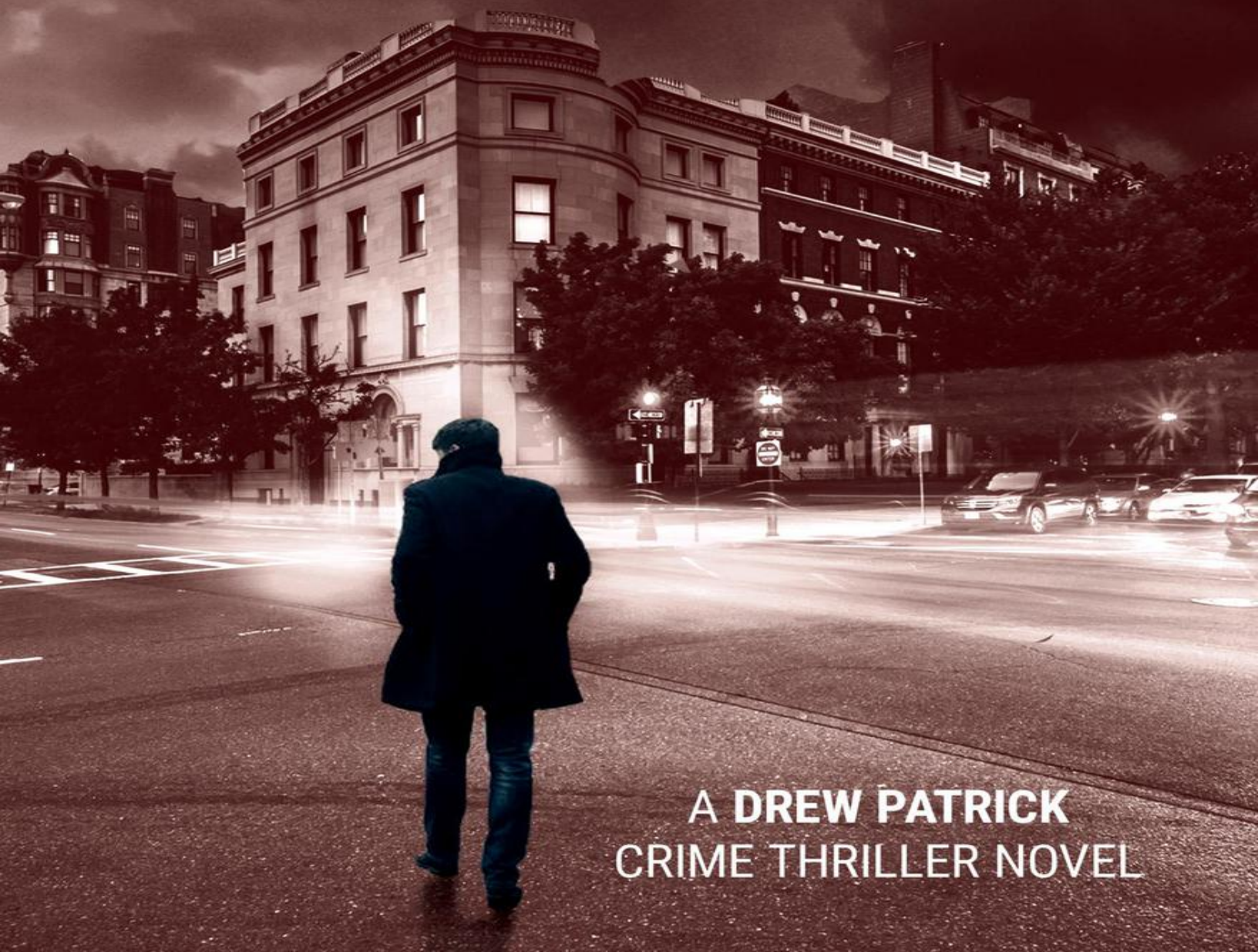


JASON RICHARDS SHATTERED



A DREW PATRICK
CRIME THRILLER NOVEL

Shattered: A Drew Patrick Crime Thriller Novel

Drew Patrick Private Investigator Series, Volume 2

Jason Richards

Published by Wheelhouse Publishers LLC, 2020.

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CHAPTER 1

Mercado

Rain pounded the windshield and the wipers worked overtime as Mercado drove the Hummer H2 along U.S. Route 201 in Maine. The Hummer was spacious, which made riding in it more comfortable for his long legs, broad shoulders, and meaty thighs. The SUV had power and size, just like its driver. Mercado would have to consider getting one of his own.

The seventeen inch Goodyear all season tires gripped the road well for such wet conditions. Mercado had the road to himself on the rainy night. But he wouldn't for long. He was quickly closing in on his target.

Mercado had already laid out his plan for when he spotted the young woman's car. For the time being he thought about the beaches, swimming holes, camping, and boating so popular in Kennebec and Moose River Valley. Mercado once kayaked in the area.

When he was a boy his parents took him leaf peeping along the Old Canada Road, as Route 201 is also known. He was innocent then. Mercado had not been innocent for a long time.

As he traveled south he followed the old river trading routes along the Kennebec River. Mercado once killed a man who lived near the river's source of Moosehead Lake. He then thought of another body he had dumped where the river empties in the Gulf of Maine. His current hit wouldn't even require him to get out of the Hummer.

Mercado considered the young woman as she drove not far ahead. The picture he had been given was of an attractive young woman in her twenties. She had soft features and vibrant eyes. Soon those eyes would be empty.

He wondered, do the eyes of the dead look empty because the soul has departed? Mercado didn't like to think about the soul. If he had one, he didn't think anything good would come of it when he was dead.

Mercado had done many bad things in his life. He was about to do another in completing the job he had been hired to do.

Mercado could not have asked for more ideal conditions for his assignment. He played out the news report in his head: *Boston woman loses*

control of car on stormy night and plunges to her death. It would be ruled as nothing more than a tragic accident. It was what his client wanted.

Tail lights blurred by rain appeared ahead. Mercado pressed on the accelerator to get closer. The car was a small sporty model. A BMW Roadster. The car model was a match. So too were the letters and numbers on the Massachusetts license plate he had committed to memory.

Mercado pressed the gas pedal to the floorboard and felt the power of three hundred and ninety-three horses as the Hummer's V8 engine roared. The front grill of the massive SUV quickly closed in on the bright tail lights of the young woman's car. Mercado felt the bump as all 6,614 pounds of his ride slammed into the rear of the Roadster.

The BMW swerved before its driver regained control. Mercado sped forward once again. The Hummer slammed harder into the back of the car and it fishtailed on the slippery road. Mercado pressed the Hummer forward and made contact with the Roadster as it spun out of control.

With that final push the car slid off the road and hurdled over the edge. Mercado continued driving as he heard the crash and explosion. He glanced into the rear-view mirror as a fireball lit the night sky. Drops of rain captured the orange glow.

The Hummer's wipers swept away the hard rain as Mercado continued along U.S. Route 201 toward I-295. He once again had the road to himself. Mercado thought about the job that awaited him in Boston.

CHAPTER 2

Drew Patrick

“Are you a serious detective Mr. Patrick?” Cynthia Holland asked as she considered my office. She paid no attention to my Beagle-mix, Dash, as he slept in his corner of the couch. Surprisingly, Dash showed no interest greeting her when she entered the office. He had looked at her and then went back to sleep. His reaction told me a lot.

Cynthia Holland's eyes rested on the Red Sox bobble-heads on my desk.

“Give-away nights at Fenway Park,” I said. I tapped the bill of the hat on the Mookie Betts doll and its head bobbed. “Arriving early can have its perks.”

“Yes,” she said, “I suppose it can.” She tried to force a smile. Or maybe it was gas. Hard to tell.

Cynthia Holland looked like she needed reassuring, and I needed a case, so I answered her as seriously as I could muster, “I’m a former special agent with the FBI.” I tilted my head toward my diploma from the FBI Academy, which hung next to my Bachelor of Science degree in Criminal Justice from Northeastern University. Perhaps those pieces of parchment would offset the bobble-heads.

Cynthia Holland shifted her dark eyes toward my office wall as she looked at the framed diplomas. Her eyes scanned like an x-ray machine. I wondered if she thought they might be fakes. She then looked at me without blinking.

“I know full well you were with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and now you own this detective agency,” she said.

“I even have my name on the door,” I said. “And business cards printed on heavy stock.”

She frowned, and I wondered if I blew being serious. I waited a moment and then she sat down in one of the client chairs opposite my desk. My keen powers of observation told me she was staying. A regular Sherlock Holmes.

“Can I get you anything to drink? Water, coffee, or tea?” I said.

“No, thank you,” she replied.

I sat behind my desk and gave her my best GQ smile. She did not smile back. Maybe it had been gas earlier.

While lacking in warmth, she was not an unattractive woman. I guessed she was in her early 50s. Cynthia Holland was thin, of average height, and had a perfect complexion and expensively styled shoulder-length brown hair. She was exquisitely dressed in a knee-length skirt and matching blouse from a designer boutique.

She placed a Gucci purse on her lap and rested her hands on top. She probably needed to rest her left hand throughout the day given the size of the diamond ring on her finger. Cynthia Holland looked me directly in the eyes and let out a deep sigh.

“My husband should be here any moment,” she said. “We'll wait until he arrives to begin.”

“Sure thing,” I said. I flashed another of my winning smiles. No reaction.

My mother always told me I had a nice smile. Maybe it wasn't true. I made a mental note to ask her later.

Being a private investigator I'm accustomed to long stretches of silence. But those usually occur when I'm alone on a stake out, not sitting in my office with a potential client. We were past the normal lull in conversation and well into an awkward silence.

It didn't seem to bother Cynthia Holland. She sat expressionless. Maybe she was meditating. Or maybe it was relief from the possible earlier gas having passed.

I doubted another smile would help. I thought about whistling a nice tune, but I wasn't confident we had the same taste in music. Given her reaction to the bobble-heads, I didn't think talking about the Red Sox winning the world series was a topic we had in common.

“Hello,” a man's voice said from just outside my open office door.

I looked up and Cynthia Holland turned around. Dash hopped down from his spot on the couch, stretched, and trotted over wagging his tail. Cynthia pressed herself deeper into the chair as Dash walked past her.

The man was two or three inches shorter than me at around five eleven or six feet. He was lanky with a perfectly tailored blue pinstripe Brooks Brothers suit, crisply pressed white shirt, with French cuffs, and a light blue domino patterned designer tie. He had neatly trimmed short brown hair, parted on the side.

I spotted a gold Rolex watch on his wrist as he reached down and scratched behind one of Dash's floppy ears. My investigative prowess told me this guy was the source of Cynthia Holland's diamond ring.

"You're late, Jeffrey," she said.

Bingo! Drew Patrick, detective extraordinaire.

"Sorry," he said, "I wasn't sure where on Brattle Street the office was located."

Cynthia Holland rolled her eyes. If Jeffrey noticed, he gave no indication.

I stood and offered my hand. "Drew Patrick."

"Jeffrey Holland," he said taking my hand and shaking it. "Pleasure to meet you."

"Likewise," I said. "Please, have a seat," I said as I indicated the empty client chair next to the one occupied by his wife.

Jeffrey Holland leaned over and offered her an awkward peck on the cheek. Then he sat in the chair. Dash resumed his position on the couch and went back to sleep.

"How about the Sox?" Jeffrey said as he eyed the bobble-heads.

"Alex Cora had a masterful first season as Manager," I said. "Perfect complement to a team of talented players."

Jeffrey Holland nodded in agreement. Cynthia Holland rolled her eyes again.

"Can I get you anything to drink?" I said.

Jeffrey shook his head. "No, thank you."

"Now we can begin," Cynthia Holland announced.

