No, but let’s hope Cassano has something for us to sink our teeth into.”

Dupree and T.J. entered the room and handed Cassano a Dr. Pepper. Although Cassano was in theory about to cooperate with Dupree and T.J., she still felt like smashing the soda can in his face. Setting aside the fact that he was a cold-blooded murderer, Dupree just

couldn't stand the sight of him.

"Let me make this easy for you," Dupree said. "As soon as we get a DNA sample from you and match it with the blood found in the backseat of Dr. Crawford's car, we own your ass. This is what we want to know: First, who originally contacted you to steal Dr. Crawford's computer? Second, why did you kill her? Third, who else is involved? And fourth, why did you kill Ivan Tesler?"

Cassano popped the top on the can of soda and took a long swig. "Before I say even one word, how do I know that the DA is going to reduce the charges?"

"I can only make one promise. If you *don't* cooperate 100%, you've got a

guaranteed appointment with cardiac arrest.”

“So, I’m supposed to take your word for it?”

“That’s your only option,” Dupree said. “Either answer our questions or we can escort you back to your cell and tell the DA to proceed. What’ll it be?”

Cassano appeared to be deep in thought.

“I don’t even know the guy’s name that hired me. I met him through Jake Sullivan, a bartender at the Night Owl. Jake knows I’m always looking to make a few bucks on the side and I don’t mind getting my hands dirty—if you know what I mean.”

“When you say ‘dirty’, you mean

‘bloody’, correct?” T.J. asked.

Cassano didn’t answer but his eyes said, “Yes.”

“Anyway, this guy says he’ll pay me two-thousand dollars to steal this big-shot doctor’s computer. Seemed like easy money to me. I gave Ivan Tesler a few hundred to keep an eye on her so I could monitor her daily routine and figure out when would be the best time to snag her computer. The guy who hired me gave me a cell phone and told me that someone would be calling to give me specific instructions and to make arrangements to pay me. Well, I get the call but it was not what I expected. The woman blows my mind. She says—”

“Wait a minute,” Dupree interrupted.

“Did you say a *woman* called?”

“Yeah. A woman. A chick. A broad. Whatever you want to call her.”

Dupree remembered that Lentz had told her Dominic Gallo was going to call Cassano with instructions. If Cassano was telling the truth, this new information put a whole new spin on the investigation. An image of Maggie Hansen flashed in her mind. “You’re absolutely sure it was a woman?”

“Unless it was a guy getting his nuts squeezed, yes, I’m positive it was a woman. Geez, do you want me to answer your questions or what?”

“Sorry,” Dupree said. “Go ahead.”

“Anyway, she asks me how much she’d have to pay me to kill somebody.

Kill somebody. I didn't know what the fuck to say. I mean, how often in your life does some crazy stranger ask you a question like that? How do you even answer that question? I've done lots of weird shit in my day, but I ain't never killed anyone. Came close a couple of times in prison. But they were all useless knuckleheads. I told her that the price all depends on who it is. Now keep in mind, I had no intention of ending anyone's life. But I got to admit, I had dollar signs in my eyes.

“She tells me she wants me to kill the doctor I was supposed to steal the computer from. She says that she still wants me to snatch the computer, but also wants me to put a bullet in the

doctor's head. I figured that if this woman really wanted the doctor dead, she'd have to pay for it—and I'm talking serious money. Hey, I thought that maybe this was my big break. A chance for me to get the hell out of New York and spend the rest of my life lying in the sun somewhere nice. Not that I really wanted to end a stranger's life, a woman I had no beef with, but for a guy like me, money talks and bullshit walks. So, I tried her on for size and asked for a million dollars. What did I have to lose? Worst that could happen was that I'd hear the dial tone. The woman offers me a half mill without even flinching. It was like we were talking about chump-change. I would have taken the half-mill.

But I thought I'd go for broke, so I said, seven-fifty. Before the words even slipped off my tongue, she says, 'Done.'

"I thought to myself, '*Done?*' She said she'd call me back in twenty-four hours and tell me where I could pick up a good faith payment of one-hundred thou."

"And where was that?" T.J. asked.

"In a locker at the Postal Annex in the Bronx."

"How did you get the key?"

"Overnight FedEx to my house."

"So you went to the Postal Annex and found one hundred thousand *cash* in the locker?"

Cassano nodded. "A thousand, crisp one-hundred-dollar bills in a black duffle bag. Just like in the movies."

“How about the rest of the money?” Dupree asked.

“She said that once she confirmed that the doctor was dead, she’d wire the six-fifty to some offshore bank account set up in my name. Said she couldn’t get me cash because they don’t make a duffle bag big enough for that much loot. I wasn’t really comfortable with this arrangement. After all, I don’t even know who I’m talking to on the telephone. But I suppose I was so caught up in the money—I mean three quarters of a mill is a lot of scratch—I agreed to her terms. Well, guess what? I never got the fucking money. I went to see Jake Sullivan and asked him how I could get in touch with the guy that hired me in the

first place. He gave me his name and said he'd call me if the guy came in the Night Owl. I found out where he lived, but when I went to his apartment, he had moved out and the manager said he didn't leave a forwarding address. I pretty much figured that he was just a patsy and not the money guy."

"Do you have any idea where the money was supposed to be wired?" Dupree asked.

"Some island down in the Caribbean."

Nobody uttered a sound for a few minutes. Dupree could almost taste the tension in the air. That he could tell this story so casually, struck Dupree. As a homicide detective, she thought she'd

seen it all. But this investigation seemed like virgin territory.

“So, Mr. Cassano, as it worked out,” Dupree said, “for a hundred grand, you killed a brilliant scientist that you didn’t even know. You must be so proud of yourself.”

“Not proud at all.” Cassano massaged his temples. “I nearly chickened out at the last minute. I almost took her computer and let her be. It’s one thing to talk about ending someone’s life, but it sure is different when you’re looking them in the eyes and can see the terror firsthand. Besides, I had no axe to grind with this lady. But she went and did something stupid.”

“And what was that?” Dupree asked.

“She found a nail file in her purse and stabbed me right in the face.” Cassano pointed to his still wounded cheek. “That set me off. I was bleeding like a stuffed pig and I completely lost it.”

“What happened next?” Dupree asked.

Cassano looked Dupree square in the eyes. “I put three bullets in her head.”

Dupree felt a chill crawl up her back and she shivered. She could not fathom how anyone could make a statement like that with such cold indifference. But this was not the time to get distracted. She forced herself to stay on task.

“Where did you get the gun?”

Cassano laughed out loud. “In case you haven’t noticed, Detective, this is New York City. You got the cash, you

get the goods. Whatever you want.”

“Give me a name.”

“There *is* no name. It doesn’t work that way. You put the word out on the street that you’re looking for a piece and the sellers find you.”

“Where is the gun?” T.J. asked.

“Swimming in the East River.”

“What can you tell us about the woman on the telephone?” Dupree asked. “The one who made the deal with you to kill Dr. Crawford. Anything unusual about her voice?”

“If you call a thick southern accent unusual, then I guess she fits the bill.”

Dupree snapped her head toward T.J. and could tell by his wide-eyed look that he was thinking the same thing. “She had

a *southern* accent? Are you sure?"

"That's what I just said." Cassano looked noticeably annoyed. "All I listen to is country music. I should know a southern accent when I hear one."

"What happened to the cell they gave you?" T.J. asked.

"Keeping the gun company at the bottom of the East River."

"She told you to get rid of it?" T.J. asked.

Cassano nodded. "After my final conversation with the woman that made the payment arrangements, she told me to toss it in the river."

"Why didn't you just keep the phone?" Dupree asked.

"I thought about it, but it stopped

working. The woman must have cancelled the service or the phone crapped out. No big deal. I never really cared much for cell phones. I don't understand all the doohickeys. Besides, whoever wanted the doctor killed was paying me a hefty chunk of change. I didn't really give a rat's ass about a dumb cell phone."

"What happened to the computer?"

"She told me to leave it in the locker at the Postal Annex."

Dupree thought about easing into the next part of the conversation, but this was one of those situations when you hit a suspect square between the eyes.

"Why did you murder Ivan Tesler?"

"Because he was a rat-bastard. A

squealer. If he would have kept his big mouth shut, I'd still be walking the streets and he'd be alive. He deserved everything he got."

Dupree found it hard to believe that even Cassano could be so callous. "So you have no regrets?"

"Yeah, I do. I regret giving him money to keep an eye on the doctor. I offer him a chance to earn a few bucks and he sticks it in my ass. Fuck 'em."

"One last thing," Dupree said. "Why did you ransack Dr. Crawford's apartment? What were you looking for?"

"After I got screwed out of the additional six-fifty the lyin' bitch owed me, I figured I'd try to make up for my losses. Not that I expected to find a

truckload of cash, but hey, maybe I'd stumble upon some diamond jewelry or a stash of money. But I didn't find shit—only worthless jewelry and a stupid camera.”

“So,” Dupree said, “you obviously never found the fireproof document case hidden under the china cabinet.”

Cassano's head snapped up. “What document case?”

“The one with fifty-seven thousand dollars in it.”

He laughed. “You're just screwing with me.”

“Whatever,” Dupree said.

Cassano's face flushed with blood “I think we're done.”

“When you gonna talk to the DA?”

“Soon,” Dupree said.

“Today? Tomorrow?”

“Soon,” T.J. echoed.

“How long do I have to stay in that rat-hole cage in the back?”

“Just until we transfer you to the county jail,” T.J. said.

The detectives stood up and each held one of Cassano’s arms. They led him through the door and down the hall to his jail cell.

“Let me know what the DA says,” Cassano requested.

“You’ll be the first,” Dupree said.
“Oh, one more thing. We’re going to need a blood sample.”

“Why?”

“Silly question, Mr. Cassano.”

“Do I have a choice?”

“Afraid not.”

As soon as Cassano was out of earshot, T.J. said, “Nice touch about the document case.”

“Just wanted to pucker up his ass.”

“You certainly did.”

Dupree and T.J. walked side-by-side toward their desks. They glanced at each other and spoke one word at exactly the same time.

“Hansen?”

Just then, Captain Jensen doubled-stepped it to Dupree’s desk. “We need to talk.”

Rarely had Dupree seen Jensen so wired. He looked like a junkie two days into rehab.

She picked up her purse.

The captain pointed at T.J. “Why don’t you join us, Detective?”

Dupree and T.J. followed Captain Jensen to his office. Once inside, Jensen closed the door. Dupree spotted John Butler sitting in an armchair. By the stern look on Butler’s face, Dupree knew that the captain hadn’t invited them to his office for afternoon tea.

Jensen nodded toward Butler.

“This little powwow is about the second envelope I received, isn’t it?” Dupree asked.

Butler nodded. “There’s bad news and worse news.”

Dupree, nerves frazzled, almost shouted, “Are you going to keep me in

suspense or tell me what the fuck is going on?”

“First,” Butler said, “with the exception of the captain, two FedEx employees, and the FedEx driver, there are no viable fingerprints on the envelope. The small envelope inside was filled with ricin.” He hesitated. “There was also a note.”

“And what did it say?” Dupree asked.

Butler looked at Jensen and he nodded. “For extra flavor, sprinkle some of this on your cat stew.”

Dupree could hardly breathe. It felt as if her lungs were filled with concrete. She glanced at T.J. and his cheeks were flushed red. “Isn’t ricin the poison a few politicians received in the mail?”

“That’s exactly what it is,” Butler said. “One of the most toxic substances on Earth.

Inhaling just a few crystals...well, let’s just say that it’s some nasty shit.”

A lull came over the room.

“Where the hell would some nutcase get their hands on ricin?” Dupree asked.

“Ricin is made from castor beans and the process is very complicated. If you Google, ‘How to make ricin’, you’ll find dozens of instructions, but few, if any, would actually work.

“So, it would appear,” Dupree said, “that whoever sent these envelopes not only wants to mess with my head, they also want to kill me.”

“Why don’t I assign two patrolmen to

watch your building,” Jensen said. “One to watch the lobby and the other stationed outside your door.”

“I can handle myself, Captain.”

“This is no time for your ego to cloud your thinking, Amaris,” T.J. said.

“I’ll be okay. Really.”

“Well,” Jensen said, “it’s your call. But if you change your mind or feel threatened in any way, don’t be a hero.”

Dupree and T.J. left Jensen’s office and returned to their desks.

“You’re not going to nag me to accept the captain’s offer, right, T.J.?”

“No guarantees. But I’ll do my best to zip my lips.”

“I keep thinking about the cat stew note,” Dupree said, “trying to figure out

if anyone associated with the investigation knows I have cats.”

“Didn’t you mention to Hansen that you had two cats the first time we spoke to her?”

“I think you’re right,” Dupree said. “Let me make a call and see if the warrant to search Hansen’s place is ready to go.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

“Boy,” T.J. said, “is there anything Judge Marshall won’t do for you?”

“I’m sure that someday I’ll find out.”

“What’s the plan?” T.J. asked.

“Let’s swing by the court house, pick up the warrant, and head over to Hansen’s.”

Traffic was congested on their way to Prospect Heights.

“Why don’t you just use the siren and beacon?” T.J. suggested.

“Wouldn’t that be abusing my

authority?”

“C’mon, Amaris, it isn’t like you’re lifting some pot from the evidence room.”

“Good point, but—”

“Do you always play by the book?”

“Thus far, I haven’t found a reason not to. But you never know what tomorrow might bring. And remember: I do use my cell when I’m driving.”

Finally, after a grueling ride, Dupree and T.J. arrived at Hansen’s building. She wasn’t sure why, but during the drive, she and T.J. hardly spoke. A noticeable air of tension hovered over them. Under normal circumstances, she might not give this a second thought. But with all they had uncovered over the last

couple of days, it seemed that T.J. and she had plenty to discuss. She wanted to let it rest, but an uncontrollable urge got the best of her.

“Talk to me, T.J. What the hell is going on?”

“Did I miss something?”

“Don’t play that game with me,” Dupree said. “It’s been like a morgue in this car for over an hour. I had to check a couple of times to be sure you were still breathing. What gives?”

“Well, you haven’t been much of a conversationalist either,” T.J. shot back.

“I’m really sorry. Guess I’m just a little preoccupied with cat stew and ricin.” Dupree’s voice was a little shaky.

T.J. glanced at her. “Am *I* an insensitive clod or what? I’m so sorry. I wasn’t even thinking about—”

“You’re not insensitive. But you are a little self-absorbed right now. What is it?”

“I just have a lot on my mind.”

Dupree backed into a parking spot, unbuckled her seatbelt, and turned off the ignition. “Is it Haley?”

“It’s *always* Haley, Amaris. Thoughts of her...”

She grasped his forearm. “We’re both dealing with a lot of shit right now, but we’re so close on this investigation, we just can’t afford to get distracted.”

“You’re absolutely right,” T.J. agreed. “I know that for a long time I

haven't been much of a partner. You had every right to blow me in to the captain, but you didn't. You stood by me. I really appreciate that. Then, you finally kicked me square in the ass and woke me up. Haven't you seen a change in me?"

"Of course I have, T.J. You've been right on top of everything." She squeezed his forearm again. "I just want you to know that you can talk to me. Spill your guts. Dump on me. Tell me what you're feeling. You talk and I'll listen. Sometimes it really helps to let it all out. Believe me, I know what it's like to keep everything bottled up inside, waiting for your head to explode. It's not a place where I want to be. And I know it's not a good place for you either."

Silence again. But a different kind of quiet.

“I guess I’m feeling really guilty,” T.J. admitted.

“About what?”

“I’m finally ready to move on.”

“And by ‘move on’, you mean?”

“I think I can actually leave the past in the past and start living again.”

Dupree could see his eyes glazing over. “That’s not a bad thing, T.J.”

“Haley’s always going to be there, somewhere in my thoughts. I’ll never erase the image of her lying on that bed...”

Dupree knew better than to say anything.

“But I can’t live like this any longer. I

don't want to be haunted by something I can't change. I have to get beyond this or there's absolutely no possibility that I'll ever have a meaningful relationship again."

"Is there anything I can do?"

"You already did." He reached over and touched her cheek with the back of his hand. "Let's get down to business."

Dupree was a little stunned by T.J.'s actions. Was it merely a friendly gesture? Or more?

They dodged traffic crossing the street, heading towards Hansen's building. Once across, Dupree grabbed T.J.'s arm just as they were about to enter. "Something just occurred to me," Dupree said. "Butler said that the

process to make ricin from castor beans was very complicated, right?”

“He did.”

“Well, wouldn’t you think that a research scientist knowledgeable in chemistry might figure out how to extract ricin from castor beans?”

“Holy shit.”

As soon as they entered the building, the grossly overweight, shabbily groomed security guard Dupree remembered walked over to them.

He pointed at them. “You’re those detectives aren’t you?”

Dupree showed him her badge. “Yes, we are *those* detectives.”

She and T.J. moved past him as if he didn’t exist and headed for the elevator.

“Excuse me,” the security guard yelled. “Where do you think you’re going?”

“Well,” T.J. said, “when we get on this elevator, we’re probably going up.”

“Who *exactly* are you looking for?”

“That’s *exactly* none of your business,” T.J. answered.

The security guard gave them a seething look. “Now you two just wait one...

darn...minute. You’ve got no right to barge in here like you own the place.”

Dupree pulled the search warrant out of her inside jacket pocket and waved it in front of his face. “Actually,” she glanced at his name tag, “Ralph, we do kind of own the place.”

“Well, can you at least tell me who you want to see?”

T.J. pushed the ‘up’ button and the doors opened immediately. “Do you have a master key to all the residences?”

“Of course I do.”

“Then why don’t you come with us?”

T.J. said. “And you can find out first hand who we want to see.”

Dupree could see that Ralph would rather jump off a cliff than join them, but he didn’t protest. Unlike the friendly, animated elevator operator Dupree and T.J. had encountered during their first visit, this one was expressionless, talked in a monotone voice, and his face was as milky white as an Albino wolf.

“Floor, please.”

“Twenty-three,” Dupree said.

The turbocharged elevator climbed up in less than ten seconds.

As the doors opened, Ralph’s face lit up. “Now I remember! You’re here to see Margaret Hansen, aren’t you?”

“Sh,” Dupree said. “We want to surprise her.”

Ralph led them to unit 2311.

About to knock on the door, Dupree said, “Wait a minute before you leave. If she’s not home, we need you to unlock the door.”

T.J. knocked.

Nothing.

He knocked again.

Still nothing.

T.J. pointed to the ring of keys

hanging off Ralph's belt. "Please let us in."

Ralph sorted through his keys, found the master, unlocked the door, and slowly pushed it open.

"We'll take it from here," Dupree said. "You can go about your business. We'll let you know when we're done." Dupree took out her cell. "May I have your phone number, Ralph?"

"212-555-9153."

Dupree saved the number.

They entered the apartment and closed the door. "Let's get busy," Dupree said. "I'll start in the bedroom, you check out the kitchen."

Remembering the messy condition of Hansen's apartment the first time she'd

spoken to the suspect, Dupree was surprised at its tidiness. The bedroom looked like a centerfold ad for Bed, Bath, and Beyond. Before Dupree began going through dresser drawers, searching closets, and inspecting the items scattered on the nightstands and vanity, five cardboard boxes neatly stacked in the corner caught her eye.

She reached for the box on top of the pile and tried to lift it, but the box felt way too heavy.

“Hey, T.J.,” she yelled. “Can you help me for a sec?”

When T.J. walked into the bedroom, Dupree pointed to the box. “Mind helping me with this?”

Each of them lifted opposite sides of

the box and set it on the floor.

T.J. grunted. “What the hell’s in there, gold bricks?”

“We’ll soon find out.”

T.J. disappeared through the doorway. With her hands resting on her hips, she examined the outside of the box. The top was neatly sealed with packing tape, and written on one side in black marker were the initials, “S.A.” Below the initials was a phone number: 212-555-9983. Curiosity got the best of her, so Dupree took out her cell and keyed in the number.

One ring. Two rings. Then, a recorded message. *“Thank you for calling the Salvation Army. To schedule a pickup, please press one. For a list of area*

drop-off locations, press two. For a..."

"Salvation Army?"

She fished around the bottom of her handbag until she found her Swiss Army knife. She carefully cut the packing tape and opened the top of the cardboard box. Filled to capacity, she found neatly folded men's clothing. As she dug through the box, examining its contents, Dupree saw sweaters, jeans, polo shirts, a leather jacket, a pair of Nike sneakers, and an assortment of other items. Almost everything in the box was in good condition. Not the type of clothing one would normally donate to a charity.

Anxious to check the contents of the other four cardboard boxes, she reached for the top box. Quite to her surprise, her

adrenalin rescued her muscles, and she managed to gingerly lift the box and set it on the floor without T.J.'s help. Although larger, the last two stacked boxes were much lighter.

With all five cardboard boxes on the floor, one-by-one, Dupree rummaged through the contents. All were full of neatly-folded men's clothing. Just then T.J. appeared.

"Any luck?"

"I haven't searched the room yet. Been busy with these boxes."

"And?"

"They're full of men's clothing. All in pretty good shape." She told him about the initials on the side of the boxes and the phone number she'd called.

“But why would she donate five boxes of men’s clothing to the Salvation Army?”

“They must be Lentz’s clothes,” Dupree said. “If our boy can afford an Audi, maybe he went out and bought a new wardrobe.”

“Or, maybe he doesn’t need his clothes anymore.” T.J. offered.

“I have a really bad feeling about this,” Dupree said. “Either Lentz never had time to unpack, which seems odd. Or something is very wrong. Let’s call in an APB on his Audi and see if we can locate him. I’ll contact Brenda and get it handled.”

For the next two hours, Dupree and T.J. combed the entire apartment, but

found nothing to support the theory that Hansen was indeed the woman who spoke to Cassano and made arrangements for him to steal Dr. Crawford's computer, or possibly murder her.

"Are we done?" T.J. asked, his tone almost a plea.

"Let's sit down for a few minutes," Dupree said. "I just want to be absolutely sure we didn't overlook anything."

Dupree sat on the sofa and T.J. eased into a side chair. On the cocktail table—covered with outdated magazines—Dupree noticed a copy of *Gone with the Wind*. She picked it up and looked at the cover. "My absolute favorite book."

“What is it?” T.J. said. “*Green Eggs and Ham?*”

“Cute, T.J. Real cute.” She turned it toward him so he could see the title. “They don’t make classics like this anymore.”

“Thank God.”

“Seriously? You don’t like *Gone with the Wind?*”

“Never read it but saw the movie. An instant cure for insomnia. I’m more of a Stephen King kind of guy. Just love the *Shining*.”

Dupree noticed a bookmark wedged between the pages about halfway through the book. Out of curiosity, she turned to that page just to see how far Hansen was into the story. The bookmark was a

business card. She looked at the card, then looked at T.J.

“You look like you just saw a ghost,” T.J. said.

She held up the card. “This is Michael Adelman’s business card.”

“Hyland’s CEO?”

Dupree nodded. “Yep. And guess where Hyland’s home office is located.”

T.J. thought for a moment. “Albany?”

“You win the prize.” She turned the card over and looked at the back side. “Check this out.”

T.J. got up and joined Dupree on the sofa.

They both looked at the back of the business card. Written very neatly was the following:

650K
OFC – C27-4150-6930
GCI Trust Ltd. 345-555-2100

“I think we just hit pay dirt,” Dupree said. “You call Captain Jensen and ask him to issue an APB on Hansen and to coordinate surveillance on her apartment. I think one patrolman at each end of the hallway, two in the underground garage, two watching the front entrance, and one in the lobby without a uniform. Tell the captain to distribute a photo of Hansen to security at JFK, LaGuardia, Newark, and Grand Central Station. He can use either the photo on her driver’s license or a still shot from when we interviewed her. I’ll

call Ralph, the security guard, and alert him to expect several patrolmen.”

“No worries that Ralph might tip her off if he sees her?” T.J. said.

“I’ll have a little chat with him about the consequences of harboring a fugitive. Once the patrolmen get here, let’s get back to the precinct. I want to recap everything we know to be certain we haven’t missed anything.”

“Sounds to me like you’ve got all the bases covered,” T.J. said.

“Just trying to put this investigation to rest so I can take a vacation.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

By the time Dupree and T.J. got back to the precinct, it was almost six p.m. The buzz of daytime activity had settled down, but as always, detective work was a twenty-four-hour a day job, so many of Dupree's fellow detectives and support staff were still milling about.

"Before we lock ourselves in the conference room," Dupree suggested, "let's see if Brenda's still here." She held up Michael Adelman's business card. "We can guess what 650K refers

to, and if we call the phone number on the back of this card, I'd bet it's for GCI Trust Ltd. The eleven digit number, no doubt, is a bank account number. But I'd also like to know what OFC and GCI stand for.

“Well, if anyone can figure it out, Brenda can,” T.J. said. “And if we're lucky, she might even have the DNA results from Cassano's blood and some info on Hansen's cell phone records.”

As they neared Brenda's cubicle, Dupree could see the top of Brenda's head rocking from side to side. Brenda was wearing pink earbud headphones plugged into her iPhone. Quietly laughing, Dupree and T.J. stood there watching Brenda's head weaving and

bobbing while she hummed a tune Dupree didn't recognize. Finally, Brenda turned her head and jumped.

She yanked the headphones out of her ears. "You two scared the waffles right out of me. Are you detectives or stalkers?"

"Well," T.J. said, "when you put on a show like that, how could we resist?"

"Just grooving with the brothers." She turned off the music and swiveled towards Dupree and T.J. "I suppose you two are here on a fact-finding mission. Or did you just pop over to chitchat?"

"Tell you what," Dupree said. "If you've got something for us to sink our teeth into, I'll bring you a latté and a brownie first thing in the morning."

“So you think I’m that easy, huh?”

“Aren’t you?”

“Are we talking girl brownie or boy brownie?”

“Whatever you prefer.”

Dupree could tell by the confused look on T.J.’s face that he didn’t get the brownie joke. “Think about it, T.J.,” Dupree said. “It’ll hit you.”

“Okay, Amaris, you’ve got a deal. A latté and a walnut brownie.” Brenda went to work. “Boy, am I gonna make your day.”

“I get it,” T.J. finally said.

“Took you long enough,” Dupree said.

“First off,” Brenda said, “got a positive DNA match for Oscar Cassano’s blood and the blood in Dr.

Crawford's car."

This did not surprise Dupree. But now, she had concrete evidence. "That's good news. Keep making my day."

"Here's a few interesting facts about Margaret Hansen's phone activity. Just like you suspected, she made three calls to a number that's associated with one of those prepaid cell phones. It's through a company called Rapid Cellular."

Again, Dupree wasn't shocked. She elbowed T.J. "So, I would bet that the southern accent on the other end of Cassano's calls were from Hansen."

"And if what Cassano and Lentz told us is true," T.J. added. "That Lentz only hired Cassano to nab Dr. Crawford's computer, then it was Maggie Hansen

who made the deal with Cassano to kill Dr. Crawford.”

“There’s more,” Brenda said. “The three calls to Albany, New York were to a private number.”

Dupree pulled Adelman’s business card out of her pocket. “Refresh my memory, Brenda. Is the number 518-555-1777?”

“Sure enough is.”

“And how about the four calls to 345-555-2100?” Dupree asked.

Brenda turned the monitor slightly so Dupree and T.J. could get a better view. “That phone number is for GCI Trust, Ltd. on the Grand Cayman Island.”

Considering all this new information, Maggie Hansen, perhaps not on her own

accord, hired Cassano to kill Dr. Crawford. But was it revenge that motivated her? Where did Hansen get the one-hundred K she paid Cassano?

“As always, Brenda,” Dupree said. “You never disappoint me.” Dupree glanced at the business card again. “Any chance you can tell us what the acronym OFC stands for?”

“Let’s find out.” Brenda keyed in a web site address. “Here’s a site that can identify every acronym in the free world” She typed in OFC and within seconds a list appeared. She ran her finger down the screen.

“Here’s some possibilities: Ottawa Folklore Center, Optical Fiber Conference, Oceania Football

Confederation. Wait a minute. I'll bet this is what you're looking for: Offshore Financial Centre." Brenda hit a few more keys. "Believe it or not, there are eighty-two countries with Offshore Financial Centres. Everywhere from American Samoa to Vatican City and everywhere in between. They're havens for rich folks who want to hide their money from Uncle Sam."

"The Grand Cayman Island is on the list, right?" Dupree asked.

"Actually," Brenda said, "as far as the number of financial institutions offering offshore accounts, Grand Cayman ranks in the top ten."

"I'm running to the little boy's room," T.J. said. "I'll meet you in the

conference room in a few minutes.”

“Well, Brenda,” Dupree said, “you certainly earned your latté and brownie. In fact, I should bring you a little sweet-treat every day for the next year.”

“Afraid that would ruin my girlish figure, Missy.”

“I really appreciate your efforts.” Dupree looked at her watch. “I have two more things I need help with, but they can wait until morning.”

“Give me the info now because I usually get in the office by six. By the time you show up I might have what you need.”

Dupree showed Brenda the back of the business card. “I’m reasonably sure that this is a bank account number for

GCI Trust Ltd.” Dupree pointed. “If it is, I’d love to know whose name is on the account and the balance.”

“That might take some doing, but I’ll look in my little bag of tricks and see what I can come up with.”

“I’ll see you in the morning with your latté and brownie in hand,” Dupree promised.