I placed a notepad in front of me and grabbed a pen, ready to take notes like a seasoned journalist. Or at least a half-decent private investigator.

"Mr. Patrick, we would like to hire you to find our daughter," said Cynthia Holland.

There was nothing in her tone which suggested the seriousness of a missing daughter. None of her behavior since entering my office would suggest I would hear anything like what she had just said.

Jeffrey Holland leaned forward in his chair. "This has happened before," he said. "Ashley will go off for a few days and not tell us. She won't respond to texts or phone calls and then show up again."

"Last month she jetted off to Paris for a long weekend," said Cynthia Holland. "Was incommunicado for three days. Came back with shopping

bags from Hermes.”

“She bought me this tie,” said Jeffrey Holland as he lifted up the end of his tie. He looked at a moment, lost in thought.

“If your daughter is prone to flights of fancy,” I said, “why the concern now?”

“She has been gone five days,” said Jeffrey Holland. I detected concern in his voice. “Ashley has never been gone more than four days before with no form of contact.”

I nodded my head.

“Have you gone to the police?” I said.

“No,” Cynthia Holland said. “We don't want this in the media. Imagine the embarrassment when she turns up after a trip to Europe or the Caribbean.”

“I can take your case, but the goal is to find your daughter. The police can help.”

“We'll take that into consideration,” Jeffrey Holland said.

“Do you know where she may have gone?” I said.

“Not a clue,” Cynthia Holland said.

“Actually,” Jeffrey said, “she mentioned something about a lake house up north.”

Cynthia Holland whipped her head in her husband's direction. “Why on earth would Ashley tell you and not me?”

Jeffrey Holland shrugged. He probably knew, or had a strong opinion on the matter, but I didn't blame him for wanting to avoid a confrontation with his wife.

“Do you know where up north?” I said. “New Hampshire? Vermont? Maine? Canada, even?”

“No, I'm sorry,” Jeffrey Holland said. “Ashley didn't say where.”

“What about her friends? Have you spoken to them?”

“The ones we could reach knew nothing more than we do,” Jeffrey Holland said.

I asked more questions to establish the best profile on Ashley I could. I also had the Hollands text me Ashley's picture and give me her detailed description, information on the car she drove, and contacts for known friends and associates.

We went over my daily rate, plus estimated expenses, and Jeffrey Holland wrote me a check to cover my first day. I'm sure he spent more on

monogrammed hankies.

The Hollands didn't strike me as the most loving parents, but they came to me to find their daughter. And even less than stellar parents can know when something is not right with their kids. The fact the Hollands hired a private investigator meant we were in that territory.

I would do my best to find Ashley. I've done this enough times to have confidence in finding her. I only hoped she would be okay when I did.

CHAPTER 3

The Hollands had given me very little to go on. Then again, if they had more they wouldn't need me. I scanned the addresses of Ashley's friends and associates Cynthia and Jeffrey provided. Two of the names on the list worked as event planners at The Charles Hotel. Starting my investigation less than ten minutes from my office seemed like the most efficient plan for my day.

Dash peed on his favorite bush outside my office building. Because Dash frequented the bush, so did other dogs who passed by on their walks. The poor bush was dead in one corner from all the dog's marking territory. Dash had the most access to it on any given day, so he could lay claim to the king of this Brattle Street bush.

After dropping him off for a day of play at dog camp, I walked back down Brattle Street toward Church Street. I hung a left on Church to make a quick stop in Dunkin' Donuts. I ordered a corn muffin and large regular coffee. I ate the corn muffin as I walked back up Brattle Street. I finished the muffin before I hung a left onto Story Street. A left, a right, and another left took me across Mount Auburn Street and along University Road to the Charles Hotel on Bennett Street.

Like many of the surrounding buildings in the heart of Harvard Square, The Charles Hotel's red brick greeted me as I approached. The lobby featured the exposed red brick, light wood paneling, and light brown leather seating.

I approached the front desk. A clerk, whose name plate indicated his name was Gavin, greeted me warmly. Gavin was neatly groomed and had a charming smile. I expected nothing less from a hotel in Harvard Square. I asked to speak with Cristina Mills and Grace Ingram.

Gavin looked at my business card. "Are you here about the luncheon in the Longfellow Room?" he asked with confusion in his voice.

"No. I'm here investigating the disappearance of one of their friends. I only need to ask them a few questions."

Gavin got a concerned look on his face. "How terrible," he said.

"I'm hoping it turns out to be nothing," I said. "But it is important I speak with Cristina and Grace as soon as possible."

He nodded. "Of course, Mr. Patrick. Just one moment." Gavin picked up the phone and punched a button. Probably a direct line to either Cristina

or Grace. We waited a few beats and then he said, “Yes, I have a Mr. Drew Patrick in the lobby. He is a private detective here investigating a case about a missing woman you and Grace know.” I waited a moment longer as Cristina gave a reply.

Gavin nodded. “Okay,” he said. “Thanks, Cristina.” He hung up and looked at me. “They can meet you the Longfellow Room. Do you know how to find it?”

“Yes. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Have a nice day.”

“You too,” I said.

As I turned to walk away, Gavin called out to me. “I hope you find the missing woman.”

“Me too.”

I wound my way around the first floor to the Longfellow Room. The décor was subtle tones of beige, off-white, and blue. Two young woman stood talking in the center of the room as they referenced something on an iPad.

Both women appeared to be in their mid-twenties. They had been college classmates of Ashley’s. One had shoulder-length blond hair. The other had shorter black hair, trimmed just below her ears. The blond wore a dark blue skirt and powder blue blouse. The brunette had on a black pants suit and white shirt.

“Mr. Patrick?” the brunette asked as I crossed the room.

“Yes,” I said. “I’m sorry to bother you at work.”

“No bother,” she said. “I’m Cristina Mills. This is Grace Ingram.”

I shook hands with Cristina and then Grace. “Nice to meet you both.”

They nodded and smiled. I handed each of them a business card. The stock and embossing I’m sure rivaled the business cards of any establishment in Harvard Square.

“Now, what’s this about a missing person?” Cristina said.

“Have either of you been in contact with Ashley Holland in the past five days?”

They both shook their heads. “The last time I spoke with Ashley was two or three weeks ago,” Grace said.

“I spoke with her about two weeks ago,” Cristina said. “We were planning on getting our sorority sisters together around Christmas.”

“Has Ashley been reported missing?” Grace asked. “It’s not unusual for her to jet off somewhere.”

“She has not been officially reported missing to the police,” I said. “But her parents are concerned they have not heard from her in five days. They did indicated she likes to jet off places, but she has never been out of contact quite this long.”

“It wouldn’t be strange for her not to contact her mother,” Cristina said. “They don’t get along. But she adores her father.”

Cristina’s comment explained much about the different reactions from Cynthia and Jeffrey in my office. “Do either of you have any idea where Ashley may have gone recently? Her parents mentioned a lake house.”

They shook their heads. “Ashley didn’t mention anything about a lake house,” Cristina said. “But, like we mentioned, it has been at least two weeks since either of us spoke with her.”

I nodded. “No posts on social media?” I asked.

Again head shakes.

A workman entered the Longfellow Room carrying a ladder. He looked to be in his late fifties and carried a little extra weight.

“Excuse me a moment,” Cristina said to me. She stepped away. “It’s the light in the center, Mike,” she said to the workman.

“I’ll replace it in a jiffy,” Mike replied. Cristina stepped back as Mike set up the ladder.

“Last minute fixes before the luncheon today,” Cristina said.

“Does Ashley have a boyfriend?” I said. “Or someone she has been seeing lately?”

Cristina and Grace looked at each other. Their glances told me they knew something, but were hesitant to share. “It might be important,” I said.

Grace looked at me and said, “She mentioned to me she was seeing some rich older guy. Somebody pretty famous, but she wouldn’t tell me his name.”

“When was this?”

Grace thought for a moment. “About a month ago, maybe.”

I nodded and then looked at Cristina. “Did she mention this to you?” I asked.

Cristina nodded. “Yeah. But like Grace, Ashley didn’t tell me anything more than that. I couldn’t even get her to give me any hints who the guy might be.”

“Other than rich, older, and somewhat famous?” I said.

“That about sums it up,” Cristina said.

“Yeah,” Grace added.

I heard Mike clatter down the ladder after replacing the light bulb.

“Ashley dates lots of guys,” Cristina said. “She’s always going to fancy parties.”

“Does she usually date older guys?” I said.

“Sometimes,” Grace said.

“All done,” Mike called over.

“Thanks, Mike,” Cristina called back glancing around me.

“And you have no idea who this guy she is dating might be?” I said.

“Not a clue,” said Grace. “Ashley never dates any guy for very long, so it’s not worth investing the time in finding out.”

“Anything else you can think of?” I said.

Cristina and Grace shook their heads in near perfect timing. They hadn’t wanted to share that Ashley was dating some older, rich, famous guy. But I felt it was more not wanting to talk about a friend’s personal life more than they were trying to hide something from my investigation. I also figured I learned all I was going to from them.

“Thank you for your time,” I said. “If you hear from Ashley, or think of anything else, please call me. Or text. Or send up a smoke signal.”

Cristina and Grace laughed softly. Professional and dignified laughs. I let them get back to their iPad. As I exited the Longfellow Room, Mike was up on his ladder fixing the hinge of a door. Busy guy.

My conversation with Cristina and Grace gave a little more information than I had before I met with them, but I still didn’t know much. Detecting is a process of gathering lots of little bits of information. In the end, you hope the lots of little bits add up to something big enough to offer a solution.

I contacted a few more names on the list and learned exactly nothing more. Since I always work better on a full stomach, I determined lunch was in order. It would give me time to think through the case. And since two minds are better than one, I contacted Jessica Casey to join me.

Jessica worked as a private investigator for a large international detective agency based in Boston. She had a snazzy office in their downtown building and mostly dealt with high-end clients like the Hollands. I only occasionally got high-end clients, and that was fine by me.

“Hello, handsome,” Jessica’s voice greeted me when she answered her phone. Jessica and I are romantically involved, but we haven’t found a need to label our relationship. What we have is special, and it works.

“Join me for lunch?” I said.

“I have an afternoon full of new client meetings, but I can sneak out for a bit. In fact, my first meeting is in Cambridge. I can meet you somewhere in Harvard Square.”

“How about Pinocchio’s?”

“Ooh, big spender.”

“Your afternoon of new client meetings limits our options. Besides, what could be better on a cool fall day than a hot slice of Sicilian-style pizza?”

“Just one slice?” she said.

“Okay, two. Maybe three.”

“I could go for a slice of eggplant.”

“Now why would you ruin a perfectly good slice of pizza by adding eggplant?” I said.

“I like eggplant. You should expand your palate.”

“I’m good with pepperoni.”

“At least we can agree on no anchovies,” she said.

“Definitely,” I said.

“Give me a half-hour,” she said. “I’ll meet you there.”

“I’ll be the good-looking guy with a hint of danger about him.”

“I just happen to go for good-looking guys with a hint of danger about them.”

“Lucky me,” I said. And I was.

CHAPTER 4

Harvard Square was buzzing with activity as people enjoyed the beautiful fall afternoon before rain from northern New England would roll in later. I pulled my Harvard baseball cap on tightly against the crisp autumn breeze. The crimson cap, with the white capital H on the front, gave the appearance that I was either a person of great intellect or had shelled out twenty-four bucks at the Coop.

My gray Northeastern University sweatshirt represented my Alma mater and kept me toasty warm as I walked down Brattle Street. Perhaps my sweatshirt confirmed the authenticity of my college diploma for Cynthia Holland. My blue jeans were classic Levis and well broken in, just the way I liked them. The same went for my New Balance sneakers.