“My mouth is watering just thinking about it.”

Brenda leaned toward Dupree and lowered her voice. “Can I ask a personal question?”

“Sure.”

“Not for nothing, but what’s the deal with Prince Charming and you?”

“Prince Charming?”

“T.J.”

“I’m not following you.”

“All the while we were talking, he couldn’t take his eyes off you.”

“I think you’ve been reading too many Danielle Steele novels.” She recalled when T.J. had softly touched her face and how she had reacted. Was there substance to Brenda’s claim, or was it merely a fairytale?

Dupree headed for the conference room. She found T.J. looking through the case file.

As if she didn’t have enough to think about, Brenda’s comments about “Prince Charming” aka T.J., made her stop and think. Ever since T.J. and she had traded their life stories, the dynamic between

them *had* changed. She could not deny the fact that an unexplainable intimacy existed between them, but she'd never considered that it might be driven by a romantic undertone—at least not from her viewpoint.

“So you think Brenda will be able to identify the account holder of that number?” T.J. asked.

“It isn't very often she disappoints us, so let's assume the best.”

Sitting next to T.J., Dupree felt a little self-conscious about Brenda's observation. She took a deep breath and cleared her mind.

“Let's recap what we know.” Dupree opened the folder and flipped through the pages.

“Dr. Lauren Crawford, research scientist for Horizon Cancer Research Center, on the verge of announcing a revolutionary treatment for cancer, is murdered by Oscar Cassano on the evening of June 30 at approximately ten-thirty p.m. in the ramp garage near Yankee Stadium. She stabs Cassano in the face with a nail file and he shoots her three times in the head with a .22 caliber pistol. We found blood from both victim and killer in the backseat, but no fingerprints or anything else we could use for a forensic evaluation. We confirmed that one sample of blood matches Cassano’s DNA. We could not make a visual identification of Cassano with the surveillance cameras in the

garage. However, we did verify that Cassano has a birthmark shaped like a figure eight on the back of his neck.

“We interviewed both Dr. Edward Mason, Executive Director of Horizon and Leona Crawford, Dr. Crawford’s mother. Both gave us a brief history of Dr. Crawford’s relationship with Hulda Clark, and explained how Dr. Crawford expanded Dr. Clark’s research theories on cancer treatment.

“Jonathan Lentz, Dr. Crawford’s ex-boyfriend, had an affair with Maggie Hansen, research scientist at Horizon, which resulted in Crawford ending her relationship with Lentz. Shortly after, Dr. Crawford fired Hansen and she did not leave calmly. Lentz, supposedly

working two jobs and barely making ends meet, bought an Audi A8 for over sixty-thousand dollars. I spotted Lentz and Hansen in a Starbucks and could tell that they were in a romantic relationship. During an interrogation of Lentz, he confessed that his step-father, Dominic Gallo, deputy director for the FDA, paid Lentz one-hundred-fifty thousand dollars to hire someone to steal Dr. Crawford's computer. We verified that Lentz deposited the money into his savings account on July 1. According to phone records, over a one month period, Lentz and Gallo spoke via telephone thirty-seven times. In view of Cassano's confession, Lentz's role in this ordeal was not to have Dr. Crawford murdered,

only to have her computer stolen.”

Dupree flipped a few more pages. “Cassano stated that after Lentz hired him, Lentz told him that he’d be contacted by someone else to give further instructions and make arrangements for payment. Lentz maintains that Gallo was supposed to make contact with Cassano via a pre-paid cell phone that Lentz gave to Cassano. But Cassano claims that he was contacted by a woman with a southern accent who offered him seven-hundred-fifty-thousand dollars to murder Dr. Crawford. Weighing all the evidence we will cover later, this person was likely Maggie Hansen. Prior to killing Dr. Crawford, Cassano hired Ivan

Tesler to follow her and report back to Cassano with her whereabouts. Ivan Tesler's testimony led us to Cassano. Aware that Tesler fingered Cassano as part of a plea bargain, Cassano brutally tortured and murdered Tesler. We have an eye witness who saw Cassano leaving Tesler's place right about the time he was killed. The plate number of the truck the man was driving is registered to Oscar Cassano. Before Tesler died, he wrote 'Dupree' and 'Oscar' on a piece of paper."

Dupree yawned.

"Want me to continue?" T.J. asked.

"I'm fine. Just need to refocus my eyes." Dupree rubbed her tired eyes and yawned again. "After Dr. Crawford's

murder, several pharmaceutical companies expressed a desire to partner with Horizon and continue with the research. Dr. Mason claims that a group of companies tried to bribe him with what they called a ‘cash incentive’. He decided to go with Hyland Laboratories—a pharmaceutical company that earlier tried to hire Maggie Hansen. If Horizon does ultimately partner with Hyland, Dominic Gallo, Lentz’s step-father, Deputy Director of the FDA, will work closely with them.

Dupree stood up and reached for the ceiling.

“Sure you don’t want me to finish?” T.J. asked. “I’m sitting here like a bump on a log.”

“I need you to be sure I’m giving an accurate account of the investigation and to add anything I might miss.”

“So far, you’re spot on.”

“Great.” Dupree glanced at her watch. “If we’re lucky, we’ll get out of here just on time for breakfast.”

Dupree fingered through a few more pages. “Let’s get back to Maggie Hansen.”

“After checking her bank statement and phone records, we discovered that she called the pre-paid cell phone in Cassano’s possession three times and also called Michael Adelman, CEO of Hyland Laboratories in Albany, New York three times. Hansen allegedly told Cassano to get rid of the pre-paid cell

phone once their business was completed. Cassano claims that he threw the phone in the East River.

“Because Hansen went to the top of the list as a suspect, we secured a warrant and searched her apartment. We found Michael Adelman’s business card, and written on the back was 650K, a phone number, GCI Trust, Ltd., and what appeared to be an offshore bank account number. Hopefully, Brenda will be able to determine if, in fact, the number on the back of Adelman’s business card is a bank account number. And if it is, find out whose name is on it.”

Dupree closed the folder. Her eyes took on a haunted look. “There is also the issue of the two envelopes I

received.” She balled her hands into fists. “No doubt Hansen’s handiwork.” The mere thought of it, welled her gut with anger. The audacity of this woman to place Dupree’s life in danger infuriated her beyond words. But she had to remain calm and in control. She’d learned that unrestrained anger is a homicide detective’s nemesis, that it compromises objectivity and logic. So close to cracking this case wide open, she had to put her personal feelings aside and not lose sight of her only goal: putting Dr. Crawford’s killer behind bars.

“Anything else to add?” Dupree asked.

“You nailed it, Amaris. But as you

were recapping, two things occurred to me. First, if either of us has any doubt that Hansen is capable of violence, let's not forget that when she attended college, she beat the shit out of her roommate and was charged with assault. And it just happened to be over a guy. So, with the little triangle between Lentz, Dr. Crawford, and Hansen, who knows just how far Hansen might go? Second, nearly all of the key players, persons of interest, and witnesses are somehow intertwined." T.J. picked up the folder and opened it. He pulled out a blank sheet of paper and removed a pen from his shirt pocket. Across the top of the paper he wrote, Crawford, Mason, Lentz, Hansen, Gallo, Cassano, Tesler,

and Adelman. He drew a circle around the names and then drew lines from each name to any other name where an association existed.

“Anything jump off the page?” T.J. asked.

Dupree studied the chart. “As if we needed more reason to believe that Hansen was in the thick of things, she’s in some way connected to everyone except Tesler. And Tesler’s only connected to Cassano.”

“I think that in the morning, when we show up unannounced at Horizon and bushwhack Dr. Mason, Michael Adelman, and Dominic Gallo, this whole investigation is going to come together.”

“I agree,” Dupree said. “But if we don’t track down Hansen...”

T.J. nodded. “Yep. We’re kind of screwed.”

Dupree stood up and rocked her head from side to side and she could hear her neck crack.

“A little tension there, Amaris?” T.J. asked “You have no idea.”

“Sit back down. I’ll bet I can help.”

“Sure you can.”

“Seriously, I’ve won awards for my chair massages. I give a one-hundred percent money back guarantee.”

After what Brenda had observed and the face touching incident, Dupree really felt self-conscious. “I’ll take a rain check.”

“Please let me give it a try.”

Reluctantly, she gave in. “Okay, you’ve got five minutes.”

He got to work immediately.

“Your muscles are twisted into knots, so for me to loosen them up, I really have to crank on you. Tell me if this is too much for you to handle.”

He squeezed the top of her shoulders with his fingers and palms. And in a circular motion, he worked his thumbs deep into the taut muscles.

Dupree moaned as his hands worked tirelessly and she could feel the muscles begin to relax. She couldn’t remember the last time anyone had given her a massage.

“Am I doing okay?” T.J. asked.

“More than okay.”

He continued for another few minutes and Dupree felt so relaxed her head dropped forward and she nearly fell asleep.

“If you don’t stop, I’m going to fall on the floor and break my neck.”

“Feel any better?”

“One thousand percent better. I think you missed your calling.” Dupree stood up and felt a little wobbly.

“You all right?” T.J. asked.

“I’m fine. I just need to get home, take a warm bath, and crash.”

“Sure you’re okay to drive?” T.J. asked, a look of concern in his dark brown eyes. “I’d be happy to drop you off at your place and swing by in the

morning.”

“That’s sweet of you. Really. But I can manage.” Dupree suspected that T.J.’s offer represented more than a ride home. He’d never admit it, but he wanted to assume the role as her bodyguard.

“Listen to me, Amaris. I need to be sure that you make it home safely. I know you’re a big girl and you can take care of yourself, but—”

“I’ll be okay. Trust me.”

“What time do you want to meet in the morning?” T.J. asked.

“You okay with eight a.m.?”

“Works for me.”

“We can check with Brenda first thing,” Dupree said, “update the captain

on what's going on, and then head over to Horizon. That should be interesting."

"And maybe if we're lucky, somebody will spot Hansen."

"Let's hope."

Dupree turned to leave, but T.J. stopped her.

"No heroics. Call me if you need *anything*."

"Even if I want a quart of Ben & Jerry's at three a.m.?"

"Only if you share."

When Dupree turned the key in the door to her apartment, she felt a dull ache in her stomach.

Cat stew.

She opened the door slowly, holding her breath, hoping that her little buddies would greet her. True to their nature, Ben and Alex were waiting impatiently, each vehemently protesting her long absence. She'd never been so happy to hear them complain. The chorus of meows wouldn't stop. Dupree glanced at their food bowls and both were licked clean.

"I'm so sorry, kitties. I guess I haven't been a good mommy, have I?" Dupree dropped her handbag on the kitchen table, and gave both cats a generous helping of Fancy Feast—their favorite—then gave them fresh water.

"My turn," she said as she set a wineglass on the counter. She knew

better than to drink on an empty stomach, but she wasn't at all hungry, which was a rare event.

“Red or white?” She preferred red wine, particularly Malbec, but tonight just seemed like a Chardonnay kind of evening. Mentally drained, she poured a generous glass, kicked off her shoes, and collapsed into her favorite La-Z-Boy recliner. She was just about to take a sip of the ice cold wine, when she heard her cell ring.

She struggled to get up, reached for her handbag, and found her phone. She looked at the display and saw that it was T.J.'s number.

“Hey partner,” Dupree said softly. “Are you calling to tell me we collared

Hansen?”

“No such luck,” T.J. said. “Just checking in to be sure you made it home.”

“That’s kind of you.” She tasted the wine. “I’m safe and sound.” They’d been partners for over six months and this was the first time T.J. had ever called to check on her. Of course, in the time they’d worked together, this was also the first time she’d gotten threatening letters. “I wonder why Hansen hasn’t come home. Think Ralph tipped her off?”

“I wouldn’t put it past him,” T.J. said. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Everything’s cool.”

“Great,” T.J. said. “Enjoy the rest of your evening—whatever’s left of it. I’ll

see you on the flip side.”

“Get a good night’s sleep,” Dupree warned. “Tomorrow’s going to be a tough day.”

“Sleep well.”

“One more thing,” Dupree said. “I have a hankering for some Ben & Jerry’s Chocolate Therapy ice cream. So don’t be surprised if I call you in the middle of the night.”

“I’ll be waiting.”

Dupree finished the wine and considered having another, but thought it unwise. She couldn’t afford to be off her mark tomorrow. It was destined to be a monumental day. Confronting Mason, Adelman, and Gallo would pose many challenges. The caliber of men she’d be

dealing with wasn't like interrogating Cassano or Tesler. These men, she suspected, could not easily be intimidated. She had to be certain that all her facts and figures were clear in her mind. In light of everything T.J. and she had documented in the case file so far, Dupree felt certain that both Adelman and Gallo—at the least—had conspired to murder Dr. Crawford. But her gut told her that Mason wasn't squeaky-clean.

What troubled her most was Hansen. Sure, there was plenty of circumstantial evidence, lots of incriminating facts. An ominous past. But were they compelling enough to convince the DA to prosecute her for conspiracy to commit murder? And would a murder charge hold up

before a grand jury? Until they located Hansen and brought her in for questioning, any conclusions that Dupree might make were purely speculative.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Dupree's sleepless night had taken its toll. Visions of the two mysterious envelopes she'd received dominated her thoughts. Sending her a note about cat stew was one thing. But attempting to injure or even kill her with a toxic drug was quite another. In all her years in law enforcement, she'd never encountered such a situation and was having a difficult time dealing with it.

When Dupree entered the precinct, she wanted to turn around, go back to her

car, recline the driver's seat, and take a nap. This, of course, was not possible. Still, she thought about it. Walking towards her desk, she spotted Mark Wells, soon-to-be-retired homicide detective, talking to T.J.

"Mornin'," Dupree said as she set down Brenda's latté and brownie on her desk. Dupree glanced at the wall clock, and then looked at Wells. "I know why T.J. is here, but what got you out of bed so early this morning? Haven't seen you here this early in ages."

"Homicide got me up," Wells said.

Kiddingly, Dupree said, "Anyone I know?"

Wells looked at T.J. "Should I tell her, or do you want to?"

“It’s your show,” T.J. answered.

“Ever heard of Jonathan Lentz?”

Suddenly, as if a shot of epinephrine was coursing through her veins, Dupree was wide-eyed and alert. “What about him?”

“He’s lying on a stainless steel table at the coroner’s office.”

For an instant, she couldn’t find her voice. “What happened?”

“Well, a housekeeper at Shoreline Hideaways on Long Island was doing her thing in the early afternoon. It’s one of those places where a couple can get away for a few days and screw like bunnies. Anyway, when she entered one of the cabins to clean it, she found Lentz handcuffed to the bed wearing only his

underwear. The killer had stuffed a washcloth in his mouth and it was soaked with champagne. Must have been the killer's innovative way of waterboarding." Wells paused for a breath. "His head was bashed in with what appears to be the empty champagne bottle. Whoever killed the poor bastard must have whacked him a dozen or more times. It wasn't pretty."