I passed Brattle Square and crossed over Mount Auburn Street. I cut through Winthrop Square and admired the bright fall colors on the trees. I crossed John F. Kennedy Street to Winthrop Street. Harvard students passed me on the sidewalk carrying pizza boxes from Pinocchio's.

Through the plate-glass window I could see the small pizza and sub shop was busy as usual. I went in, made my way to the counter, and ordered. Two slices of pepperoni for me, and a slice of eggplant for Jessica. I completed the order with a Coke and bottled water and paid. Jessica would sip her water while I had a Coke and a smile.

Two coeds got up to leave and offered me their table by the window overlooking Winthrop Street. I smiled and thanked them. They smiled back. The usual reaction. Maybe I didn't need to check with my mother.

As I was sitting, I spotted Jessica on Winthrop Street approaching the restaurant. Her five foot ten inch athletic frame moved quickly. Jessica believed in arriving at least ten minutes early to any appointment. Even for a casual lunch with her favorite guy.

As she entered Pinocchio's, customers did a double-take. I saw it often. At first glance Jessica had a passing resemblance to Gisele Bündchen. With a little closer inspection the customers realized Jessica's hair was more chestnut, and she had light green eyes.

A few took a moment longer to consider her. Could Gisele be in disguise? Is there a Tom Brady sighting? All the patrons of Pinocchio's seemed satisfied Jessica was not Gisele and went back to eating their pizza and subs.

“Do people ever wonder if I'm Tom Brady when I'm with you?” I said. Jessica wrinkled her nose and said, “You have dark hair and are two inches shorter. But you have similar blue eyes.”

“You left out every bit as handsome and a similar gun for an arm.”

“Goes without saying.”

“But that would be a 'no'?” I said

Jessica nodded her head and then gave me a kiss.

“But you're the star quarterback of my team,” she said as she removed her blue LL Bean fleece pea coat.

“Best team around,” I said.

Jessica placed her jacket over the back of her chair and sat. If she hadn't already told me she would be meeting a client, her charcoal pants suit and white blouse would have been a clue. Everyone at Jessica's agency wore suits. Their detectives were former FBI, Secret Service, police, and lawyers. Jessica fell into the latter category.

“So Pinnacle Detective Agency doesn't have enough clients in Boston that they are sending you to Cambridge?” I said before taking a bite of my pizza.

“Worried about the competition?” Jessica said with a grin.

“We don't exactly fish in the same client pond,” I said. “Unless the Pinnacle waters are drying up.”

“Hardly,” said Jessica. “Some of our clients have us on retainer to investigate the missing keys to their beamers.”

“Can't they just take the Mercedes instead?”

Jessica paused in taking a bite of her pizza and laughed.

“And you wonder why I don't have you over to the office more,” she said grinning.

“Oh, I know why,” I said. “Plus, I hate to wear suits.”

“How did you ever last five years with the FBI?”

“I was finding myself,” I said.

I polished off my first slice of pizza. Jessica was only half-way through her slice.

“Seriously,” Jessica said, “we have some very challenging cases. Plus, there is all the travel.”

Jessica often spent time in New York, Los Angeles, London, and cities across Europe.

“Ah, the glitz and glamour of international investigations,” I said. “You know, if you ever want to take on grittier cases, Dash and I can always make space for you on Brattle Street.”

“While we work well together on the occasional case, I'm not sure being partners is in either of our best interests.”

“Does save on changing the sign and business cards,” I said.

I was well into my second slice. Jessica still had a quarter of her slice remaining.

“Besides,” she said, “I get enough grit when I help out on some of your cases.”

“A little grit can go a long way,” I said. “Although I may be stepping up in the world.”

“Do tell.”

“I reeled in a rather large catch this morning,” I said. “I'm actually surprised they didn't go to Pinnacle.”

“Maybe they did, and we didn't take their case.” Jessica looked at me playfully.

“Or they decided to go straight to the Commonwealth's number one private investigator.”

“Who is the client?” Jessica said. “I can tell you if I met with them.”

“It's a good thing you are so cute,” I said.

“Right back at ya,” she said, raising her bottled water and titling it in my direction.

I raised my can of Coke and took a sip. “I can't believe they ever messed with the formula,” I said.

“That was over thirty years ago,” Jessica said.

“It was a big deal at the time.”

“Tell me about your new client.”

“Cynthia and Jeffrey Holland,” I said. “They've hired me to find their daughter, Ashley.”

“Wait a second,” Jessica said. “Ashley Holland? Do you have a picture of her?”

I pulled out my cell phone and found a picture of Ashley the Hollands had sent me. I handed the phone to Jessica. She considered the photo of Ashley a second, then nodded her head.

“The luck of your Irish family may truly be working for you today,” she said. “Ashley Holland is mentioned in one of our investigations.”

CHAPTER 5

Mercado

Mercado sat drinking a beer in Cheers on Beacon Hill. He was in the original basement level bar, not the replica set bar built on the ground floor after the popularity of the television sitcom. People sat drinking, eating, and enjoying themselves. A family passed wide-eyed with bags filled with Cheers swag from the gift shop. Tourists, he figured.

Mercado drained his beer and placed the empty mug on the bar. He nodded to the bartender who filled a mug from the tap and placed it in front of Mercado. Sam Adams Brick Red. The bartender swiped the empty mug away with his left hand in a single swift motion and wiped the bar dry with the cloth in his right.

Mercado took a sip of his beer. The bartender returned and placed an order of Pub Skins in front of Mercado.

“Get you anything else?” the bartender said.

“Another beer when I finish this one,” Mercado said.

“You got it.”

The bartender moved away to take the order of a couple who sat down at the opposite end of the bar.

Mercado checked his watch. His client would be there soon. On her insistence, they always met in a public place. He figured she was afraid to meet him alone. He was a dangerous man, so fearing him was not unreasonable.

He looked around but wasn't sure what she would look like. Other than the fact she was five foot five, slender, Caucasian, and in her late fifties, she had on a different disguise each time they met. He wasn't sure what was up with all the cloak and dagger spy shit.

It wasn't like he was going to blab about who was paying him for contract killings. That wouldn't be good for business. Mercado was very discreet. And careful.

So was the client. Or so she believed. Mercado had figured out who she was fairly quickly. It wasn't difficult given the assignments. He also had trailed her home to a Brownstone in Boston's Back Bay.

But he played along. She was the client. It was no skin off his nose. As long as she paid, what did he care?

Mercado waited by eating the potato skins, piled with cheddar cheese and bacon bits, and drinking his beer. He left the side of sour cream untouched.

A woman wearing a pink Red Sox cap, Cheers sweatshirt, and designer sunglasses sat next to him at the bar. A small purse hung at her side. She had dark straight hair that reached her waist. She looked like a 1960s version of Cher.

"I remember when this was the Bull and Finch Pub," she said. "But I love the Cheers Hot Bloody Mary."

That was the phrase Mercado was told his client would use.

He responded as agreed, "I'm drinking Sam Adams Brick Red."

It was like his client imagined she was a villain in a James Bond movie.

The bartender came over. "What can I get you?" he asked the woman.

"Cheers Hot Bloody Mary," she said.

"Coming right up," the bartender said.

Hmm, Mercado thought, maybe she actually does like that drink.

"I trust you completed the job?" she said softly.

"Just like you asked," Mercado said in a hushed tone, as required by the client. He slid a USB flash drive with a video of the accident taken from his cell phone. The woman took the flash drive and dropped it in her purse.

Mercado continued, "I watched it after I transferred it to my computer to copy the file. It's a little dark and rainy, but you can make out the car and license plate well enough."

"Very good," she said.

The woman reached into her purse and handed an envelope to Mercado under the bar. He took the envelope and placed it in his jacket pocket. Even with his meaty hands, he could feel the stack of bills.

"The balance owed, deposit for your next job, and details on the girl," the woman said.

The bartender walked over and placed her drink on the bar in front of her.

"Thank you," she said.

The bartender nodded with a smile. He glanced at Mercado's mug. Nearly empty. He turned to the taps behind him, filled a fresh mug with Sam Adams Brick Red, and placed it in front of Mercado.

Mercado nodded his appreciation to the bartender. The woman took a sip of her cocktail and waited for the bartender to move away before speaking again.

“Another accident. But different,” she said.

“No problem,” Mercado said.

“I'm leaving town tomorrow,” she said, “so I want it done tonight. We can meet at the airport in the morning. I've also left you details for that meeting in the envelope. Commit everything to memory, then destroy the paper.”

“Sure thing,” Mercado said. “Like burning it in a wastebasket? Probably better than shredding it.” He stifled a laugh but enjoyed toying with the woman.

“Whatever way is best,” she said in all seriousness.

Kind of sad. He had always found the woman rather pathetic. And desperate. But she also had ice coursing through her veins. Not enough to kill someone herself, but obviously enough to pay somebody else to do it for her.

That was Mercado's stock and trade.

Yet he didn't plan to become a contract killer. It just turned out that way.

He knew something was wrong with him. He understood his head was messed up. But he was too messed up to understand how he really got the way he did. But he figured it was too late to find out why.

“Good luck,” the woman said. She dropped money on the bar for her drink and got up from the bar stool.

Mercado would take good luck, but he didn't need it. He was skilled at what he did.

The woman turned and left. Half the Cheers Hot Bloody Mary left in the glass. Mercado finished his beer.

“Want another?” the bartender asked.

“No,” Mercado said. “I need to go to work.”

He paid and left.

CHAPTER 6

Drew Patrick

I looked like I had stepped off the page of a Lands End catalog with my light blue Oxford dress shirt, khaki chinos, and loafers. Jessica assured me the change of clothes would fit perfectly with Pinnacle's casual Friday. My definition of casual was a sweatshirt, jeans, and sneakers, but I had been informed there is such a thing as too casual. At least I didn't have to dust off one of my suits.

The Pinnacle Detective Agency occupied 11,000 square feet of office space on Federal Street in downtown Boston. I rode the Red Line from Harvard Square to South Station. I exited South Station at Summer Street and crossed Summer and Atlantic Avenue. If I hadn't already eaten at Pinnochio's, I would have been tempted to stop at the Bon Me Food Truck. Full of pizza, I resisted.

I passed the Rose Kennedy Greenway Dewey Square. In warmer weather, the green space is occupied with Bostonians enjoying a picnic lunch, reading a book, or munching on fresh produce purchased at the Dewey Square Farmers Market. I crossed over Purchase Street near the Bank of America Financial Center. As I approached High Street I considered taking a right to pick up some chocolates by purveyors of fine chocolate at Au Chocolat for Jessica. She had amazing willpower to not stop by there every day, so I figured she deserved a treat. I'd stop on the way home.

People crowded into the buildings on Federal Street as they returned from lunch to resume high finance and other business dealings. I took my spot in the revolving door and entered the lobby. The beige stone flooring was buffed to a high gloss and large plate glass windows allowed patches of sun to stream in between the buildings which sat opposite on Federal Street. I waited by the bank of elevators surrounded by people in suits staring at the screens on their phones and tapping out text messages.

The elevator doors opened and the phone zombies stepped in without looking up from their glowing screens. I stood in the elevator with my back

to the doors as they closed. I faced the crowd to see if anyone would notice. Perhaps it would even promote human interaction.

After a few beats, one woman glanced up at me. I gave her one of my world famous smiles. She returned an uneasy smile and then returned to her text message. Perhaps she was telling the person on the other end of the phone about the crazy guy facing all the other riders in the elevator.

We reached Pinnacle's floor and it appeared the woman was happy to see me turn around and step off the elevator. I turned back toward the elevator and waved. The woman tried not to look, but her eyes shifted upward long enough to see me before the doors closed. I guess I'll never know if she waved back. I doubted she had.

Pinnacle's hallway probably looked like every other hall in the building with the same beige stone floor tiles, modern high-sheen wood panels on the walls, and potted plants spaced evenly on either side of the doors. I entered Pinnacle's reception area and was greeted by a cheery Millennial. I had visited Pinnacle a number of times and the girl was new. She wore a lavender button-down dress shirt with navy blue chinos. We both looked the part for Pinnacle's casual Friday.

"How may I help you?" she said. Bubbly.

"I'm Drew Patrick, here to see Tyrell Evans," I said as I handed her my business card.

She glanced at my card and then placed it on the reception desk. "Just a moment," she said. I waited as she picked up the phone on her desk. "Mr. Evans, a Mr. Drew Patrick is here to see you." She nodded and hung up the phone.

"Just through the door and to your right," she said to me.

While I knew the way to Tyrell's office, I thanked her. We exchanged casual smiles to go along with the theme of casual Friday.

Tyrell Evans stood outside his office waiting for me as I approached. His six foot four-inch linebacker-sized body filled the door frame. His creased espresso skin and whitening hair revealed his sixty-five years.

Tyrell was the Investigator in Charge for Pinnacle Detective Agency. He had spent thirty years as Special Agent in Charge of the Boston FBI office before joining Pinnacle ten years ago. When Jessica got tired of pushing papers as a lawyer, it was Tyrell who suggested she get her private investigator license and join the agency. She's been a star at Pinnacle ever since.

“Drew, good to see you,” he said as he extended his large hand.

“Always a pleasure,” I said as we shook hands. Tyrell had a familiar firm but welcoming grip.

“Come on in.”

I followed Tyrell into his corner office. He sat behind a large mahogany desk. I sat in one of the Corinthian leather chairs opposite his desk. The windows behind him looked out onto Federal Street.

The office walls were adorned with commendations from various law enforcement agencies, the mayor of Boston, and Governor of Massachusetts. A credenza along the wall to the right displayed family photos. Tyrell had two adult children whom he had raised with one of the sweetest women on the planet. And she bakes one of the best pumpkin pies I've ever tasted.

“How's the family?” I said looking at the photos.

“All doing fine. We just found out we're expecting our third grandchild.”

“Congratulations.”

“Thanks. I keep thinking one day you and Jessica will tie the knot and have some kids. But you don't need to answer. I know what you two have works. Just something to ponder.”

Most people in our lives gave us that to contemplate. Jessica and I were more of the mind that if it isn't broken, don't try to fix it. While our relationship was not easily defined by labels, it worked extremely well for both of us.

Tyrell leaned back in his executive leather chair. He looked at me and said, “I understand you've been hired to find Ashley Holland.”

“Yes. What can you tell me?”

“I'll share what we know, but I'm not sure it is likely to help you locate her.”

“I won't be any more in the dark than I am now,” I said.

Tyrell opened a case file on his desk and handed me field reports submitted by investigators working the case.

“As you can see in the report, Ashley Holland is one of several young women Grant Worthington is, shall we say, meeting up with.”

“The movie mogul?” I said.

Tyrell nodded his head and said, “One and the same. He lives in Los Angeles most of the time but has a lovely Brownstone in the Back Bay. He's

originally from Boston. I guess he wants to maintain a connection to his roots.”

“So both your Boston and LA offices are on the case?” I said as I scanned the contents of the field reports.

Tyrell nodded his head again. “Yep. Mr. Worthington likes to keep the company of young women on both coasts. We've been retained by his wife, Evelyn, to present evidence of his cheating. She's building a case to file for divorce and take most of the movie empire with her.”

“Not a small chunk of change.”

“No, it is not. The Worthington movie studio is worth billions. Too many high-value franchise films for the average moviegoer to count.”

“I bet Evelyn Worthington has counted every one of them,” I said.

“No doubt,” he said.

I flipped through the pages and Tyrell gave me a few moments to read more of the details.

“Well,” I said, “this is interesting.”

“I figured you would think so,” he said.

Ashley Holland, and the other Boston women, all worked for an executive escort service. The Hollands hadn't mentioned that to me. Also a good chance they didn't know.

“It's a legitimate service for executives who want an attractive and intelligent woman to accompany them to dinner and social functions,” Tyrell said. “But that is not to say some hanky-panky doesn't happen off the books.”

“Hanky-panky?” I said. “I didn't realize that was still part of the vernacular.”

“I'm old,” Tyrell said.

“Age is merely a number,” I said. “I bet you are still one of the fittest investigators in this office.”

Tyrell smiled and said, “I can still hold my own.”

“What I don't get is why Grant Worthington would be so public about being seen with these women?” I said.

“The story he tells Mrs. Worthington is that they are up-and-coming actresses he is considering for movie and TV projects.”

“Okay,” I said, “do we imagine Ashley was involved in, as you put it, off the books hanky-panky?”

“Oh yes,” Tyrell said. “We have some photographic evidence, but I’ll trust you don’t need to see those.”

“I’m pretty sure I can piece together what went on.”

“Amazing how people don’t shut the blinds,” Tyrell said.

“Makes taking pictures with telephoto lenses that much easier,” I said.

“Most definitely. Although to be fair, our agents got the pictures at a rather isolated lake house in Maine. They probably had no reason to believe anyone else was around to see them.”

“Ashley’s parents mentioned she went on a trip to a lake house up north. They didn’t have any other details.”

“That was earlier in the week,” Tyrell said.

“Monday night,” I said reading from the report. “Ashley has been missing since some time after that.”

“Ashley and Grant arrived in separate cars and left in separate cars,” Tyrell said. “Our guy trailed Grant all the way back to his home in Back Bay Wednesday morning. We didn’t have anybody on Ashley.”

“No reason to,” I said. “You’re investigating Grant having affairs. The time the women spend with him is all that matters for your case.”

“I wish we could give you more to go on, Drew.”

“I know a little more now than when I came in, so I’ll take it as a win.”

“You always were a glass half full guy.”

“It helps keep me sane in this crazy business.”

Tyrell and I said goodbye and he promised to find an evening where Jessica and I would go to his house for dinner. He hinted his wife might bake her famous pumpkin pie. I’d go without the pie, but it certainly didn’t hurt in sealing the deal.

I made my way to the lobby and through the revolving door out toward Federal Street. My feet took me along High Street to Au Chocolat. I bought Jessica a box of truffles.

CHAPTER 7

A good rule in looking for a missing person is to investigate where they were last seen. My visit with Tyrell Evans narrowed that down for Ashley Holland from somewhere up North to a specific lake house in Maine. I accepted the news as progress.

Before heading into Moose country, I decided to stop by Ashley's condo. I would feel pretty silly traveling to Maine and back only to discover Ashley hanging out at home binge watching her favorite shows on Netflix. Another good rule in detecting is to eliminate the easiest explanation first.

I hopped on the Silver Line from South Station to Courthouse Station. It was a short walk from Courthouse Station to Ashley's building in Boston's burgeoning Seaport District. I wasn't sure if her rich parents or earnings as a high-priced escort paid for the luxury residence in the new art deco building overlooking the harbor.

The luck of my Irish ancestry was continuing as I knew the doorman, Frank. He had been a longtime doorman at the Taj Boston, back to when it was the former Ritz Carlton. Frank had been an amateur heavyweight boxer back in the day. Not a bad guy to have manning the entrance to your building.

"New gig?" I said to Frank.

"Hey, Drew. Yeah, the management here poached a lot of us service folks from some of the better establishments around Boston."

"They couldn't do better than you," I said.

"Appreciate that. The new job has its perks. We were treated to seats at Fenway for Game 1 of the World Series."

"I'm in the wrong line of work," I said.

"Being a PI suits you. I can't picture you in a uniform."

"The Oxford and chinos have been a stretch."

A well-groomed couple approached the building. Frank opened the door for them.

He said, "Good afternoon Mr. and Mrs. Pendleton."

The Pendleton's gave a modest nod of their heads as they entered the grand lobby. Frank closed the door.

"They are first class assholes," Frank said. "But it's my job to be nice."

"I take back what I said about wanting your job," I said.

"I'm sure you run into your fair share of wisenheimers in your line of work."

"But I don't have to be nice to them."

Frank smiled. Then he said, "So how ya been?"

"Can't complain. Except for not getting tickets to the World Series."

"Those might require you to be nice to assholes."

I smiled. A woman approached and Frank opened the door for her.

"Good afternoon Ms. Randall."

"Hello, Frank," she said. "Thank you," she added as she walked through the open door. Frank closed the door behind her.

"She's one of the classy ladies," Frank said. "So, I take it you're not just out for a stroll. You investigating someone in the building?"

"I'm looking for one of the residents. Ashley Holland. She's been missing for a few days. When did you last see her?"

Frank considered my question for a moment. Then he said, "About five days ago. Said she was going to Maine. Didn't say when she'd be back. You suppose something happened to her?"

"I don't know," I said. "Her parents are concerned that no one has heard from her this week."

"She goes away a lot," Frank said.

"According to her parents, she has never gone more than three days without checking in."

Frank leaned in toward me and said, "You know she works for one of them executive escort services?"

"I just learned that at a previous meeting."

"They say it is legit, but I imagine more goes on with some of the clients. Extra-curricular stuff."

"I've heard that theory as well," I said. "She ever bring clients by her place?"

"Not that I'm aware of," Frank said shaking his head. "Of course I work the day shift, and most of that business would be at night. But I'd probably hear about it from the other doormen."

I nodded my head. "Any chance I could check out her place?" I said.

"I can't let you in a resident's unit unless you're on the list," Frank said. "But you're free to look around the lobby and pick up materials from the sales office. Although they are at lunch for another half-hour."

“Since I'm here, I'll just have a look around until the sales agents come back from lunch,” I said.

Frank smiled and nodded as he opened door.

“Thanks, Frank.”

“I expect you'll like the building,” he said. “High end all around. Could use better security, though.”

“Good to know,” I said.

“I guessed it might.”

I walked through the open door, past the closed sales office, and got on the elevator. I checked my notes for Ashley's unit number and hit the button for the fifth floor.

The fifth floor was quiet. I located Ashley's unit and picked the lock rather easily. Frank was right that security could have been better. For million dollar units, it should have been harder. Of course, most people wouldn't get past Frank.

Ashley's condo was modern with marble countertops and high-end stainless steel appliances. She had modern-chic furniture. The large picture windows offered a sweeping view of Boston Harbor. Most boats were already away for the coming winter season.

From the few contents in her fridge, it didn't look like Ashley did much cooking. The living room was neat and tidy. Modern art hung on the walls. They looked to be originals. A small bookcase displayed photos of Ashley with friends in Europe, the Caribbean, and trendy Boston bars and clubs.

A small stack of fashion magazines sat on a glass and steel coffee table. A matching desk in the corner had some open bills on top. A lease for a BMW; a credit card with charges at various fashion boutiques on Newbury Street, Starbucks, Netflix, Amazon Prime, and some takeout restaurants in the area. I glanced at her monthly mortgage statement.

Ashley would need a hefty bank account to cover just the bills I had seen on the desk. I poked around and found direct deposit pay stubs from Premier Escort Service. Ashley made more than enough. Anything she might get from mommy and daddy would be icing on a very lucrative cake.

I walked down a short hallway to her bedroom. The bedroom furniture was the same modern-chic as the living room. More modern art hung on the walls.

Ashley's closet was filled with pricey evening gowns, cocktail dresses, and casual slacks, jeans, and shirts for everyday wear. The labels matched

many of the expensive boutiques listed on her credit card statement. Drawers in the closet contained shorts, fashionable bikinis, and undergarments. Also from boutiques on Newbury Street.