"How did you get a positive ID?" Dupree asked.

"We talked to a lady at the check-in office and she gave us his name, address, credit card information, and the year, make, model, and plate number of his car. We found no driver's license, and his face was so bashed in, it was

impossible to get a visual ID from DMV records.”

“Was the car a new pearl white Audi A8?” Dupree asked.

“Affirmative.”

“Is it still on sight or impounded?”

“It’s gone.”

Dupree tried to process this new information. “Did the lady at the check-in get a look at Lentz’s companion?”

“She said Lentz checked in alone.”

“What time?”

“Before ten a.m. And get this. The young girl at check-in did say that she saw the Audi peel out of the driveway at eleven-thirty.”

“Could she give a description of the person driving the car?”

“Better than that. She felt sure she could pick her out of a lineup.”

“Just out of curiosity, why were you called to investigate a murder on Long Island?” Dupree asked.

“Benny Johnson was first on the scene. Worked with him for a lot of years before he transferred to the Island. When they ran Lentz’s name through the system, Benny noticed that we interviewed him in connection with the Crawford investigation, so he gave me a call.”

“Not for nothing,” Dupree said, “but you took it upon *yourself* to respond without contacting T.J. or me?”

“Hey, don’t get all territorial on me. I knew that you two had your hands full

with the Crawford case and the mayor is putting lots of pressure on Captain Jensen, so I thought I'd be a nice guy and give you a break. I don't sleep anymore anyways, so trekking out at six a.m. is no real inconvenience."

Dupree could relate to not sleeping. "Sorry if I barked at you, Mark—"

"Wait till I tell you the best part," Wells said. "We lifted a print off the handcuffs."

"And?"

"Does the name Margaret *Hansen* ring a bell?"

Dupree and T.J. gawked at each other.

"Yeah," Dupree said. "It rings a lot of bells." She paused, her mind racing. "Has Lentz's name been released to the

media yet?”

“Not until we notify next of kin.”

“Here’s a bizarre coincidence,” Dupree said. “T.J. and I are meeting with Lentz’s step-father later this morning. Tell Benny Johnson to keep Lentz’s identity under wraps until we’ve had a chance to inform his step-dad. And I don’t want anyone in the media to know that we lifted Hansen’s fingerprint.”

“I’ll handle it,” Wells said.

“Thanks for all the info, Mark,” Dupree said. “T.J. and I have to check in with Brenda.” She winked. “Oh, and one more thing: Sorry I’m such a wench this morning.”

Dupree and T.J. walked down the

long hallway to the back office cubicles.

“It seems,” T.J. said, “that little Miss Goody-Two-Shoes has a really dark side. It’s one thing to punch a roommate in the chops because she’s hitting on your boyfriend, and quite another bashing someone’s brains in with a champagne bottle.”

“The question,” Dupree asked, “is why? What’s the motive?”

“Until we track her down, it’s anybody’s guess.”

When they reached Brenda’s cubicle, they found her sitting in front of the computer, arms folded across her chest, chair reclined as far back as it would go, staring at the flat screen.

Dupree held up the latté and brownie.

“As promised, here’s your morning treat.”

Brenda beamed with a broad smile. “You’re the best, Missy.”

“Any luck with tracking down that account number?” Dupree asked.

Brenda cocked her head to one side. “Girl, you know better than that.” She set down her brownie, took a sip of the drink, and hit a few keys. She pointed to the screen. “C27-4150-6930 is an off-shore account number at GCI Trust Ltd., which, by the way, is Grand Cayman Island Trust, Limited. It took some doing but after being transferred to six different people, I finally spoke to someone who would help me. The account is in the name of Oscar Cassano.

But here's the kicker: The custodian for the account is none other than Margaret Hansen."

"How shocking," Dupree said. "Were you able to find out how much is in the account?"

"Six-hundred-fifty-thousand. USA legal tender."

"Maybe that's why we can't locate her," T.J. said. "She's probably drinking a piña colada somewhere in the Caribbean."

Dupree thought for a minute. "Brenda, is it possible to run a report for the passenger manifest for all the major airlines that fly to the Cayman Islands?"

"It'll be a challenge," Brenda said. "But let's see what I can do." She

grinned. "It might cost you another latté and brownie."

"I'll do better than that," Dupree said. "How about a box of chocolate truffles from Jacques Torres?"

"You got yourself a deal, Sugar."

About to step away, Dupree's cell phone rang. "Detective Dupree."

"Hi, Detective, this is Officer Moretti. We met at the crime scene where Dr. Crawford was murdered. You may not remember me, but—"

"Sure I remember you, Tony. What's up?"

"That APB you issued on a Margaret Hansen? Gab and I just picked her up at JFK. Apparently, a very alert TSA agent spotted her going through security,

detained her, and contacted headquarters.”

“You just made my shortlist, Tony. And that’s a good thing. Where was she headed?”

“To Grand Cayman Island.”

“That’s no surprise.”

“Want me to bring her to the 40th?”

“That would absolutely make my day!”

“I’m on my way.”

Dupree dropped the cell in her jacket pocket. “You’re not going to believe this, T.J.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Tony Moretti and Gab Hirsh, showed up a little after nine a.m. Dupree was chatting with T.J., asking him not to mention Lentz's murder during their interrogation of Hansen, promising she'd explain her reasoning later. Obviously, due to the latest development, T.J. and Dupree could no longer stay with the plan to pay a sneak visit to Horizon, so she spoke to Captain Jensen and made arrangements for Parisi and Wells, along with three uniformed policemen, to go to

Horizon and bring Mason, Adelman, and Gallo in for questioning as persons of interest. Dupree spotted the officers coming her way with Hansen wedged between the two of them. Hansen had a look on her face that could intimidate Mike Tyson.

“It’s nice to see you again, Ms. Hansen,” Dupree said, her tone saccharine sweet.

“Wish I could say the same. How long is this going to take?”

“Oh, it shouldn’t take longer than twenty-five years to life,” Dupree said. She grabbed Hansen’s arm and looked at Moretti. “We’ll take it from here officer. Thanks.”

Each holding one of Hansen’s arms,

Dupree and T.J. escorted her to an interview room.

“So what is it now?” Hansen asked. “Do I have an outstanding parking ticket?”

“Where were you going when the officers picked you up?” Dupree asked.

“Well, I *was* going to Grand Cayman for a long-overdue vacation, but thanks to you, I missed my flight.”

T.J. laughed. “The only vacation spot in your future is a federal penitentiary.”

Dupree bent forward, her face inches from Hansen’s. “We’ve got you cold for conspiracy to commit murder.”

Hansen yawned. “And who did I supposedly conspire to murder?”

“Y o u *know* the answer to that

question,” Dupree said, “But just to make it official, we’re charging you with conspiracy *and* accessory to commit murder for the death of Dr. Lauren Crawford.”

“That’s absurd,” Hansen said, her face showing signs of concern. “Once again you two are on a fishing expedition but have no evidence.”

“How’s this for evidence?” Dupree said. “We can prove that you deposited six-hundred-fifty-thousand dollars in an offshore account in the Grand Cayman Island. In fact, we know where you deposited the money and the account number.”

“Six-hundred-fifty-thousand dollars?” Hansen laughed. “And where would an

unemployed research scientist get that kind of money?"

"Oh," Dupree said, "I would guess that Oscar Cassano might be able to answer that question. After all, it's his account but you're listed as the custodian."

Hansen didn't utter a sound.

"How clever of you to pay Cassano a hundred-k in advance and then deposit the rest of the money in an offshore account," Dupree said. "Too bad you'll never get to spend it."

Now Dupree saw fear in Hansen's eyes. She'd seen this look many times. It always came at the exact moment a murder suspect realized that there was no way out.

“Do the names, Michael Adelman or Dominic Gallo ring a bell?”

Hansen sneered in defiance. “If you’re going to arrest me, I want an attorney.”

“That’s your right,” T.J. said. “But we haven’t arrested you. All we’re doing is talking.”

“Talking? Is that was this is?”

“You have a real opportunity here, Ms. Hansen,” Dupree said. “An opportunity we’re only offering once. If you want to keep denying your involvement, that’s up to you. But before you say another word, let me share a few facts with you. Conspiracy to commit murder comes with a twenty-five year to life sentence. Couple that with an accessory to murder charge and you can

pretty much plan on being in a cage until your pretty blonde hair turns white. During your trial, when the D.A. informs the jury that Dr. Crawford was on the threshold of making one of the most extraordinary medical discoveries in history, and that her death, something you were a part of, could delay or postpone her research indefinitely, how do you think the jury is going to react? Think they're going to be lenient and merciful, or would they want Dr. Crawford's murderers to get the maximum sentence?

“This is what we call, the moment of truth, Ms. Hansen. If you cooperate with us completely and give us a sworn statement naming the other parties and

their role in the conspiracy, I believe we can talk the D.A. into reducing the charge to accessory to murder only. With a little luck and good behavior, you could be out of prison in five years.

Dupree could see that Hansen was thoughtfully weighing her options.

“So, Ms. Hansen, what’ll it be? If you still want an attorney, that’s your call. But as soon as we arrest you and read your Miranda rights, all bets are off. We’re going for your jugular.”

“And one more thing to consider,” T.J. added. “Right now as we speak, Dr. Mason, Dominic Gallo, and Michael Adelman are having a meeting at the Horizon offices. In about thirty minutes, a truckload of cops are going to interrupt

their little powwow and haul their asses into the police station. Like you, each of them will be offered the opportunity to plea bargain. The first one to go state's evidence gets the reduced sentence. One deal and only one deal.”

Hansen thought about that for a long time before she responded. “What guarantee do I have that if I cooperate you’ll keep your end of the bargain?”

“Look, Ms. Hansen,” T.J. said. “This is what we do each and every day: make deals and plea bargain. What kind of credibility do you think we’d have if we didn’t stick by our word? What do you think the media would do if they knew that cops were coercing suspects into making confessions under false

pretenses?" T.J. looked at his watch. "It's now or never."

Hansen nervously drummed her fingers on the table. Her eyes shot back and forth between Dupree and T.J. "It was Gallo and Adelman who approached me right after Dr. Crawford fired me. Dr. Mason had nothing to do with it. Adelman and Gallo were manipulating him and he was clueless. Gallo and Adelman wanted Dr. Crawford out of the way. Gallo knew that Jonathan was in desperate need of money and that he would do just about anything to line his pockets with hundred-dollar bills. Gallo also knew that Jonathan rubbed elbows with an unsavory crowd. So, Gallo paid him

one-hundred-fifty-thousand dollars to find someone willing to steal Dr. Crawford's computer."

"*Steal* her computer?" Dupree said.
"Why did she end up dead?"

"That's where I came in. Once Jonathan found someone willing to steal her computer, it was my job to convince him to kill her."

"You hated Dr. Crawford so much that you would actually arrange her murder?" Dupree said.

"It wasn't about hate; it was about opportunity. Adelman gave me seven-hundred-fifty-thousand dollars to get the job done and didn't care how much of the money I paid the killer. The guy was an idiot, so I took advantage of his

stupidity and only paid him one-hundred-thousand.”

“And the rest ended up in a Cayman bank?” Dupree said.

Hansen nodded.

“Wait a minute here,” T.J. said. “What the hell would lead you to believe that you could turn a common thief into a murderer? That just doesn’t make sense.”

“Hey, you two are cops, so you should know something about the criminal mind. For the right payoff, a guy like Cassano would slit his own mother’s throat. When you’ve got the bad seed, you’re capable of anything. Besides, if Cassano had refused, we would have found someone else. New

York is a haven for violent people looking for an opportunity to live the American dream.”

Certain that Hansen sent the two letters, one with the catstew comment, and the other with ricin, Dupree found it difficult to sit across from her without reaching across the table and grabbing her by the throat. “So you arranged to have Dr. Crawford murdered for six-hundred-fifty K? That’s what you think a brilliant scientist’s life is worth?”

“That was chump change compared to the future payoff.”

“Explain,” Dupree said.

“This was the deal: I get rid of Dr. Crawford, then Adelman and Gallo talk Dr. Mason into rehiring me and putting

me in charge of the research operations for a six-figure paycheck. Granted, I'm not on the same level as Dr. Crawford, but Mason knows I have enough knowledge to move forward with the research and clinical trials, so it was an easy sale. And if we ran into any roadblocks, Gallo was our go-to-guy with the FDA. Here's the big payoff. Once everything was signed, sealed, and delivered to the FDA, they approved our drug and treatment plan, and we distributed our products worldwide, the floodgates would open and Mason, Adelman, Gallo, and I get filthy rich—richer than anything you could ever imagine.”

“But if Mason wasn't part of the

conspiracy,” Dupree said, “why would you three want to include him in the big payoff?”

“What choice did we have? We needed his approval in the first place or the partnership would have never happened. Besides, the earning potential was staggering. What’s the difference between a few million one way or the other?”

Dupree and T.J. glanced at each other. Dupree had to ask a question about Jonathan Lentz, but she had to be careful. She didn’t want to let on that she knew Hansen had murdered Lentz.

“What about Jonathan Lentz? Where does he fit in?”

“He doesn’t. His only part in this plan

was to find the right person to steal Dr. Crawford's computer."

"But what about the two of you?" Dupree asked. "Aren't you...*involved*?"

"That's ancient history."

The three of them exchanged glances.

"Well, I gave you the whole story," Hansen said. "You've got Gallo and Adelman by the nuts. What happens now? When do you talk to the DA about reducing the charges?"

"We'll get to work on it right away," Dupree said.

CHAPTER THIRTY

After spending nearly forty-five minutes listening to Hansen's unbelievable story and getting a sworn statement, Dupree and T.J. mentally prepared themselves for round two.

"So," T.J. said, "do you believe Hansen's claim that Mason was not a part of this?"

"I've had a feeling from the onset of this investigation that he was involved, but now I'm not convinced."

"I guess once we put him on the hot seat," T.J. said, "we'll know for sure." He tasted his coffee. "By the way, I

figured out why you didn't want to mention Lentz's murder to Hansen. Very clever. The plea bargain didn't include Lentz's murder, so I'd guess that you plan to nail her little ass with murder one?"

Dupree saluted T.J. with her coffee. "Bravo. There's hope for you yet. Seriously, I don't know if the DA's going to go for M-one, but M-two should be a slam dunk."

"But you know that Hansen is going to cry foul and retract her testimony," T.J. said. "Even though she gave up Gallo, and Adelman, and made a full confession on video, her attorney no doubt will claim that we coerced it out of her."

“That’s why we need to push Mason hard and get confessions from Gallo and Adelman.”

“That’s not going to be easy.”