She had larger pieces of luggage for longer trips. An empty space next to a large suitcase would fit a smaller piece of luggage for shorter trips.

All the evidence pointed toward Ashley having not returned home. That wasn't a surprise but confirmed she was somewhere other than Boston.

I left Ashley's building before the leasing office re-opened. I would have just been a Lookie Lou. Ashley's building was well out of my price range. Besides, I had inherited a great old house in Cambridge from my grandmother. One of these days I might even get around to remodeling it.

I headed back to Cambridge and picked up my car. I would have enough daylight remaining to begin my search for Ashley in Maine.

CHAPTER 8

The most direct route from Boston to the lake house in Maine would be along Interstates 93, 95, and 295, to U.S. Route 201. The same in reverse coming back to Boston. There were tolls, but money wasn't an issue for Ashley. My bet is she opted for a travel time just under four hours, versus a five hour trip on alternative routes.

I knew Ashley leased a BMW Roadster. What I didn't have was her license plate. Her parents didn't know. Why would they? Most people didn't even know their own license plate without looking. I had the next best thing. I called my contact at the RMV.

He gave me Ashley's license plate number and called I a guy I know who works for E-ZPass. He'd be able to look up Ashley's use of toll stations from Massachusetts to Maine, and back. On the way to the lake house, Ashley passed through the New Hampshire and Maine tolls on I-95 and Maine tolls along I-295. There was no record of her passing through any of the tolls coming back from Maine. She either took a different route, possibly to a different destination, or she never made it to the first toll station on I-295 in Maine.

I'd done as much as I could from my office. Dash and I got in my car and headed to Maine. We wasted no time traveling the interstates. If I was correct, the real search began along U.S. Route 201.

Maine's a big state. The key was finding someone who saw Ashley along 201. That would tell me how far she traveled en route back to Boston. Depending on how far Ashley traveled there might still be a lot of territory to search, but any narrowing of the area would help. I hoped for the best and prepared for the worst.

Somewhere around Bingham, we stopped at a gas station off 201. We had already stopped at every logical stop along the way. No one remembered seeing Ashley Holland at any point after she and Grant left the lake house. No security cameras captured her image. Until the gas station near Bingham.

As I entered the convenience store at the station, the counter clerk was watching a *That 70s Show* rerun. He turned as I approached the counter.

I showed him my investigator license and handed him one of my business cards.

"What can I do for ya?" he said.

“Have you seen this young woman?” I said as I showed him a picture of Ashley Holland.

He considered the photo for a moment.

Then he said, “Yep. She stopped in heeah.”

“Do you remember when?” I said.

The clerk scratched his head. He had dry, cracked skin. His face was ruddy and weathered. He looked warm in his flannel shirt from LL Bean.

That 70s Show faded to a commercial break.

“Wednesday,” he said. “I remembah because of the rain that day.”

“Did she say where she was going?”

“Home to Boston.”

“Did she mention stopping anywhere along the way? Someplace here in Maine? Possibly in New Hampshire?”

The clerk shook his head and said, “Nope. Can't say that she did.”

“Thank you,” I said. “You've been a big help.”

As I turned to leave, a promotion for the evening news flashed across the television. “Tonight on News Center Maine, a tragic accident claims the life a young Boston woman,” said the news anchor. I turned and looked at the television, but just as quickly News Center Maine was previewing another story on local elections, and then a glimpse at the weather forecast.

The clerk and I looked at each other. Neither of us said a word. While we didn't have enough details, we both suspected Ashley Holland's death would be the lead story on the evening news broadcast.

CHAPTER 9

Mercado

After Mercado left Cheers, he walked over to the Public Garden. He opened the envelope and took out a picture of a young woman and the sheet of paper with her name and address. Hannah Parks. She lived in a condo in Quincy near the Neponset River and Dorchester Bay.

Hannah would likely be working that night. Escorting some rich bastard to dinner, a cocktail party, or office event. She'd arrive home late after most everyone else in her building were asleep. Mercado was patient. He'd wait. Like a coiled up snake that quickly strikes.

Mercado put the photograph and sheet of paper back in the envelope, folded it over, and stuffed the envelope back in his jacket pocket. It was getting dark, and the temperature was dropping.

Mercado shoved his hands in his pockets and walked to the Boston Common parking garage to retrieve his car. He got in his car and exited the garage, taking a right onto Charles Street. A nice stretch of road with the Boston Common on his right and Boston Public Garden on his left.

At Beacon Street, he took a left and then another left onto Arlington Street. Mercado continued onto Herald Street and merged onto I-93 toward Quincy. Mercado drove for twenty minutes and passed the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library on his left.

Mercado thought about how the nation's 39th president was assassinated. He wondered about taking the shot that killed JFK. Mercado figured he could have made the same shot easily. He had successfully pulled the trigger in far less favorable conditions.

But Mercado wouldn't have killed Kennedy. He liked what he read about him in history books and saw in documentaries. So why kill these young women? He had nothing against them personally. He didn't even know them.

Mercado had no good answer other than he was being paid to do a job. And his work was to kill people. He was an assassin for hire. It's what he did. It's who he was.

Mercado knew he was sick. He knew his head wasn't screwed on right.

He saw the sign for exit 12 toward Neponset/Quincy. Mercado exited and drove to Hannah Parks' address. He parked his car where he could watch the entrance to Hannah's condo without drawing any attention to himself.

Four hours passed. Then five. Then Hannah Parks came home. Mercado watched her as she opened the door to her condo and went in.

Mercado exited his car and walked across the parking lot, checking to make sure he was alone. When he was sure no one was around, Mercado quickly and quietly picked the lock on Hannah's door. He slowly opened the door and looked inside.

An LED nightlight provided the only light in the entry hallway. Mercado entered and closed the door behind him. He walked down the hallway. Kitchen to his left. Living room to his right. Another hallway led toward the bedrooms.

Mercado proceeded down the hallway. It was dark, but another LED nightlight helped him follow the hallway to Hannah's bedroom. Her bedroom door was open and the light on. Mercado could hear water running in the en-suite bathroom. The water was too loud to be the sink, but it wasn't the shower. Hannah was filling the tub for a bath.

Mercado entered the bedroom and crossed the room to the bathroom door. It was ajar. From his angle, Mercado could see Hannah in the large mirror over the sink. Her back turned toward the mirror.

Hannah was tall, thin, and curvy. Like a model. Her long strawberry blond hair hung over her shoulders.

She unzipped the evening dress she had been wearing, and it dropped to the floor. She stepped out of it. Hannah pulled down her panties and then undid her bra. Mercado couldn't help it, he was getting turned on.

But he had to stay focused. Doing anything other than the job he was hired to do came with a lot of risks. He could leave DNA behind. Staying a second longer than necessary could be the second someone might spot him leaving.

Besides, he was a hired killer. Not a rapist. Mercado made his own logic. His own sense of right and wrong. But any way you sliced it, Mercado knew he was twisted.

He focused on the task at hand as Hannah Parks leaned over and turned off the water. What a view, Mercado thought. Such a shame she had to die.

As Hannah stepped into the tub, Mercado pushed open the door and rushed into the bathroom. Before Hannah had a chance to react, Mercado grabbed her, covering her mouth.

She tried to scream, but it was no use.

She tried to break free of Mercado's grip, but he was much too strong.

He forced her into the bath and slammed her head against the side of the tub. Hannah's body went limp and Mercado let it slide motionless into the water.

Mercado snapped a quick picture with his cell phone, and then he quickly retraced his steps out of the apartment.

Mercado crossed the empty parking lot.

Not a creature was stirring. Especially not Hannah Parks.

The storm front from northern New England had arrived. As Mercado reached his car, the skies opened. A hard and cold rain poured down. Somehow it seemed appropriate, he thought.

Mercado got in his car and drove away, windshield wipers swiping the rain away.

CHAPTER 10

Drew Patrick

The hard rain from the night before had given way to blue skies and sunshine as I traveled along Memorial Drive between Cambridge and Boston. I, for one, was happy. My drive back from Maine had been slowed due to the torrential downpour.

Dash seemed happier as well. Last night he curled up on the floorboard and whimpered as thunder rolled over us and rain pounded the roof of the car. For our ride to Station H-4, SP Boston Barracks—the Massachusetts State Police Boston offices—he sat in the passenger seat looking out the window at the Charles River. We had been heading to drop him off at doggy day care, but Detective Lieutenant Isabella Sanchez insisted Dash come along.

“I think Detective Lieutenant Sanchez has a crush on you,” I said to Dash as we drove under the Longfellow Bridge and onto Edwin H. Land Boulevard. He looked at me and thumped his tail against the seat.

We continued along Edwin H. Land Boulevard past CambridgeSide Galleria and over a narrow slice of the Charles River. We hung a right onto Charles River Dam Road and passed the Museum of Science on our right. A quarter of a mile later we arrived at the State Police Boston Barracks.

There was limited parking, but I did my “Hail Mary, full of grace, help me find a parking space,” and we found one. It almost always worked for me.

We stopped on the way into the building as Dash made friends with one of the K-9 German Shepherds coming off duty.

“Detective Lieutenant Sanchez requested Dash visit today,” I told the State Trooper with the K-9 unit.

“Maybe we should put him to work,” he said.

“I’m not sure he would be of much help,” I said. “Unless you need him to sniff out burgers. He has a particularly good nose for Charlie’s Kitchen in Harvard Square.”

“There he is,” I heard Detective Sanchez’s voice call out behind us.

“Ace private investigator at your service,” I said.

“I was talking to Dash,” she said as she walked over.

Isabella Sanchez was a lean and toned five feet seven inches. You never ask a woman her age, but I knew she was in her thirties. Mid-thirties if I had to guess. She had black hair that fell to the shoulders of her dark gray pants suit. Her brown eyes grew wider and a broad smile broke out across her face as Dash rushed over to her.

“He sure likes Detective Lieutenant Sanchez,” the K-9 State Trooper commented.

“They have a bit of thing,” I said.

“Come on, Dash,” Sanchez said. Dash followed her toward the building. “Patrick, move your ass. Burke is waiting.”

“We don't have so much of a thing,” I said to the trooper. I followed Sanchez and Dash into the building to Detective Captain Robert Burke's office.

Burke came from good Irish stock like myself. He was two inches shorter than me at six feet even. His once athletic build had given way to being slightly overweight. But he still was in better shape than a lot of guys in their fifties.

“Have a seat,” Burke said.

He sat behind his government-issued desk. Similar to Tyrell's office, Burke's was also filled with commendations for his service. Burke was a lifer with the staties. He had risen through the ranks from trooper to Detective Captain. He had been a detective for more than twenty years.

I sat in a chair near his desk. Sanchez sat on the couch off to the side. Dash hopped up next to her.

“Don't let him on the couch,” Burke said.

“He's fine,” Sanchez said.

And that was that. Burke may have been Sanchez's superior officer, but it was often hard to tell. They had an excellent working relationship and a close bond, forged over many tough cases. She was as good a detective as they came. Like Burke, she had risen quickly through the ranks. When she made Detective Lieutenant two years prior, no one was prouder than Burke.

“I take it you have news on Ashley Sullivan?” I said.

Burke nodded his head. “Everything is preliminary at the moment,” he said, “but from what Maine State Police have shared, Miss Holland was forced off the road.”

“Forced, as in more than a hit-and-run accident?”

“That's why you have that fancy private dick license from the Commonwealth,” Burke said.

“Issued by none other than your State Police Colonel,” I said.

“Nobody's perfect,” he said.

Dash had rolled over on his back and his right hind leg twitched as Sanchez rubbed his belly.