“No, but it’ll be interesting.” Dupree rolled her shoulders and tried to work the knot out of her neck. “Here’s what I think we should do. First, you and I will interview Gallo. When we’re finished with him, Parisi and I will tackle Mason, and Wells and you can go to work on Adelman. What do you think?”

“Sounds like a workable plan.”

For several minutes, Dupree and T.J. were lost in their private thoughts.

“I’m having a hard time wrapping my head around this whole case,” Dupree said. “It’s unimaginable to me that a

high-level director from the FDA and the CEO of the biggest pharmaceutical company on the planet could commit such a horrific crime.”

“Hey,” T.J. said. “Fame and fortune are powerful motivators.”

* * *

At ten fifteen a.m., Dupree, sitting at her desk, anxiously drumming a pen on a yellow legal pad, spotted Parisi and Wells entering the precinct. Just ahead of them were three men, one of whom was Dr. Mason. The other two men, she presumed, were Adelman and Gallo.

Looking over at T.J., Dupree whispered, “It’s show time, partner.”

Dupree and T.J. stood and

approached the five men.

“Good morning, gentlemen,” Dupree said, trying to be as pleasant and non-threatening as possible. “I’m Detective Dupree and this is Detective Brown. We’ve met Dr. Mason, but haven’t yet had the pleasure of meeting either of you.”

Pointing, Mason said, “This is Michael Adelman, CEO of Hyland Laboratories and this is Dominic Gallo, Deputy Director of the Center for Drug Evaluation and Research.”

Dupree and T.J. exchanged handshakes with the two men. Dupree observed that Gallo seemed calm and at ease, but Adelman was noticeably nervous.

“I know that you’re very busy men and we appreciate you taking the time to meet—”

“We didn’t come down here voluntarily,” Adelman almost yelled. “You dragged us out of an important meeting as if we were criminals.” He folded his arms across his chest.

“We just want to ask you a few questions,” Dupree said.

“Do we have a choice?” Adelman asked Dupree.

“I’m afraid you don’t.”

“Well, let’s get this over with,” Adelman said, his cheeks crimson red. “My colleagues and I have a full schedule and I have a flight to catch later today.”

“We’ll have you out of here as soon as possible.”

Dupree was surprised at Adelman’s appearance. She figured that the CEO of the biggest pharmaceutical company in the world would be wearing a Valentino original, but his suit looked like he bought it off the bargain rack at an outlet store. And he didn’t appear to be particularly well groomed. He wasn’t an unattractive man, just unremarkable. Gallo, on the other hand, looked more like someone you might see on the cover of *GQ* magazine. His full head of salt and pepper hair looked freshly cut and neatly combed. His charcoal grey suit, custom tailored no doubt, fit perfectly. He stood about six-foot tall and looked

trim and in good shape. She guessed he was in his mid-fifties.

Dupree pointed to an area that looked like a doctor's waiting room. "Please have a seat gentleman while I talk to my colleagues. We'll be with you in a few minutes. Mason, Adelman and Gallo followed Dupree's instructions without comment. Mason and Gallo didn't seem annoyed by Dupree's request, but Adelman glared at Dupree as he brushed by her and made his way to the waiting area.

Dupree huddled with T.J., Parisi, and Wells as if she were an NFL quarterback calling a play. She went over the strategy T.J. and she had discussed earlier.

“Any questions?” Dupree asked.

“Nope,” Wells said. “Can’t wait to get a crack at Adelman. Something about this guy really irritates me.”

“It might be a while,” Dupree said. “Keep Adelman and Mason on ice until T.J and I grill Gallo.”

Parisi and Wells escorted Mason and Adelman down the long hallway towards the interview rooms. They placed Adelman in room 1 and Mason in room 2, while T.J. and Dupree led Gallo to interview room 3.

Once seated, Dupree studied Gallo closely and he appeared to be calm, not at all intimidated by Dupree and T.J. He looked like a man who had nothing to hide. Considering Gallo’s involvement

in Dr. Crawford's murder—at least according to Hansen's testimony—Dupree expected to see concern in his eyes. After all, earlier this morning, he was in Dr. Mason's office, prepared to meet with Michael Adelman to discuss a joint venture between Horizon and Hyland Laboratories, and suddenly, he found himself sitting across from two homicide detectives. Even a perfectly innocent man would likely show signs of anxiousness. But Gallo remained rock-solid.

“So now that you've got me here behind closed doors, mind telling me what this is all about?” Gallo said.

“It has to do with your stepson, Jonathan Lentz,” T.J. said.

“You dragged the three of us down here to talk about my *stepson*?”

“Not exactly,” Dupree said “Is he in trouble again?” Gallo asked.

“I’m afraid it’s more than trouble,” T.J. said.

Gallo spoke in a calm, controlled voice. “What kind of predicament has Johnny gotten himself into this time?”

“I’m sorry to have to tell you this, Mr. Gallo, but Jonathan was murdered yesterday morning,” Dupree said.

Dupree expected that Gallo would react to such alarming news with strong emotions. Wouldn’t anyone in his position have difficulty suppressing their feelings? But it seemed as if Dupree had just delivered an unpleasant weather

report. Dominic Gallo didn't even flinch.

"Mr. Gallo," Dupree said. "Did you hear what I said?"

"Clearly."

"And you have no questions, or comments?"

Gallo adjusted himself in the seat. "Would it shock you if I said I wasn't surprised?"

"Yes, actually, it would," T.J. said.

"When he lost his job with Lehman Brothers back in 2008, something snapped and he went from a hardworking, successful young man to a reckless fool. As much as I tried to put him on the straight and narrow, he was always flirting with disaster. Hanging

around with the wrong crowd. Forever falling for some get rich quick scheme. He didn't understand the concept of working hard anymore, of saving, and building a financial future. He bought Lottery tickets every week, played the horses, made frequent trips to Atlantic City. He'd hop from one job to another, always believing that the grass was greener on the other side of the fence. After his mom died five years ago—the most wonderful woman I ever met—I tried my best to assume the father role, but no matter what I did, Johnny just wouldn't turn his life around. He was bitter, angry with the world. He was always borrowing money from me that I knew he'd never pay back. But I let it

go; tried to look the other way, hoping that he'd get with the program."

Dupree didn't understand how Gallo could give such a speech without even the slightest sign of emotion. The man was an iceberg. He hadn't raised his voice, never lost his composure, and he didn't seem moved by Lentz's murder. He hadn't even asked how he died or if they had any suspects.

"What does Johnny's murder have to do with Ed Mason and Michael Adelman? Why are they here?" Gallo asked.

"We're getting to that, Mr. Gallo," Dupree said. "How well did you know Dr. Crawford?"

"I worked closely with Lauren for

over two years. She was spearheading the most significant medical research in history. If all of her theories proved true—and I have every reason to believe they would—she would have radically changed the future of medicine.

“Isn’t it highly unethical for any member of the FDA to work directly with a pharmaceutical company or independent research group? Isn’t it a conflict of interest?” T.J. asked.

“Under normal circumstances, yes, it would be a conflict of interest. But what you need to understand is that her research was a new frontier. It has the potential to save millions of lives and extend the lives of millions more. And who knows what we’ll discover if we

continue on the same path? Perhaps in another five or six years cancer might be like polio and literally vanish from the face of the Earth.”

Time to connect the dots, Dupree thought.

“Were you aware that Dr. Crawford and Jonathan were romantically involved?”

For the first time since starting the interview, Gallo showed signs of nervousness. “They met at a little shindig Ed Mason had hosted at his home. Ed had invited me to this gathering and told me I could bring a date. Well, I thought Johnny might enjoy such an exquisite event—Ed really knows how to throw a party. Contrary to

what you might think—especially after my unsavory description of my stepson—I wasn't shocked when I found out they were dating. That was the fascinating thing about Johnny. When he turned on the charm, he could seduce the Virgin Queen of the Nile. He was a real player and knew how to hide his dark side. I suspect when Lauren got to know the *real* Jonathan Lentz, she didn't like what she saw."

Gallo glanced at his watch. "Are we almost finished? Ed, Michael, and I have a full day ahead of us working out the details of their partnership agreement."

"Just a few more questions, Mr. Gallo," Dupree said. Her probing eyes met his. "Forgive me for saying this, but

you don't seem fazed at all by your stepson's death. I find that really strange."

"I've never been one to wear my heart on my sleeve. I have my moments when I'm alone. But I've always felt that Johnny was headed for an early grave. Maybe that's why I'm not shocked by his death."

"Tell us what you know about Margaret Hansen."

Dupree watched Gallo's Adam's apple rise and fall several times. His cheeks blushed red.

"Does she have something to do with Johnny's...murder?"

"We were hoping you could answer that question," T.J. said.

“I don’t appreciate the implication,” Gallo said, his voice slightly louder.

“There *is* no implication, Mr. Gallo,” T.J. said. “We would just like to know if you were aware of any conflict in their relationship.”

“I didn’t even know they *had* a relationship. Last I heard, they had a fling and that was that.”

“They had more than a fling,” Dupree said. “They were quite the item.”

“Do you have evidence that incriminates Maggie?” Gallo asked.

Interesting, Dupree thought. He knew Hansen well enough to call her “Maggie.” “Sorry, that’s something we can’t discuss while we’re in the middle of an investigation.”

“Well, I’m really sorry I can’t offer more assistance,” Gallo said. “Are we done *now*?”

“Not quite,” Dupree said. “You might be interested to know that Jonathan Lentz made a full confession regarding his part in the Crawford murder. We know that you—or one of your cronies—paid him one-hundred-fifty thousand dollars to find someone to steal Dr. Crawford’s computer. But we have evidence—strong evidence—that your ultimate goal was not to get your hands on her computer but to have her murdered. We have sworn statements from both Jonathan and the man hired to murder Dr. Crawford.”

For the first time since speaking to

Gallo, Dupree saw his expressionless face break a smile. “Unless you intend to arrest me, I’d suggest that the two of you continue your investigation elsewhere and let Ed, Michael, and me conduct our business.”

Ignoring his comment, Dupree said, “Who are you working with, Mr. Gallo? We know you’re not a solo pilot on this. Is it Dr. Mason? Michael Adelman?”

“Apparently,” Gallo said, “English is not your first language, Detective. Let me make it abundantly clear: This conversation is over, and I strongly suggest that both of you release me before I contact my attorney and file a formal complaint against the police department.”

“Let me also make it *clear*,” Dupree said. “You’re under arrest as an accessory to murder and conspiracy to commit murder, for the death of Dr. Lauren Crawford. You have the right to remain silent. Anything you say or do can and will be held against you in a court of law. You have the right to an attorney. If you cannot afford an attorney, one will be provided for you. Do you understand these rights, or are they not clear enough?”

“What I understand is that both of you are making a huge mistake.”

“I think not, Mr. Gallo,” Dupree said.

“You have no basis for your accusations,” Gallo said. “Do you think that a dead man’s statement is going to

stand up in court? Do you really believe that the word of a criminal like Cassano holds any credibility at all? I have an unblemished record of accomplishment and strong business ethics with the FDA. Once the DA examines the evidence, this case will never make it to court.” He grinned. “Excuse the expression, but you’re pissing in the wind.”

“That’s interesting,” Dupree said. “We never mentioned Cassano. Where did you hear his name?”

A look came over Gallo’s face that Dupree had seen many times before. It was what she called an “oh-shit-moment.”

“Well, Mr. Gallo,” Dupree said. “I really hate to ruin your day, but I have

more bad news for you.”

Gallo’s eyes were wide open.

“You see, along with the testimony and sworn statements from your stepson and Oscar Cassano, Margaret Hansen sang like a whippoorwill. She spilled her guts and told us *everything*. You knew that once Dr. Crawford was out of the way, you could manipulate Dr. Mason and convince him to partner with Adelman and then rehire Hansen, and the four of you would be on your merry way to Emerald City.

“Using your tremendous influence with the FDA, you were going to cut through all the red tape and push Dr. Crawford’s treatment for cancer through the approval process. And then the

floodgates would open and all of you would get filthy rich. Your stepson was nothing more than a pawn.”

T.J. pushed a legal pad and pen across the table, in front of Gallo. “We want your confession in writing.”

“I want to speak to my attorney.”

“Suit yourself,” T.J. said. He stood and reached for his handcuffs. “Please stand and turn around.”

“Is that really necessary?” Gallo said. “At least let me preserve some dignity. What do you think I’m going to do, outrun the two of you?”

“You compromised your dignity when you conspired to commit murder,” T.J. said. “Now please stand and turn around.”

Gallo complied and T.J. cuffed him and escorted him to a jail cell.

“Good luck with Adelman,” Dupree said.

“No worries,” T.J. said. “I’ll have a written confession in thirty minutes or less.”

Dupree and Parisi entered interview room 2 and found Dr. Mason pacing the floor.

“Would you mind telling me what the hell is going on?” Mason yelled. “Why are you detaining my associates and me? Do you have any idea how humiliated I am?”

She gestured. “Have a seat and we’ll

talk about it,” Dupree said.

Mason dragged the chair away from the table and sat down.

“I’m afraid we’ve got some bad news for you,” Dupree said. “Your joint venture with Hyland is never going to happen.”

“*What?*”

“Adelman, Gallo, and Hansen will be spending the next two decades behind bars.”

“Forgive me,” Mason said, “but I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Dupree explained to Mason the details of the conspiracy to murder Dr. Crawford. She watched the color drain from his face.

“Look, Detective, Michael Adelman

and Dominic Gallo may be driven by success and financial reward, and Maggie Hansen might be an opportunist, but there is no way that any of them are capable of murder. I know these people well and they would *never* commit such a crime. Your accusations are preposterous.”

“With all due respect, Doctor, quite to the contrary, we’ve got rock-solid evidence. Hansen gave us a full confession and by the time Detective Brown gets done with Adelman, we’ll have his confession as well.” Dupree fixed her eyes on Mason’s. “The big question here, Dr. Mason, is whether or not you’ll be joining them in prison.”

“Are you accusing *me* of taking part in

this horrific crime?”

“Should we be?” Dupree said.

“First of all, Detective, I respected Dr. Crawford in the highest regard. The world would be a much better place if there were more people like her. We had our little tiffs—mostly trivial disagreements, but the thought of harming her is incomprehensible to me. What would be my motive?”

“Money can corrupt even the most moral and ethical people. If and when Dr. Crawford’s theories and treatments proved credible and were approved by the FDA, Horizon Cancer Research Center would have made millions and I’m certain you would have benefited handsomely.”

“Well, Detective, before you make such a statement, perhaps you’d like to review my employment contract with Horizon.”

“What do you mean by that?” Dupree asked.

“My salary as Executive Director is one dollar a year.”

“A *dollar* a year?”

“Not exactly the golden goose,” Mason said.

“Why did you agree to such a deal?” Dupree asked.