“There is a series of evidence that leads us to believe Ashley Sullivan did not simply lose control of the car on her own,” Sanchez said.

We were silent a beat.

“Are you going to share this evidence?” I said.

Burke cracked open a can of Diet Coke that had been sitting on his desk.

“I'm good, by the way,” I said as Burke lifted the Diet Coke can to his lips.

“Good,” he said, “because this is the only one I've got.” He took a sip.

“Mind you there is nothing concrete here,” Sanchez said.

“But enough for you to ask me to come over,” I said.

Burke took another sip of the Diet Coke. Then he said, “A Hummer that had been reported stolen was recovered. It had some scratches on the front grill. With those scratches were flecks of paint matching beamers like the one Miss Holland drove.”

“Since her car was burned out from the explosion,” Sanchez said, “we needed to check her VIN records for the color of her car...”

“And the paint color matches,” I said concluding Sanchez's statement.

“Not only that,” Sanchez said, “but the frame of the car had dents consistent with being hit by a large SUV or truck.”

“Like a Hummer,” I said.

“You're on a roll, Drew,” Burke said. “But wait until you hear this next part.”

Burke paused and took another sip of Diet Coke. I hadn't been thirsty, but that was changing.

Burke continued, “A young woman by the name of Hannah Parks was found dead in her bathroom this morning. No clear signs of forced entry, but the crime unit thinks an expert at picking locks could have easily gained entry. What makes these deaths suspicious is that Hannah Parks worked for the same escort service as Ashley Holland.”

“Premier Escort Services,” I said.

“So you have been doing some actual investigating,” Burke said.

I gave Burke a crooked smile. Then I said, “It would seem like a mighty big coincidence.”

“And we don't like coincidences like that,” Sanchez said.

“Neither do I,” I said.

I let it all sink in for a moment.

Burke said, “I'd say we are looking at two murder investigations.”

I nodded my head.

The deaths of Ashley Holland and Hannah Parks were tragic on their own. That they were likely murdered made them worse.

“I assume you'll be sticking your nose into the investigation?” Burke said.

“Just try to stop me,” I said.

“Wouldn't dream of it,” Burke said.

CHAPTER 11

The Hollands lived in a stately 1880s Queen Anne style home in Newton. The period architectural details were impressive on the well-maintained home. A large foyer and main staircase gave a sense of grandeur as I entered the house. The entryway anchored several large rooms on either side.

An elderly housekeeper, who looked like she might have been original to the house, showed me to the living room. In contrast to Ashley's modern-chic condo, her parents' home felt like a museum. The living room furnishings, like the housekeeper, appeared original to the house.

"Mr. Patrick, thank you for coming by," Jeffrey Holland said as he entered the room. He appeared genuinely grief-stricken.

I had been in similar situations too many times over the years. Mostly as a Special Agent with the FBI. A few times as a PI. It never got easier. Nor should it. The fact that it is always heart-wrenching reminded me of our shared humanity.

"I am sorry for your loss," I said. Jeffrey Holland and I shook hands. He trembled slightly.

Cynthia Holland walked into the living room smoking a cigarette and carrying a glass tumbler filled with scotch.

"Do you have to smoke in the house?" Jeffrey Holland said.

"Piss off," Cynthia said, slurring her words.

Jeffrey Holland turned to me and said, "I'm sorry about Cynthia. She has taken the news of Ashley's death very hard."

"No need to apologize," I said. "We all handle grief differently."

"What is he doing here?" Cynthia said tilting her head toward me.

"There is nothing for him to investigate. Ashley's dead. He didn't even find her."

"He came to pay his respects," Jeffrey Holland said. "And it is not fair to suggest Mr. Patrick failed at finding Ashley."

Cynthia snorted and took a drag on her cigarette. She blew out a cloud of smoke.

"We should get our money back," Cynthia said. "We paid him to find our daughter. Did he find her? No."

"That's enough," Jeffrey Holland said.

Cynthia Holland wagged her head and said, "Now you get a backbone? Where was that when Ashley started working as an 'escort'?" Cynthia placed the word "escort" in air quotes.

"What are you implying?" Jeffrey Holland said.

"Oh get a clue," Cynthia said. "Your daughter was a prostitute. Sure, she didn't hang out on street corners, but the end result was the same."

"How can you say that?" Jeffrey Holland said. He turned and looked at me. "That can't be true."

I wasn't sure what to tell him. Ashley was a legitimate escort. Nonetheless, I had been provided evidence she was sleeping with Grant Worthington on the side. It also appeared such arrangements were not unheard of for escorts at Premier.

"Mr. Patrick?" he said. "Is it true? Did you find any evidence to support what my wife has claimed?"

I owed him the truth. But I wanted to soften the blow.

"Ashley worked for a legitimate escort service. Premier Escort Service caters to wealthy executives. A rather exclusive clientele. She would accompany them to dinner, cocktail parties, and other business and social events. There is evidence she was sleeping with one of her clients."

"See!" Cynthia Holland said. "Ashley was a whore!"

"Cynthia, please!" Jeffrey Holland said. "That's our daughter you are speaking about."

"While she was sleeping with a client," I said, "it has not been firmly established she was being paid directly to do so."

It was the best I could offer at the moment.

Jeffrey sat on the couch. He paused a moment and then looked up at me. "In the end, it doesn't really matter," he said. "She was my daughter. I loved her. She was a beautiful person. Even if..." his voice trailed off. He couldn't finish the sentence.

I didn't want to add to their heartache, but the Hollands needed to know what we suspected about Ashley's death.

"You are dealing with a lot right now," I said, "but there is information related to Ashley's death you need to understand. I'd rather it comes from me than the police."

Jeffrey Holland stared blankly at me. While he seemed lost, I think he was bracing himself for more disturbing news. I truly felt for him.

"What is it?" Jeffrey Holland said, barely able to get the words out.

“The State Police have reason to believe Ashley was murdered.”

“Murdered?” Jeffrey Holland said. “Why do you think that?”

I recounted the conversation I had with Burke and Sanchez. Jeffrey Holland sat in stunned silence. Cynthia, too, was now at a loss for words. I noticed a tear streak down her face.

I said, “While I am no longer officially on the case, I promise you, I am going to investigate your daughter's death. I will do everything I can to find out what happened, and bring those responsible to justice.”

Jeffrey Holland considered what I said. He was looking at the floor but offered a nod of his head. Then he looked up at me. “Thank you,” he said.

“I realize this overwhelming,” I said, “but I need to ask you a few questions.”

“Okay,” Jeffrey Holland said. Cynthia Holland sat down beside him, a look of shock on her face. It was all beginning to sink in for her.

I said, “Had Ashley mentioned any trouble she might have been in?”

Jeffrey Holland shook his head and said, “No. Nothing.”

“She seemed to have plenty of financial resources,” I said, “but are you aware of extreme spending beyond her means? Possible debt she would have trouble repaying?”

“Certainly nothing we were aware of,” Jeffrey Holland said.

I nodded my head. “Did Ashley mention any issues with a client? Or with any of the other escorts at Premier?”

Another shake of the head from Jeffrey Holland. Cynthia had withdrawn into herself, staring blankly at the space directly in front of her.

“One more question. Did Ashley ever mention Hannah Parks?”

“I don't recall Ashley ever mentioning that name,” Jeffrey Holland said.

“If you think of anything. Anything at all, no matter how insignificant it might seem, please call me.”

Jeffrey Holland again offered me a nod of his head.

“Again, I am truly sorry for your loss,” I said.

I left Cynthia and Jeffrey Holland sitting on their living room couch, and let myself out. I promised the Hollands I would do everything I could to solve the case, and I meant it.

The only known connection between Ashley and Hannah was Premier Escort Service. I turned out of the Hollands driveway and pointed my car toward Premier's office.

CHAPTER 12

GRANT WORTHINGTON

They were having dinner at the Polo Lounge of the Beverly Hills Hotel, the epicenter of Hollywood celebrity dining. Where you sat mattered for the occasion you were celebrating.

Grant Worthington had his favorite power booth for when he closed one of his high profile movie deals. Tonight, Grant selected an alcove for an intimate date.

Victoria looked ravishing in a long-sleeve silhouette Herve Leger Nathalia Signature Essentials Dress. She certainly had the legs and curves to pull off the mid-thigh and form-fitting outfit. The cultured pearl necklace perfectly accented the black dinner dress and her long dark hair.

Victoria took in every inch of the room's hunter green walls and striped ceiling of white and the same hunter green. Celebrities and other Hollywood elite sat comfortably at tables covered in fine white linens and set with understated silverware, glasses, and white coffee cups. She drew in the scent of the simple flower arrangement at the center of the table.

Grant gazed into Victoria's hazel eyes which sparkled in the glow of the candlelight. He flashed a smile and his perfectly polished teeth glistened. Grant wasn't the best looking guy in town – not by a long shot. But he made up for his below average looks and average build by wearing Armani suits, Rolex watches, and driving Bentleys, Lamborghinis, and Ferraris.

It also didn't hurt that he was one of the most powerful producers in Hollywood. Grant Worthington could either make someone a star or kill their career with a phone call.

Victoria hoped Grant would make her a star. Grant hadn't yet told her it was never going to happen. He hesitated because the sex was simply too good.

“So, my darling, what will it be tonight?” Grant asked.

“I'm thinking a McCarthy salad to start, and the Crispy Seared Branzino for my entree.”

“Excellent choice.”

“Let me guess what you are having,” Victoria said. “Polo Crab Cake, followed by Filet Mignon.”

“You know me so well,” Grant said as he placed his menu on the table. “What about dessert?”

“I thought I was dessert?” Victoria said playfully.

“Of the best kind,” Grant said. He reached across the table and took Victoria's hand. “I booked us the Presidential Suite for the evening.”

“You spoil me,” said Victoria.

“Nothing but the best, my dear. Nothing but the best.”

They raised their glasses of Dom Pérignon.

“To us,” said Victoria.

“Yes,” said Grant. “To us.”

As they clicked glasses, Grant momentarily wondered what his wife might be having for dinner at home.

CHAPTER 13

EVELYN WORTHINGTON

Evelyn Worthington turned her Diamond Metallic White Mercedes-Benz S 560 off Sunset Boulevard and pulled to the front of the Beverly Hills Hotel. She handed her keys to the valet and walked past the pink columns and stepped onto the red carpet leading to the hotel entrance.

Evelyn had made this same walk countless times over the past thirty years. But no one was likely to recognize her in the blonde wig and colored contact lenses, making her eyes appear blue rather than their natural brown. She had purchased a Christian Siriano Grass Green Slip Dress, which she would wear just this once.

Mrs. Grant Worthington had swapped out her her diamond engagement ring and gold wedding band with an equally stunning blue sapphire gemstone set in fourteen karat white gold. Attention to details mattered when you wanted to go unnoticed by even those who know you best.

Evelyn passed through the grand lobby and headed directly to the Polo Lounge. Grant thought he was so clever, but Evelyn was always a step ahead of him. He thought she was home by herself.

Evelyn entered the Polo Lounge knowing Grant had reserved seating in an alcove for intimacy – for *his date*. Yet she knew the spots in the Polo Lounge where you could see everyone without being seen. Attention to details.

From her perfect vantage point, Evelyn watched and waited. She ordered a glass of white zinfandel and scrolled through pictures on her phone. The private investigator she had hired sent her all the evidence she needed of Grant's affairs.

Grant had taken two lovers recently. Tonight's bimbo would be his third.

How dare he? Evelyn thought as she swiped through one picture after another. Grant dining in the finest restaurants, staying in five star hotels, and giving *his lovers* lavish gifts.

Fine dining, fancy hotels, and lavish gifts were expressions of Grant's love and affection Evelyn once received.

Thirty years, she thought. Thirty years we have been married. I was with Grant when he was a nobody. The only woman who would have him before he ruled Hollywood.

Evelyn and Grant had met in college back in Boston. He was one of the least attractive men she had ever laid eyes on, but he was smart, funny, and charming. Evelyn would often tell her friends she could “see the beauty within.” With her above average looks and smarts, Evelyn could certainly have dated any other guy. But she was drawn to Grant.

The two fell in love and were married two weeks after graduating college. Neither wanted children. Another selling point in Evelyn's book. No, Mr. and Mrs. Worthington were going places together.

Grant inherited a small fortune of old Boston money and bankrolled his windfall into a movie studio. He had always dreamed of making it big in Hollywood.

Too ugly to be a movie star. Not creative enough to direct. But Grant had money, a knack for spotting talent, and the ability to know what the public wanted to see before they knew it themselves.

Evelyn was a shrewd businesswoman and kept both the studio's and their home's financial affairs in order. At least half of their fortune was owed to Evelyn's money sense. The Worthingtons had spent thirty years building an entertainment empire.

Now Grant was screwing around.

Evelyn hated his cheating.

Despite that, Evelyn still loved the homely jerk.

There had been some pretty good years the past three decades. She wanted to rekindle the magic. But his cheating – his lovers – stood in the way of their happiness.

Evelyn slammed her phone down on the table. A little too hard. She attracted glances from other diners. Some of them the most notable stars in Hollywood.

“Is everything alright?” asked a waiter.

“Yes. Sorry. Everything is fine.”

She had lost her cool and attracted unwanted attention, no matter how little or fleeting. She wouldn't let anything like that happen again. Attention to details mattered.

Evelyn ordered a Caesar salad, Scottish salmon, and another glass of white zinfandel.

Still no sign of Grant and the little bitch he was currently boning.

They'd arrive soon, she had no doubt. Grant would want to leave enough time for screwing in the hotel room he had booked here at the "Pink Palace."

Enough time for dinner, sex, and to go home and pretend none of it happened.

"Just another day at the studio," he'd say. "Another power meal at the Polo Lounge making the next big movie deal."

Yeah, right, Evelyn thought. *Just another day, my ass.*

Evelyn finished her salad and was starting on the salmon when in walked Grant and the twenty-something piece of eye candy. She was a younger and prettier version of Evelyn.

If Evelyn were being honest, the images on her phone didn't do the young woman justice. She was stunning.

No doubt Grant was letting her believe she would be the next big name in Hollywood. She likely was nothing more than great in bed.

Evelyn no longer could match the looks, but she was certain she knew more about pleasing Grant in the sack.

Why, Grant? Evelyn thought to herself. *Why am I not enough?*

Evelyn watched as Grant led the little whore to their table. Her arm looped through his. Her lithe body moved gracefully. Evelyn was certain the form-fitting black dress had Grant turned on. Hell, Evelyn was almost turned on.

"Why do you do this to yourself?" Evelyn said quietly. "Why torture yourself more than you have to?"

Evelyn didn't have an answer. All she knew was she needed to be there. She needed to see with her own eyes.

It was the same with the other two. The beautiful young girl with the perky breasts he took to their lake house in Maine. The strawberry blond he most recently took to a gala in Boston.

Light conversation filled the room.

Waiters delivered orders.

Grant and *his date* smiled and laughed.

Evelyn watched as the two toasted with their flutes of champagne. After dinner they would rush to one of the suites or bungalows.

"I hope it's worth it," Evelyn muttered in the young woman's direction.

Evelyn knew one thing for certain: by getting into bed with Grant, the young woman had sealed her fate.

CHAPTER 14

When Evelyn could no longer stand to watch her husband fawn all over the little tramp, she paid her check and left the Polo Lounge. Outside, a warm LA breeze caressed her face as she waited for the valet to fetch her Mercedes.

“Here you go, Ma'am,” the young man said as he hopped out of her car and held the door open for her.

“Thank you,” she said. Evelyn gave the valet a generous tip, slid behind the wheel of her S-Class, and sped off toward her Beverly Hills mansion.

She loved the warmth and near constant sunshine of southern California, but Evelyn was a Bostonian at heart. She loved the city’s history and culture. It is why she insisted they purchase the Brownstone in the Back Bay twenty years ago. While Grant wanted to be in Hollywood most of the time, for the past two decades they had been rather bi-coastal.

Before Evelyn reached their neighborhood, she pulled into an alley behind many of the Beverly Hills boutiques she frequented. She got out of the car and went to the trunk. She opened it, took off the wig, removed the colored contact lenses, and changed out of the green slip dress. She placed those items in a trash bag and tossed it in a dumpster.

Evelyn put on the dress she had worn out of the house earlier that evening. She removed the sapphire ring and replaced it with her diamond ring. Evelyn couldn't bring herself to toss the sapphire ring. It was too beautiful. She placed it in her purse.

Evelyn closed the trunk and got back in the car. She checked her hair in the mirror. Satisfied she was herself again, Evelyn pulled out of the alley and drove the remaining three blocks to her home.

The Worthington's west coast home was fifteen thousand square feet in one of the trendiest neighborhoods in the 90201 zip code. As Evelyn pulled the Mercedes to a stop in the wide circular driveway, she was greeted by the tall Romanesque columns at the front of the sprawling home.

She walked up the steps as one of their staff got in the Mercedes and parked it in the five-car garage. Another of the Worthington's staff opened the front door and greeted her. Evelyn headed straight upstairs to the master suite.

The master suite had two rooms. A large bedroom with an ornate king-size bed was to the right. To the left was an equally large sitting area with

two sofas. Evelyn passed through the sitting area to her walk-in closet, which was larger than a typical New York City apartment.

She undressed and put on a silk nightgown. Evelyn padded back into the sitting room and plopped down on one of the sofas. She tried not to think about Grant and Victoria back at the Beverly Hills Hotel.

Maybe Victoria would be the last affair? Evelyn figured Grant would be so shocked at three accidental deaths he would regain his senses. He would have to question what sort of sordid business the women from Premier Escort Services were involved in that three of them would end up dead.

Surely Grant would no longer want anything to do with Premier. He would never admit to using the service. He definitely would not admit to sleeping with some of the escorts.

Evelyn wouldn't let on about any of it. She would just suggest they take a long vacation. It would rekindle the magic. They could put a temporary unpleasant period of their lives behind them.

Was that possible? Could Evelyn go on as if nothing happened? His cheating? Her response?

Yes, she told herself. There was no other choice. She had done what needed to be done. Evelyn had long ago promised herself she would never let what happened to her mother happen to her.

All of her father's affairs with younger women destroyed their family. It destroyed her mother's life. And nearly destroyed Evelyn's life as well.

After her mother died from alcohol abuse, Evelyn worked two jobs to save for college. She refused to be a victim. At college, she met Grant. They fell in love. All her friends told her she could do better, but Grant made Evelyn happy.

When Grant inherited family money, the world was their oyster. Grant became the king of Hollywood, but they both had built the Worthington entertainment empire. In truth, it was as much Evelyn's as it was his.

She would not lose what they had built together. She wouldn't lose him. Gathering evidence for a divorce was a good cover story. But that is all it ever was.

Evelyn Worthington would never divorce her husband. For better or worse, until death do them part. But she couldn't allow Grant to continue with his affairs.

Like her father, Grant was weak around young and beautiful women. It was a disease. The only cure was to eliminate the temptation.

The burner cell phone rang. Evelyn picked it up.

“It's done,” Mercado said on the other end of the phone. “I'm texting you a picture as proof of death.”

“Good,” Evelyn said. “Now I need you to come to California. I have another job for you.”

CHAPTER 15

Drew Patrick

Premier Escort Service occupied an office suite in a prominent five-story building on the corner of Newbury Street and Massachusetts Avenue. They had strategically situated themselves among eight blocks of high-end retailers, trendy boutiques, art galleries, chic eateries, and stunning Victorian brownstone homes. Location, location, location.

“Ms. Osbourne will be with you momentarily,” the front desk receptionist told me. She was tall, slender, and tanned. Her above the knee navy blue dress looked expensive. As did her jewelry. They were probably from the boutiques on Newbury Street. They either had a corporate expense account or Premier's front desk job paid more than minimum wage.

I was the only one waiting in the reception area. I was sure most executives booked their escorts online. I bet they even had a phone app.

The receptionist used a mouse to click around on her computer. I picked up a *People* magazine. When I got bored reading about Ben Affleck and Jennifer Garner, I put the magazine back on the table.

I hummed along to Elton John's *Benny and the Jets* playing over the office radio. I wondered how soon it would switch over to twenty-four hours of Christmas music. Thanksgiving was still several weeks away, but it seemed to start earlier each year.

A door to the right of the receptionist opened. I looked over as a tall and slender woman stepped out. She wore a stylish cocktail dress. It's five o'clock somewhere. She smiled at me as she walked past and exited the office.

An equally tall and slender woman walked out of the interior office door. I was detecting a pattern to the women employed by Premier. She walked over to me.

I stood as she approached. There are a few gentlemen left.

The woman was in her late fifties or early sixties. She was nearly as tall as Jessica. While I didn't think any woman was as beautiful as Jessica, she was attractive. If not a former model, she could have been.

“Mr. Patrick,” the woman said in a lovely British accent, “I am Rita Osbourne.”

“Any relation to Ozzy?” I said as we shook hands.

“Pardon?” she said.

“Ozzy Osbourne. The rock singer.”

She considered my question a beat. Then she said, “Isn't he the one who bit the head off a bat on stage?”

“The bat bit him back,” I said. “Plus he needed to be treated for rabies. Ozzy, not the bat.”

“How gruesome,” Rita Osbourne said.

“Gross,” the receptionist said.

“A lesson learned in performing a stunt for shock value,” I said.

I assumed from Rita's reaction, she was not related to Ozzy. Or she didn't want to admit it. I considered asking if her first name was inspired by The Beatles Rita the meter maid but thought that might be pushing it. Although Sir Paul did sing about how lovely Rita was.

“This way, please,” Rita Osbourne said as she showed me through the open door to her office.

Her long legs took even and graceful strides, barely ruffling her black pencil knit skirt. I deduced her outfit also came from a fancy boutique on Newbury Street. While Rita could likely afford her own outfits, I was still betting on a corporate expense account.

“Please, have a seat,” she said, motioning to a plush black leather chair.

I sat. Rita Osbourne sat in the chair's twin located across a small glass table. The entire office was glass and leather. I had no doubt it was Italian leather of the highest quality. It sure felt classier than the leather seats in my car.

Rita Osbourne sat back in her chair and crossed her legs. Her white silk blouse was as undisturbed by her arms moving to rest on the side of the chair as her skirt had been when she crossed the office. Rita Osbourne was cool, collected, and in charge.

“What is it like being a private investigator?” she said.

I shrugged my shoulders. “A lot of wandering around and talking to people,” I said.

Rita Osbourne let out a sophisticated laugh. She said, “Surely your job is more exciting than that?”

“Has its moments,” I said. “But I mostly ask a bunch of questions until I find some answers.”

“Do you carry a gun?”

“When I need to,” I said. “Most of the time I can handle things another way.”

Rita Osbourne looked me up and down and nodded her head. “I imagine you can handle yourself,” she said.

“When called for,” I said.

“Did I hear correctly you were once a special agent with the FBI?”

“It's not a secret,” I said.

Rita Osbourne considered me a few moments. Then she said, “I hear you were an exceptional FBI agent. And I also know you are an excellent private investigator.”

“You can't always believe what people say,” I said.

Rita offered me a mildly surprised look. “Modest was not something I've heard to describe you,” she said.