“A couple reasons. First and foremost, I’m a retired oncologist. I’ve been treating cancer patients for over thirty years and I can tell you first hand, it’s a dirty business. I’ve seen my share

of vibrant, seemingly healthy people reduced to skin and bones. And I've been forced to prescribe the most toxic meds in the world for people in so much pain they begged me to euthanize them. There are few things in life that would please me more than an effective treatment for cancer and the prospect of finding a cure.

“Furthermore, I don't *need* the money. My house is paid for and I have enough invested to last me three lifetimes, even if I live frivolously, which by the way, is a far cry from my frugal lifestyle.

“Granted, there would be a payoff once the research is completed, everything approved by the FDA, and we begin production and distribution of

the drugs. I'd get 5% of the bottom line. So, knowing that Lauren was the most qualified person in the world to finish the research and get the treatments approved, why, pray tell, would I want her out of the way?"

Dupree didn't have an answer. She looked at Parisi, who was little more than an ornament. "Would you mind providing a copy of your employment contract for us to see?"

"Signed and notarized," Mason said.

Dupree and Mason were engaged in a stare down. "One more question," Dupree said. "It is my understanding that Dr. Crawford didn't want to gouge anyone with outrageous prices for the drugs and was adamant about making the

treatments available to anyone who needed them, regardless of their financial situation. If you had proceeded and established a partnership with Hyland, wouldn't Adelman insist that you price the drugs consistent with demand? Let's be honest. Wouldn't a dying cancer patient, riddled with pain, pay *anything* for a treatment that would extend their life, improve their quality of life, and possibly cure them? Wouldn't they sell all their worldly belongings, and beg, borrow and steal every penny to pay for the treatments?"

"Absolutely. Adelman would have liked to charge an exorbitant price for the treatments. He's a businessman. However, in Lauren's infinite wisdom,

she set up a provision in Horizon's operating charter that limited the price on any drug or treatment directly resulting from her research. Consequently, there is a cap on pricing."

Mason shook his head, staring past Dupree. "I'm having a hard time accepting this mind-boggling story. You think you're a good judge of character and then find out..."

"You're free to go, Dr. Mason. Just remember to get me a copy of your employment agreement. And I'd also like to see Horizon's Operating Charter."

Dupree looked at Parisi. "Would you be kind enough to escort Dr. Mason to the exit." Dupree squeezed Parisi's arm.

“Thanks for all your help. Couldn’t have done it without you.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

“Well,” T.J. said, “this has been quite a morning.” Dupree and he were sitting in Captain Jensen’s office, waiting for him to return from a meeting with the police commissioner. Adelman and Gallo were on their way to the county jail where they’d be held until arraignment in the morning. Hansen was still in the precinct lockup awaiting a transfer to a women’s facility.

“I think we’re going to make the captain’s day,” Dupree said. “If full

confessions from Adelman and Hansen don't moisten his loins, nothing will."

"Do you think Gallo will cave in?"

"I guess it depends on how his attorney advises him," Dupree answered. "Personally, it really doesn't make much difference. He can proclaim his innocence till doomsday. But in the end, considering the solid evidence against him, there isn't a jury in the world that's going to let him off the hook. He's dead meat."

"What do you think is going to happen with Horizon?" T.J. asked.

"That's a complicated issue. The only thing I know for sure is that someone *has* to follow through. Dr. Crawford's research is far too important and

consequential for it to just go away.”

“How about Mason? Do you think he’s totally innocent?”

“Well,” Dupree said, “we have nothing concrete, but I still think we need a covert operation to surveil his activities.”

“I agree.”

Dupree could barely keep her eyes opened.

“So, Amaris, you’ve been talking about taking a vacation as soon as we closed this investigation. Got something planned?”

“Thinking about flying to the west coast for a week or so.”

“Do you have family or friends out there?”

“No, but a couple of years ago, I attended a law enforcement conference in Sacramento and met a homicide detective working out of San Diego. She had solved two serial killer cases in less than two years and got major national press. In fact, she was the keynote speaker at the conference. Having so much in common—two women working in what is basically a man’s world—we bonded rather quickly. We’ve kept in touch via telephone, texting, and e-mails. Long story short, she’s been trying to get me to the west coast for a while now; wants me to meet her hubby and kids. So, I’ve been checking airfares and I may just surprise her.”

“Are you talking about Sami Rizzo?”

“You know who she is?”

“Every cop in the free world knows who she is. She was in the spotlight for months.”

“I know,” Dupree said. “She’s a rock star.”

Just then, Captain Jensen entered his office, out of breath.

“Am I late for the party?” the captain said, glancing at his wristwatch. He lumbered to his desk and moaned when he sat down. “Back’s not feeling great today. Can’t understand why I’m so tense.”

“Sorry to hear that, Captain,” Dupree said “You can make it feel a whole lot better by telling me that your interviews this morning yielded a strong lead.

Commissioner Ryan just knocked the snot out of me. I guess Mayor Brooks is driving him nuts—calling five times a day to get a progress report on the Crawford murder investigation. Don't know how much more I can take.” He adjusted himself in the chair and let out a painful moan. “Whoever coined the phrase, ‘shit flows downhill’, must have been in law enforcement.”

Dupree and T.J. exchanged glances and smiled like Cheshire cats.

“I think we’re going to make your back feel a whole lot better,” Dupree said.

After updating the captain on the status

of the soon-to-be-closed investigation, Dupree and T.J. finished some reports, neither having much to say. Dupree's body was achy and drained of energy and her brain felt like scrambled eggs. She couldn't wait to get home and submerge herself in a hot bath, drink a glass or two of wine, hop in bed, and sleep till noon. But before she could earn this privilege, she had two more tasks on her "To-Do" list.

"Should we give Hansen the bad news?" Dupree asked, breaking the silence.

"There's no time like the present," T.J. said.

Before they even reached lockup, Hansen spotted them and came charging

towards the front of the cell, holding onto the bars like a crazed gorilla.

“Did you talk to the DA.?” Hansen said, almost panting.

“We did indeed,” Dupree said.

“And?”

“You’re good to go. Conspiracy to commit murder will be reduced to accessory to murder.”

Hansen’s face relaxed and she smiled victoriously. “Thank you.”

T.J. looked at Dupree.

“Don’t celebrate quite yet, Ms. Hansen,” Dupree said. “There’s still the matter of Jonathan Lentz’s murder that we have to discuss.”

“*What? Jonathan was murdered?*”

“Sad isn’t it?” Dupree said. “Why did

you do it? Why did you bash his brains in? Was it because he gave up Gallo and that threatened your little scheme?”

“I don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about,” Hansen said.

“Oh, I think you do.”

“I haven’t seen Jonathan—”

“Save it for the jury,” Dupree said. “You see, you were smart enough to wipe the champagne bottle clean but you forgot one important detail.”

Hansen stood silently, her rosy cheeks turned chalk white.

“The CSI team lifted your fingerprint off the handcuffs.”

Dupree could tell by the look in Hansen’s eyes that she was frantically searching for a believable retort.

“I don’t know who murdered Jonathan, honestly, but if the handcuffs you found were his, he and I used them many times. So, my fingerprints could have been on them for months.”

“Nice try,” Dupree said. “But there is one more minor fact that’s going to cause you major heartburn.” Dupree paused, purposely wanting Hansen to agonize for a few minutes.

“Well? *What* minor fact?”

“Just that the young woman working the reservation desk at Shoreline Hideaways saw you getting into Mr. Lentz’s A8 and peeling rubber out of the driveway. And she can identify you. Once she picks you out of a lineup, let’s just say that your goose is cooked.”

The veins in Hansen's neck stood out on livid edges. "You tricked me, you motherfucking asshole!"

"My, oh my," Dupree said. "You really have quite the potty mouth. You can mother-f me as much as you like if it makes you feel better. But know this: you're going to spend the next twenty-five years—and maybe more—in a cage. And that's exactly where a monster like you belongs."

Dupree and T.J. turned to walk away, but Dupree stopped.

"One more thing," Dupree said. "I've never tasted cat stew, nor would I like to sprinkle ricin on top of it. But you do get an A+ for originality."

Hansen actually laughed. "Got to

admit. It was pretty damn clever, no?”

“Genius,” Dupree said. “You just added attempted murder to your murder charge.”

Again Dupree and T.J. turned to leave.

“Hey, Detective,” Hansen yelled. “How did you know it was me who sent the letters?”

The corners of Dupree’s mouth turned up. “You just told me.”

The look of horror on Hansen’s face was an image Dupree would not soon forget.

On their way back to the office, T.J. said, “Nice double-reverse. When did you figure out that Hansen sent the letters?”

“Didn’t know for sure. But shortly after you reminded me that she was the only one associated with the investigation who knew I had two cats, and the fact that she’s a scientist capable of making ricin, I figured it had to be her.”

“I don’t get it,” T.J. said. “Why would Hansen send you the threatening letters?”

“Why do any nutcases do what they do?”

“But what was her motive? What did she hope to gain? She seems way too intelligent to do something so stupid.”

“You’re trying to rationalize the thought process of an irrational woman,” Dupree said.

“I don’t see her as that irrational.”

“Really? Would a *rational* woman beat her boyfriend to death with a champagne bottle and leave her fingerprint on a pair of handcuffs? Or would she conspire to murder a brilliant research scientist? Would a *rational* woman implicated in a murder conspiracy send a homicide detective ricin and potentially place herself in the spotlight?”

T.J. thought long and hard. “I see your point.”

“Great. Glad you’re finally realizing that my instincts are usually right.” She winked.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Dupree had one more piece of unfinished business, but decided to address it without T.J. She found him standing in front of the water cooler eating a Snicker's bar.

“Early dinner?” Dupree asked.

“Something to tide me over.”

She noticed that he glanced at the handbag hanging from her shoulder.

“Where you headed?” he asked.

“Just have to run a few errands.”

“Need my assistance?”

“Everything’s under control,” Dupree said. “I’ll see you in a couple hours.”

“I may already be gone, so give me a holler on my cell if I’m not here when you get back.”

“Sure thing.”

Through crawling traffic Dupree drove over the Brooklyn Bridge and headed for Mrs. Crawford’s home. When she got there, the street was congested with parked cars, so Dupree found a spot two blocks away.

As in the past, roaming the streets of Brooklyn gave Dupree a feeling of nostalgia.

Making her way to Mrs. Crawford’s, she passed home after home, one more magnificent than the other. One in

particular caught her eye.

She'd once lived in such a place. She remembered sitting on the front steps of her mom's home without a care in the world, eating freshly baked chocolate chip cookies, washing them down with a glass of ice-cold milk. She could still smell the chocolaty scent coming from the oven as her mom baked the cookies to perfection. To this day, she'd never tasted a cookie quite as delicious as her mom's.

As Dupree climbed up the front steps of Leona Crawford's home, she remembered her first meeting with the woman—the day she had crushed her heart when she'd told Mrs. Crawford that her daughter had been murdered.

Nothing Dupree could say or do could ever begin to erase Mrs. Crawford's unimaginable pain, but Dupree hoped she could at least give her a breath of relief today.

Dupree knocked softly. Mrs. Crawford opened the door almost immediately. Quite to Dupree's delight, the woman greeted her with a cordial smile. Her face revealed no obvious signs of distress.

Mrs. Crawford stepped to the side and motioned with her arm. "Please come in, Detective. It's so nice to see you again." Mrs. Crawford extended her arm and held Dupree's hand.

"Make yourself comfortable," Mrs. Crawford said. "Can I get you anything?"

Tea, coffee, a soda?"

"No thank you, Mrs. Crawford."

"What brings you to Williamsburg?" Crawford asked. "I hope you came to deliver good news."

"I just wanted to let you know that we have arrested four people in connection with your daughter's murder."

Crawford's eyes opened wide. She looked up at the ceiling. "Praise be to God."

She grabbed a tissue, wiped her eyes, and blew her nose. "That's...that's fantastic news, Detective." Mrs. Crawford inhaled deeply. "I can't even imagine one person wanting to harm my Lauren. But *four*? That's unthinkable. Would it breach police policy if you told

me who they are?”

The police department hadn't yet disclosed the names of the three people charged with conspiracy to commit murder, or the name of the actual killer, so technically, Dupree really wasn't supposed to share the arrest information with anyone. But at this particular point in time, she didn't care about protocol. All she cared about was trying to ease some of Mrs. Crawford's anguish. Besides, what would Mrs. Crawford do with this information, call *CNN*?

“I don't know if this will shock you or not,” Dupree said, “but an ex-research scientist from Horizon, the CEO of a major pharmaceutical company, and a member of the FDA were all involved in

the conspiracy. But the man who actually committed the crime was basically a hired gun.

“Nothing you’re saying is shocking me, Detective. I am surprised that neither Dr. Mason nor Jonathan Lentz’s names came up. I never really trusted Dr. Mason. And I would suspect you know how I feel about Jonathan Lentz.”

“We have no evidence to support the theory that Dr. Mason was involved. Lentz did play a small role, but really wasn’t part of the conspiracy. Unfortunately, he got caught in the middle of a tangled web and ended up a murder victim himself.”

“That’s very sad.” Crawford wiped her eyes again. “I’m glad you found the

monsters who took my Lauren. Nothing will bring her back. But at least I can sleep at night knowing that justice will be served.”

“Have you found anyone to escort you to Tijuana for your next treatment?”

“I talked my nephew into accompanying me. It took some convincing, but he’s really a good boy.”

“When are you leaving?”

“In two days.”

“I hope you have a safe trip and that your treatment goes well.”

Mrs. Crawford’s eyes filled with tears. “Thank you for...everything.”

They were both silent for a long time.

“I would like to share something with you, Detective. Something highly

confidential. Do you have a little free time?”

Dupree didn't, but sensed urgency in her voice. “Of course.”

“I can't remember exactly when it all began, but it was about two years ago. For whatever reason, my level-headed daughter became paranoid and feared that if something ever happened to her, no one would finish her research, or it would end up in the wrong hands. You see, Lauren, more than anyone, knew that not everyone in healthcare wanted to see a more effective, affordable treatment for cancer. Or even a cure. Greed is a powerful force.

“Lauren's biggest fear—perhaps the most significant reason why she was so

concerned about her welfare—was that upon her death, Dr. Mason would likely partner with a major pharmaceutical company, one that would stand to gain unimaginable profits. She refused to allow any pharmaceutical company the right to charge an obscene amount of money for the cancer-fighting drugs Horizon researchers developed. So, she devised a contingency plan—a plan to ensure that not a single cancer patient in the world would be denied treatment because they couldn't afford it.”

“Was there conflict between Lauren and Dr. Mason?” Dupree asked.

“I don't know if I'd call it conflict. But there were many issues upon which they disagreed. Particularly, Lauren had

frequent discussions with Dr. Mason about his desire to partner with a major pharmaceutical company. Her concern escalated a few months ago when she noted Mason's unusual behavior. In fact, I wouldn't have been surprised if Lauren had asked Dr. Mason for a letter of resignation. To coin a phrase, they just weren't reading off the same page of music."

Mrs. Crawford paused for a minute and stared off into the distance. "I know that you're a very competent detective. And I'm sure you've completed a thorough investigation. Still, I'm not convinced that Dr. Mason wasn't part of the conspiracy."

"Sorry you feel that way. But at this

point, we really don't have any evidence that implicates him." Dupree could see Mrs. Crawford's eyes tear up. "If you don't want to continue—"

"I do, Detective. I do."

Dupree watched a tear trail down the broken woman's cheek. She wiped it away with the palm of her hand.

"Remember Lauren's work with Hulda Clark and Dr. Orlando Garcia at the Century Nutrition Clinic in Tijuana? If you recall, Dr. Clark died in two-thousand-nine and Lauren stayed in close contact with Clark's successor, Dr. Garcia. He is a brilliant medical doctor and research scientist whom my daughter implicitly trusted and respected. Well, quite a while ago, Sidney Goldman, the

gentleman funding Horizon, Dr. Garcia, and Lauren met at the Tijuana clinic and worked out a strategic plan. Mr. Goldman is very influential with the pharmaceutical industry. He knows most of their CEOs on a first name basis. And he also carries a great deal of clout with the FDA. Not that Lauren would ever want him to ask the FDA to cut corners or compromise their thorough evaluation, but Mr. Goldman is a good guy to have in your corner. They agreed that if anything ever happened to Lauren to prevent her from completing the research, Mr. Goldman would stop funding Horizon and instead, fund Century Nutrition Clinic under the direction of Dr. Garcia. As a matter of

fact, the ultimate plan was to expand the facility in Tijuana, hire more researchers, and update all of the laboratories with the latest state of the art equipment.

“Although Dr. Garcia is an American citizen, because of his prior relationship with Dr. Clark, he is prohibited from dealing directly with the FDA or marketing any prescription drugs in the United States. However, if he partners with a well-respected American pharmaceutical company, which Sidney Goldman would coordinate, they can submit the application to the FDA for approval. Once approved, Dr. Garcia would work directly with the pharmaceutical company to manufacture

and distribute the cancer medications in the United States and worldwide, ensuring that they are affordable, comply with the strict FDA guidelines, and are available to anyone who needs them.

“But how is Dr. Garcia going to complete the research when he doesn’t have access to Horizon’s computers or main server?”

Mrs. Crawford excused herself, walked over to a small desk, and opened the center drawer. She removed a black rectangular object about the size of a brick and held it up for Dupree to see.

“I removed this from a safety deposit box yesterday. Know what it is?” Mrs. Crawford asked.

“Looks like an external hard drive.”

“Exactly. And guess what it contains.”

Dupree shrugged. “Not sure.”

“It contains all the data and every clinical trial that Lauren compiled since day one of her research. And she updated it daily. Every afternoon, she’d take what she called her ‘sanity break’. She’d go to the bank, which was only a few blocks away from Horizon, remove the hard drive, and bring it to Starbucks where she could plug it into a wall socket and use her iPad to download the latest data.

“The obvious question that Lauren faced was how she could be sure that Dr. Mason and his new partners wouldn’t complete the research and apply to the FDA before Dr. Garcia and

his pharmaceutical partners. I could bore you with the details but at this point, it really doesn't make any difference because of the latest developments and the arrests you made, so the entire scenario has changed. Dr. Garcia, with the help of Sidney Goldman, will undoubtedly prove Lauren's theories, apply to the FDA, and change the world. I don't think that Lauren ever truly believed that her life was in danger. She just wanted to be sure that all the bases were covered and that her research would continue."

Stunned by the amazing story, Dupree was speechless.

"So there you have it," Mrs. Crawford said.

Dupree's head was spinning and she had a million questions. She decided to let it rest for the time being. "That's incredibly ingenious."

"I told you my daughter was a brainiac."

Dupree looked at her watch. "I really have to get moving. Mind if I give you a hug?"

The corners of Crawford's mouth turned up. "I'd really like that."

They held each other tightly for a long time. Dupree's eyes were misty. As she reached for the doorknob, Mrs. Crawford stopped her.

"Just a thought. Don't you think we now know each other well enough to be on a first name basis?"

“You’re absolutely right...Leona.”

“I hope that I see you again, Amaris.”

“Likewise.” Dupree could tell that Leona was getting choked up. “I promise to keep in touch. As a matter of fact, once I get back in the swing of things, why don’t you join me for dinner some evening at my place? You can see the place I call home and meet Ben and Alex, my kitties. I must warn you though that I’m not the best cook, so don’t set your expectations too high.”

“I’d be happy with a grilled cheese sandwich. It’s not about the food, my dear, it’s about the company.”

Dupree felt a strong mother-daughter connection to Leona. She could not deny that Leona could easily become a mother

figure in her life. Not a replacement for her mother—no one could assume that role. And who knows, maybe in some small way Dupree could fill the emptiness Leona felt for her daughter. Whatever the case, Dupree felt certain that Leona and she would cultivate a meaningful friendship.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

“Hey you,” T.J. said.

Dupree had just stepped in the door of her apartment, balancing her cell phone between her ear and shoulder.

“Did you do everything you had to do?” T.J. asked.

“I did.”

“Great. I know tomorrow is Saturday, but any chance I can see you in the afternoon?” T.J. asked.

His request caught her completely off guard. “What did you have in mind?”

“How about a casual stroll around Central Park? It’s supposed to be seventy-five and sunny tomorrow.”

“I’d like that,” Dupree said. “What time did you want to meet?”

“How about two o clock?”

“That works.”

“Let’s meet at the fountain in the Conservatory Garden.” T.J. suggested.

“Perfect.”

“Sleep well. Looking forward to seeing you, Amaris.”

Something in his voice sounded different than normal. Not bad-different. But different. “Have a good night, T.J.”

Moments after ending the call, Dupree’s mind kicked into warp speed. Why did T.J. want to meet her—on a

Saturday afternoon no less? The only other time they had spent personal time together was when they went for drinks and she poured out her heart and told her story. Something was up. And she didn't have a clue what it was.

* * *

In spite of the many issues whirling around in Dupree's mind, she'd not only slept peacefully without awakening once—not even for a bathroom break—but didn't roll out of bed until after ten a.m. Had it not been for Alex jumping on the bed and head-butting her in the back, wanting her undivided attention, she might have slept the whole day and missed her rendezvous with T.J.

She lounged around for a while, then took a quick shower, got dressed, pulled her hair back into a ponytail, gulped a cup of coffee, inhaled a pumpernickel bagel, and cruised out the door.

The subway that ran from the Village north to Central Park—the “C” train—was only a few blocks away. As always, the train was standing room only. Dupree was about to sit in the only available seat, but she surrendered it to a senior citizen. During her ride, she couldn’t help but wonder what was up with T.J. Her curiosity was almost unbearable. She hadn’t the slightest clue what he wanted. Suddenly, she recalled his hand on her cheek. Brenda’s observation. The chair massage. Could it

be that he...? She didn't even want to think about it.

Dupree got off the train at 105th Street and leisurely strolled into Central Park toward the fountain in the Conservatory Garden. She looked at her watch. One-forty. Plenty of time. On her way, she took in all the wonders of this beautiful, eight-hundred-forty-three acre marvel, letting all her senses enjoy the smell, the view, and the sounds of nature. As she made her way along the path deeper into the park, she inhaled deeply and could smell the sweet aroma of cherry blossoms, daffodils, and morning glory. People whizzed by her on rollerblades, skateboards, and bicycles. She saw families enjoying private picnics, people

tossing Frisbees, couples walking hand in hand.

As much as Dupree loved the park, it served as a poignant reminder of her solitary life. Aside from her newfound relationship with Leona Crawford, she had no family, few friends, and the focal point of her existence was her career. She had no idea where she'd be in five years, nor did she anticipate that any factors might change her situation.

There was also another issue that troubled Dupree. Whenever she closed a case, she felt an immediate rush of adrenalin, an inexplicable feeling of accomplishment. But like a drug, the euphoria wore off quickly, and then she'd crash, needing another "fix." In

fact, after closing an investigation, she would often feel terrified that she'd never solve another murder case again. She'd never really spoken to anyone about this phenomenon, but maybe it was time for her to lie on a leather sofa and bare her soul.

Dupree could now see the fountain; its perimeter, a circular bench around the water, accommodating dozens of people resting their feet, sipping sodas, eating ice cream cones, and munching popcorn. Several wooden benches were positioned across from the fountain. On one particular bench, she spotted T.J.

He wasn't alone.

A woman Dupree didn't recognize was sitting next to T.J. As she moved

closer, she could see them talking, laughing, and sitting unusually close to each other. The young woman had long, wavy auburn hair, and from that distance, she looked very attractive. Approaching them slowly—Dupree didn't think that T.J. had noticed her yet—she could see that the woman was very young. Early twenties. Maybe even younger.

As Dupree moved closer, she could see T.J. pointing at her and he whispered something in the young woman's ear. The woman fixed her eyes on Dupree and watched her walking toward the bench.

T.J. looked at his watch. "Right on time." He moved closer to Dupree and

gave her a quick hug. "I'd like you to meet someone."

The young woman stood and smiled. Now close enough to get a good look at her, Dupree thought that she was as attractive as a Glamour Magazine cover girl. She felt a twinge of envy.

"Amaris Dupree," T.J. said. "Meet Ashley Martin."

She offered her hand to Ashley and the young woman firmly grasped it. Still holding Ashley's hand, Dupree carefully studied her face and saw something familiar in her eyes. Images of Dupree's mother flashed through her mind. Her cheeks blushed red. Could it be?

"T.J. has told me a lot about you," Ashley said, her voice a little shaky.

Like three mannequins, they stood motionless, staring at each other as if lost for words.

Ashley moved closer to Dupree. “Um, I don’t know quite how to say this, so I’ll just be blunt. I’m...”

“My *daughter*?”

Dupree could feel her hands trembling and her heart flutter in her chest; it felt as if a giant butterfly was trapped in her lung. Her knees nearly gave out. She studied Ashley’s eyes again and could now see the resemblance. She had her grandmother’s high cheekbones and wide set eyes. Dupree looked at T.J. and then at Ashley, her eyes cloudy with tears.

“I need to sit down,” Dupree said, her

voice unsteady and barely audible. Tears were now running down her cheeks. She tried to suppress the sobbing but had no control over her feelings. “This can’t...be happening,” she whispered.

Ashley nestled beside her and draped her arm around her mother’s shoulders.

“How did you find me?” Dupree asked Ashley.

“T.J. found *me*.”

Dupree looked at T.J. and swallowed hard. “How did you do this?”

T.J. cocked his head to one side. “Let’s just say that I know people who know people. And when you have the right contacts, you can find almost anyone—even Osama bin Laden.”

Wobbly-legged, Dupree carefully stood up and wrapped her arms around T.J. and gave him a bear hug for what seemed like an eternity. She kissed him on the cheek. “I just don’t know what to say, T.J. I...I—”

“You two have a lot of catching up to do. Call me later and we’ll talk.”

“It was wonderful to meet you, Ashley,” T.J. said. “I hope to see you again.”

The two women watched T.J. walk away.

“He’s quite a guy,” Ashley said.

“That he is.”

As cliché as it seemed, Dupree literally had to pinch herself to be sure this wasn’t a dream. All these years. All

the pain and emptiness and tears. And here she was. Her daughter. Standing only inches away from her.

Dupree grasped Ashley's hand and squeezed it. "I want to know everything about you."

They engaged in small talk for a few minutes but neither asked the obvious, most compelling questions. Dupree was still reeling.

After a long searching look, Ashley asked, "Why did you give me up for adoption?"

The question pierced Dupree's conscience like a dagger. "Because I was a self-destructive, stupid kid. I had no business being a mother and I wanted you to have a good life."

“How come you never tried to find me all these years? Didn’t you want to have some kind of relationship with your flesh and blood daughter? I mean, weren’t you curious about me, who I was?”

“You have no idea how many times I desperately tried to find you.” Dupree explained the confidentiality clause in the adoption agreement. “I even hired three private detectives, but all of my attempts to locate you failed.” Dupree had her own questions but wanted to tread lightly. “When did you find out that you were adopted?”

“My parents...well, I mean step-parents actually, told me on my fifth birthday. They believed it would have less of an impact if I found out at a young

age.”

“Did you ever ask your parents to search for me?”

“No.” Ashley’s face tightened. “I assumed you wanted nothing to do with me, so I never made an attempt to contact *you*.”

Both Dupree and Ashley studied each other’s eyes.

“Tell me about your parents.”

“They’re really wonderful people. They’ve always been supportive of me and have always treated me like their own daughter.”

Dupree was delighted to hear that. But she couldn’t help but wonder if she would have been as good a parent. The mere thought of it, choked her up again.

“So, Ashley, where do you live?”

“In Thousand Oaks, a suburb of Los Angeles.”

“About how far is it from San Diego?”

“If the freeway traffic is moving, which isn’t very often, it’s about a ninety-minute ride.”

“What are you doing right now? In college? Working?”

“Freshman year at UCLA.”

“That’s fantastic! What course of study?”

“Earth and Environmental Science.”

“So, what kind of career are you looking for?”

“Not sure yet.” Ashley pointed to the lush greenery around them. “I’ll

probably become a tree-hugger.”

After another twenty minutes of small talk, Dupree looked at her watch. “Where are you staying?”

“At the Yotel in Times Square. I know. The name is strange but it’s a really nice place.”

“I never heard of it, but New York has thousands of hotels. How long are you going to be in New York?”

“I leave midday on Monday. I wanted to stay longer, but orientation begins next Wednesday.”

Dupree had experienced her share of emotional pain throughout her life. But the mere thought of her daughter leaving on Monday was more than she could bear.

“Here’s a crazy thought,” Dupree said, her voice unsteady. “Why don’t you check out of your hotel and come stay with me until you leave? I could be your tour guide and show you the city.”

Ashley didn’t answer immediately. Instead she stared past Dupree with a peculiar look on her face. Was Dupree pushing too hard? Did her invitation place Ashley in an awkward situation?

“I’d love to, but are you sure that’s okay? I wouldn’t want to inconvenience you.”

Dupree let out a heavy breath of relief. “I’ve been searching for you for eighteen years, Sweetheart. Trust me, it’s not at all inconvenient.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

To Dupree, driving Ashley to the airport proved far more painful than when she'd first given her up for adoption. As a confused teenager, what had Dupree known about love, family, or parenthood? But now, after years of emotional torture and profound guilt, having no idea when or if she'd ever see Ashley again, Dupree felt gripped with fear and apprehension. Although Ashley's behavior during her visit suggested that she was thrilled to finally

meet her biological mother, once back home in a familiar and safe environment, perhaps Ashley would conclude that she didn't need her biological mother to be part of her life.

Dupree and Ashley exchanged few words; the mood in the car was oppressive. Dupree kept taking her eyes off the road and looking at her daughter's pretty face. She wanted each glance to be like a photograph etched in her mind, a snapshot she could recall whenever she needed to fill the emptiness in her heart.

As expected, the time she had spent with Ashley seemed like a nanosecond. But Dupree couldn't believe how much they'd crammed into such a short period.

“So,” Dupree said, mouth so dry she was unable to swallow, “tell me...what do you think of New York?”

“It’s awesome. I just love it!”

“Out of everything we did and the landmarks we visited, what was your favorite?”

“I loved the Statue of Liberty, the Guggenheim Museum, and of course the pizza.

But...” She paused and firmly held Dupree’s hand. “What I enjoyed most was getting to know you.”

Merging onto the entrance ramp for Interstate 678, Dupree wasn’t sure she could restrain herself much longer. In less than twenty minutes, she’d drop Ashley off at the terminal and her

daughter would soon be on a plane back to LA. Dupree's emotions were so bottled up inside that she just wanted to pull the car onto the shoulder, hold Ashley tight, and cry like she never cried before. She had no idea how she'd found the strength to hold it together as long as she had.

A burning question hung in the back of Dupree's throat—a question she felt terrified to ask. But the terminal was just ahead and time was running short. “When do you think I’ll see you again, Ashley?”

“Once I start school, my schedule will likely be crazy-busy. I haven’t yet seen the school calendar—I guess they’ll go over that during the orientation on

Wednesday. But I'm sure I'll be home for Thanksgiving, Christmas, and of course, spring break. I doubt I'll be able to visit you in New York until next summer. But you're more than welcome to visit me in LA anytime—even during the school year. I might not have a lot of free time, but I'm sure I can juggle my schedule.”

Ashley sounded sincere and her open invitation eased Dupree's angst. “You may just see me sooner than you think. I'm planning a vacation to San Diego to meet a friend, and maybe—”

“That's fantastic! I didn't expect to see you again so soon. No matter how busy I am with school, I'll find a way to spend some time with you.”

Dupree pulled to the curb, turned on her hazard lights, and flipped the trunk release. She and Ashley met at the back of the car. She helped her daughter remove the luggage and closed the trunk lid.

“Well,” Dupree said. “I guess this is it.”

They held each other tightly, and Dupree kissed Ashley’s cheek and patted her back. “I love you, Ashley. I thank God for bringing you into my life.”

Ashley blinked several times, her eyes were wet with tears. She reached in her purse and removed a manila envelope. “This is for you.”

“What is it?”

“See for yourself.”

Dupree was about to tear open the envelope when an airport security guard waved his flashlight. “Let’s move it along. This is a drop-off-pick-up area only.”

Dupree thought about flashing her badge, but didn’t want to risk a confrontation in front of Ashley. Some TSA agents abused their authority and knew little about professional courtesy.

“Call me when you get to LA.”

“I will. And you can call me, text me, or send an e-mail anytime. We can even Skype.”

“I’ll keep in touch, Honey.”

“As soon as you confirm your trip to the west coast, let me know.”

“I will.”

Dupree watched her daughter enter the terminal. She didn't think it was physically possible but felt certain her heart shivered. The annoying airport security guard again waved his flashlight.

“Okay. Okay. I'm leaving.”

Dupree hopped in her car and squealed her tires as she pulled away from the curb, her mind flooded with jumbled thoughts and inexplicable feelings. Just before she reached the airport exit, she pulled to the curb, tears streaming down her cheeks, blurring her vision. She picked up the manila envelope and tore it open. Inside she found a high school graduation photograph of Ashley. In the lower right

hand corner, Ashley had signed the photo.

*To Mom with love,
Ashley.*

Dupree could no longer fight the inevitable. She covered her face with both hands and wept like a lost child.

When Dupree heard the gentle knock, she knew it was T.J. After she'd arrived home, long after there were no more tears to cry, she'd called him and asked him to come over.

She opened the door. Before he could even step inside, Dupree hugged him. "I owe you, T.J. Owe you big time."

"All in a day's work, partner."

They sat next to each other on the sofa.

“How long have you been working on finding my daughter?”

“Ever since you told me your story.”

“How the hell did you do this?”

“I told you. I know people who know people. That’s all I can say.”

Dupree wanted to push it, but let it go. For now. “She’s only been gone for two hours and already my heart aches.”

“Did you both enjoy the weekend?”

“It was amazing, T.J. It didn’t feel like we’d just met. We immediately connected and I felt Ashley was completely at ease.” Dupree took in a deep, quivering breath.

“What is it,” T.J. asked.

“Ashley lives three-thousand-miles away.”

“So you think you’re rarely going to see her?”

“Logistically, it’s complicated. She’s starting her freshman year at UCLA, my time off is limited, and...”

T.J. reached for her hand and gently squeezed it.

“It isn’t like either of us can just hop in the car and pop over. You found my daughter, but I’m afraid I’m going to lose her again. And this time it’s going to be even more painful.”

“You haven’t taken even one day off since we became partners, so you must have quite a few vacation days in the bank.”

“Last time I checked, I had about thirty-two days.”

“So, that’s six weeks plus, right?”

She nodded.

“If my math is correct, that means you can visit Ashley for one week every other month.”

“Technically, yes. But you’re forgetting two things. First, you know how stingy Captain Jensen is when it comes to approving time off. You’d think that the money was coming out of his personal banking account. Second, Wells is retiring in a few weeks, which puts us a man short, so, needless to say —”

“It’s handled,” T.J. said.

“What’s handled?”

“Wells’s replacement starts on Monday. Some hot shot kid from the 34th.”

“How come I wasn’t informed?”

“Officially, there hasn’t been a formal announcement.”

“How did you find out?”

“I know people who know people. Remember?”

Dupree thought about that for a minute. “That still doesn’t solve my problem with the captain.”

T.J. winked. “That’s handled, too.”

“You’ve lost me, T.J.”

“While Ashley and you were bonding this weekend, I had a long chat with Jensen.”

“And?”

“I anticipated that Ashley and you would have a problem trying to see each other as often as possible. I also figured that you would make more trips west than she would east. I told the captain about your situation and believe it or not, he was really touched—said he’d do whatever he could to accommodate your vacation requests. Maybe he’s not as much of a hard ass as we both thought.”

She looked at T.J. with tears in her eyes. “I...I don’t know what to say.” Her voice was quivering. “Thank you so much.”

“Hey, if the situation was reversed, I know you’d do the same for me.”

Neither spoke for a long time.

“I still can’t believe that the captain agreed to be flexible with me on my vacation time.”

“Well,” T.J. said. “There is one more minor factor. I guess you could call it a motivator.” He let out a laugh. “I told him that if he didn’t work with you I would tell his wife that he’s smoking two packs of Camel’s a day and that he keeps a stash of Twinkies and M & M’s in his bottom drawer.”

Dupree laughed. She wasn’t sure about the last part of the story, but really didn’t care. As long as she could see Ashley as often as possible, nothing else mattered. “I think what you did is called blackmail.”

“Actually, it’s called salesmanship.”

Neither uttered a sound, but their eyes met. Dupree saw a look on his face that she'd never seen before. His eyes seemed to sparkle with a profound intensity.

He moved toward her.

Dupree didn't quite know how to react; she sat frozen, studying him closely.

T.J. closed his eyes and tenderly kissed her lips. It was not a passionate or lustful kiss. It was brief but gentle. Dupree didn't respond to his gesture, but she also did nothing to stop him.

She felt paralyzed, her mind plagued with confusion and disbelief.

"I am *so* sorry, Amaris," T.J. said. "That was so inappropriate of me. I

deeply apologize. I just don't know what came over me. I guess it was just...the moment. My emotions are a little unstable right now. Please forgive me. I promise it'll never happen again."

Dupree didn't know what to think. She glanced at T.J. but his head was turned away from her, as if he was too embarrassed to look at her. Her mind was overwhelmed with conflicting thoughts. She wasn't sure what she felt.

"T.J."

He turned his head.

When she looked into his eyes, they told her everything she needed to know. No more confusion. No more doubts. "What if I *want* it to happen again?"

EPILOGUE

August 1

This was Dr. Mason's third trip to David Taylor's mansion on the isle of Anguilla. The CEO of Ritter-Stone Pharmaceuticals and Dr. Mason met in Taylor's private den, both enjoying an espresso.

"It surprised me when I found out about Adelman, Gallo, and Hansen," Taylor said. "Who knew they would be so careless?"

"It sure shocked me," Mason said. "But it did create quite an opportunity for you."

“As the cliché goes, ‘Their loss is my gain’.”

“You’ll be happy to know,” Mason said, “that my brilliant attorneys found a loophole around the price cap in Horizon’s operating charter.” He grinned. “I don’t quite understand all the legal technicalities, but basically, all we have to do is inflate our expenses and limit production and we can charge whatever we damn-well-want for the drugs and treatments.”

“That’s great news, Ed. I’ve always been fonder of the word, ‘billion’, than ‘million’.”

“I know that verbally we’ve worked out the details of the partnership,” Mason said. “But when will the

contracts be ready?"

Taylor slid a manila folder across the table. "You'll probably want your attorneys to review these documents." Taylor winked. "Except for the matter of the *incentive* we agreed upon, which of course can't be in writing, everything should be in order."

"I'll let my legal counsel scrutinize the fine print. All I want to know is when do I get the ten million?"

"As soon as everything is approved by the FDA," Taylor said, "and we begin production and distribution."

"And how long might that be?"

"That depends on how long it takes for us to complete all the research and submit the application to the FDA.

Educated guess? About a year. Crawford will be a tough act to follow. And without Gallo, it will present a few challenges. But my team has meticulously studied the data and we feel confident that soon we're going to make the cover of *Journal of the American Medical Association*."

"So, just in the spirit of goodwill, do I get an advance?"

"Afraid not, Ed. Not a penny until we're up and running. And you'd better hope that nobody applies to the FDA before we do."

"Trust me. No one's even close."

Mason picked up the folder. "I'll have these contracts back to you by the end of the week."

Just as Mason was about to open the door and leave, Taylor said, "I do have one question, Ed. Why didn't Adelman, Gallo, or Hansen implicate you to get lighter sentences?"

"We thought it best to keep Hansen in the dark. Although she served her purpose, she was high-strung and unpredictable, so we led her to believe that I was as pure as the driven snow."

"But what about Gallo and Adelman? Why didn't they finger you?"

Mason's facial expression hardened. "I guess they kept their mouths shut because they love their families and wouldn't want anything terrible to happen to them."

February 21

Utterly shocked, Dr. Edward Mason watched the CNN special report, his hands moist and clammy, and his heart pounding out of his chest.

“Breaking News from CNN’s Chief Medical Correspondent, Sanjay Gupta. This may be the most astounding announcement in medical history. Century Nutritional Clinic located in Tijuana, Mexico, in partnership with Summit Laboratories, the third largest pharmaceutical company in the world, have just announced that the FDA has tentatively approved a revolutionary new treatment for cancer, rumored to be nothing short of miraculous.

Pending a series of routine tests, none of which are expected to jeopardize the approval, they project that the drugs and treatments will be made available worldwide by the end of the year.

Many of you may remember Dr. Lauren Crawford, the brilliant research scientist who pioneered the research but tragically was murdered...”

Mason turned off the TV, and slammed the remote against the wall.

“Even from the grave, you got the best of me, Lauren.”

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

As is the case with almost every book ever written, there are a lot of people behind the scenes who transform an idea from vision to reality. In many cases, readers give the credit to the author, but there are many others to recognize. I would like to thank the following people for their invaluable contribution to *Hypocrisy*.

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dear friend and a hell of a writer herself.

I would also like to thank my family and friends for their encouragement and support. And of course, an author's most valuable asset is his or her readers. Many thanks to all of you.

A WORD FROM D.M. ANNECHINO

I truly hope you enjoyed, *Hypocrisy*, my fourth novel. I have a few questions for you. Did you find the book engaging—did it make you want to turn pages? Were Dupree and T.J. fully developed? Who was your favorite character? What did you think of the plot? Was the story plausible, original? Did any plot twists surprise you? Overall, what did you like and dislike about *Hypocrisy*? Please post your questions and comments on my website. The address is:

www.dmannechino.wordpress.com I'll do my very best to respond to each and every comment.

I would also like to ask you for a favor. If you liked *Hypocrisy*, I would greatly appreciate it if you took a few minutes to write a review. Positive reader reviews have a strong influence on prospective readers searching for a new book. If you'd be kind enough to write a review, it would really make my day! Please go to www.amazon.com Search for *Hypocrisy*, and at the top of the page just click on "Customer Reviews" and then click on "Create your own Review". I thank you in advance for helping me out.

One last thing. *Hypocrisy*, like my

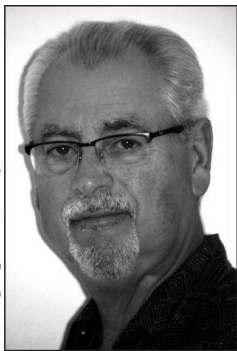
other three novels, delves into murky waters. We all have theories about everything from religion to politics to medicine, and my novels have explored all three topics. My books are controversial by design. For a novel to be compelling and engaging, it needs to make the reader think, and in many cases, feel a bit uncomfortable. If a novelist doesn't evoke emotions in his or her readers, then he or she has failed as a writer.

I have the deepest respect for the thousands of dedicated people in healthcare who work tirelessly to develop new treatments and possible cures for cancer. I also applaud the scores of volunteers who unselfishly

donate time and money to help rid the world of this awful disease. That said, please bear in mind that *Hypocrisy* is a work of fiction. In no way is it intended to question the integrity and goals of anyone associated with cancer research and treatments. I tip my hat to each and every one of you.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Photograph © Jennifer Ann Chasser



Daniel M. Annechino, a former book editor specializing in full-length fiction, wrote his first book, *How to Buy the Most Car for the Least Money*, in 1992

while working as a General Manager in the automobile business. But his passion had always been fiction, particularly thrillers. He spent two years researching serial killers before finally penning his gripping and memorable debut novel *They Never Die Quietly*. His second book, *Resuscitation* (Thomas & Mercer 2011), a follow-up to his first novel, hit #1 in Kindle sales in the UK and reached #26 in the USA. He is also the author of *I Do Solemnly Swear* (Thomas & Mercer 2012). *Hypocrisy*, is Annechino's fourth novel.

A native of New York, Annechino now lives in San Diego with his wife, Jennifer. He loves to cook, enjoys a glass of vintage wine, and spends lots of

leisure time on the warm beaches of Southern California.