“You seem to have heard a lot about me.”

“Enough to conclude there was no point in turning you away.”

“I am persistent,” I said. “That much is true about what you've heard.”

“My sources used more colorful language,” she said.

I shrugged.

“You're not bothered by that?” she said.

“Sticks and stones,” I said.

Rita Osbourne let out another sophisticated laugh. It seemed a learned trait from some sort of finishing school. Or I could just be a clod.

“While I'm a fan of the subject,” I said, “If we're done talking about me, I'd like to ask you a few questions.”

“Of course,” Rita Osbourne said. “It is, after all, what you say you do.”

I gave her my most sophisticated smile. It didn't come nearly as close to her laugh, but I never attended finishing school.

CHAPTER 16

“What can you tell me about Ashley Holland and Hannah Parks?”

Rita Osbourne dropped her head toward her chest. After a measured display of sorrow, she said, “How tragic. Losing them both in two terrible accidents.”

Burke and Sanchez had already questioned Rita Osbourne. She understood the deaths were suspicious. At least enough for two State Police detectives to look into how they died.

Maybe she didn't want to believe Ashley and Hannah's deaths were anything other than tragic accidents. Or she knew and didn't want to say. I wasn't sure which yet.

Rita took a deep breath and looked up at me.

She said, “Ashley and Hannah were two of my best employees. I can't fathom how I will ever replace them.”

“No one can ever be truly replaced,” I said. “We are all unique. Special in our own way.”

“Of course,” she said. “I meant more like filling their positions. It takes a lot of training to join my escort service.”

“What kind of training?”

“You must think very little of what my girls do?”

I shook my head. “No. I'm just trying to understand your business better.”

Rita got up and crossed the office. She stared out the window as people went about their day along Massachusetts Avenue four stories below.

After a minute passed, she said, “It's all so horrific.”

Rita continued to stare out the window. Her posture was perfect. More finishing school. The black pencil knit skirt was form fitting. Rita Osbourne kept herself fit.

She turned toward me. “I'm aware of what the State Police think,” she said. Rita paused a beat. “I don't believe it.”

“I tend to agree with them,” I said. “I wouldn't be here if I didn't. I'm no longer even being paid to investigate.”

“I wasn't aware private investigators did pro bono work.”

“We do when no one is paying us and we care enough about a case.”

“How noble,” she said. Rita sat back down in the plush leather chair and resumed her earlier position.

I said, "Two young women are dead under suspicious circumstances. Their parents deserve the truth about what really happened. If someone did kill them, and I believe someone did, they need to be brought to justice."

"And what is justice, Mr. Patrick?"

"It's different for different people. But a murderer going to prison for life is a good place to start. It won't bring Ashley and Hannah back, but it can offer some closure."

"And a measure of justice?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "It's imperfect, but it's something."

"My girls are highly educated with liberal arts educations. They can converse intelligently on many subjects. Were you aware that many of them speak at least three different languages fluently?"

"Impressive," I said. "I'm still mastering English. And not the Queen's English. Our own version of it here in Boston."

Rita Osbourne ignored me. She continued, "To work as an escort at Premier, a young woman must be comfortable around wealthy executives. It's not as easy as that may seem."

"I imagine not. I'd want to stick a fork in my eye if I had to spend all that time around wealthy executives."

"You are not a fan of wealthy and powerful men?"

"I'm not a fan of lots of folks."

"Be that as it may," Rita said, "escorting an elite clientele requires a level of sophistication, grace, and discretion."

"Not to mention genuinely attractive," I said.

Rita grinned and offered a slight nod of her head. "Yes, my girls are all attractive."

"And tall," I said. "Have you ever considered starting a women's basketball team?"

"You are an extremely interesting man, Mr. Patrick. A few moments ago you were talking about finding justice and closure for Ashley and Hannah, now you are attempting to be humorous."

"A lot of people tell me I'm a wise ass. I'll take humorous. But don't think for a second I'm not serious about what I do."

"I understand," she said. "You must see the darker side of humanity in your line of work. Humor releases the stress."

I nodded.

"I recognize what most people say about escort services," Rita said.

“And?” I said.

“Most people would be wrong. Escort services like ours are completely legitimate. Our young women accompany men out to dinner, work functions, and society events. They offer stimulating conversation and the company of true beauty. Nothing more.”

“And these men pay a lot of money for this service?”

“The expense is relative,” she said.

“If you have to ask, you can't afford it,” I said.

Rita Osbourne smiled. A more genuine smile. She was warming to my charm.

“Perhaps,” she said. “We have extremely exclusive clients.”

“So for what they pay,” I said, “these extremely exclusive clients don't expect more?”

“We make it quite clear what they are, and are not, paying for.”

“But sometimes it turns into more than dinner, work functions, and society events,” I said.

“We do not sell those services,” she said. “The escorts of Premier Escort Services are not prostitutes.”

“I think you've made that pretty clear,” I said. “But there certainly are times when an escort voluntarily provides extra-curricular activities. Without being paid for them.”

“The contracts my escorts sign prohibit any physical intimacy with our clients.”

Rita Osbourne had been coached well by Premier's attorneys. And what she said would legally hold up. I had no doubt what the contracts said. I also had no doubt those contracts were sometimes broken. What mattered to me was if Ashley and Hannah were killed because of it.

“Were you aware Ashley Holland was sleeping with Grant Worthington?” I said.

“I cannot discuss a client with you.”

“So you don't deny Grant Worthington is a client?”

Perhaps I should have been a lawyer. Or at least played one on TV.

“I know you are already aware of the fact,” Rita said. “But I still cannot discuss a client with you. You are not the police.”

“Fair enough,” I said. “But are you also aware there is photographic evidence of Ashley and Grant sleeping together?”

“I am not going to discuss this with you,” she said.

Rita Osbourne was one smart cookie. And had first-class lawyers.

"All I want to do is find out who killed Ashley and Hannah," I said.

"Assuming they were murdered," she said.

"Ashley and Hannah both worked as escorts here. They both died in apparent tragic accidents just days apart. You don't find that strange?"

I waited a few beats. "Well?" I said when Rita didn't answer.

"There are such things as coincidences, Mr. Patrick."

"Not like these," I said. "At least not most of the time."

"And that's your professional opinion?" Rita said.

"Mine, and those of two excellent State Police detectives. But don't tell them I said they were excellent."

We were silent a few more beats. Then I said, "I've done this many times. Too many. So have detectives Burke and Sanchez. Detective Captain Robert Burke has seen more cases than he can even remember. We can solve this one. With or without cooperation. But it will be a lot easier with cooperation."

Rita Osbourne took a deep breath and exhaled. She said, "These are delicate matters. They must be handled with discretion."

"Discreet is my middle name."

"While I don't condone any of my girls becoming intimate with clients," Rita said, "I realize it happens on occasion."

"And you were aware it happened with Ashley?"

"Yes," she said.

"What about Hannah?"

Rita nodded her head.

"With the same client?"

Rita nodded her head again.

"Are there any other escorts who also had this same client?"

Rita considered my question a moment. "Yes," she said. "Brooke Chambers. Although I don't think Brooke ever," she stopped herself a beat. Then she continued, "I don't think Brooke was ever intimate with the client."

"You don't have to answer," I said, "but am I correct in thinking the client we are speaking of is Grant Worthington?"

Rita Osbourne looked me. "You are an astute detective, Mr. Patrick," she said, "you don't need my answer."

CHAPTER 17

Jessica and I were having dinner at Henrietta's Table in Cambridge. We liked the fresh from local farms good home cooking. Even after dark, the restaurant offered a bright and airy environment with an upscale country kitchen décor.

The waitress brought our drinks as we considered the supper menu. Jessica started with a Henrietta's Sangria. I was having an Autumn Old Fashioned. The mix of Clydes Alabama Style whiskey, orange bitters, maple syrup, and cherry was a perfect drink on a cool fall evening.

"I know what I'm having," I said as I put down my menu.

"Already?"

"I had a good idea before we came in," I said. "Maine Rock Crab for a starter, and Yankee Pot Roast for my entree, and Henrietta's Chocolate Bread Pudding Sundae for dessert."

Jessica tilted her menu away from her face and smiled at me. My world grew brighter. I was lucky to have her sitting across from me. She returned to reading the menu.

I enjoyed my Autumn Old Fashioned as Jessica scanned the options. I figured she was debating whether to have the fish or the chicken. We ate at Legal Sea Food recently, so my bet was on the chicken.

She put her menu down. A hint of perfume drifted toward me. It was like a spring meadow.

"So what will it be?" I said.

"Spinach salad and the rotisserie roasted herb crusted chicken."

I smiled.

"Because we had Legal a few weeks ago?" she said.

"Yep."

"Well, I'll keep you in suspense as to what I'm having for dessert."

Our waitress, Julia, came and took our order. She had served us a few times before when we'd eaten at Henrietta's.

"How are your studies going?" Jessica asked her. Julia was a graduate student in American History at Harvard.

"Good," she said. "Doris Kearns Goodwin came to speak to my class on American presidents."

"Did you know Doris Kearns Goodwin was the first women to be let in the Boston Red Sox dugout?" I said.

"No, I didn't," Julia said. "Cool."

"Makes me think I should become a world-renown scholar on American presidents," I said.

"Or get hired by a member of the Red Sox to solve a case," Julia said.

"Even better," I said.

"I'll go put your order in," she said. "Let me know if you need anything else."

After Julia left, Jessica leaned toward me and whispered, "I think Julia has a little crush on you."

"I do have that effect on women."

"Just as long as you remember you're spoken for."

Jessica placed her hand on top of my mine.

"How could I forget?" I said.

"Meaning?"

"Meaning, I'm aware of how good I've got it."

Jessica patted my hand. "I've got it pretty good too," she said.

"Where do things stand with the Ashley Holland case?" Jessica said.

I caught Jessica up on what I had learned. She agreed, despite the lack of hard evidence, there was enough to pursue the case as a murder investigation. But there was still a lot to consider.

"So let's consider means and possible motive," she said.

"Grant Worthington pretty much rules Hollywood, so he certainly has the means," I said.

"How about motive?"

"Ashley and Hannah were blackmailing him to keep silent?" I said.

"They learned something else about Grant he didn't want to get out?"

I spread my hands apart and shrugged my shoulders.

"Both plausible," Jessica said.

She took a sip of her sangria. Jessica was a sipper when it came to alcoholic beverages. She'd nurse the drink through dinner.

"The difficulty is in figuring out how probable," I said. "And then proving it. Not to mention Grant may not be involved at all."

"There is that," Jessica said.

"I really don't have enough information to have a strong working theory," I said.

Jessica said, "Other than their deaths look like they occurred at the hands of a hired killer. Ashley and Hannah were both escorts at Premier.

And both had slept with Grant Worthington.”

“Thus far, those are the results of my investigation in a nutshell,” I said. I finished my Autumn Old Fashioned. I caught Julia's attention and ordered another. She brought it over and placed it on the table, along with our starters.

I dug into my Maine Rock Crab as Jessica nibbled at her spinach salad. She sipped her sangria. I drank my second Autumn Old Fashioned.

“So what's your next move?” Jessica asked.

“Take your pick,” I said. “I need to learn more about Premier Escort Services, Grant Worthington, and Ashley and Holland's interactions with him. I also need to find out if Ashley and Hannah shared any other connections. Particularly any other Premier clients.”

“That's a pretty long list,” Jessica said.

“Burke and Sanchez will run down information on Grant Worthington,” I said.

“He's their person of interest?” Jessica said.

“At the moment,” I said. “I'm going to ask around about Premier. That should also reveal any other connections Ashley and Hannah may have shared.”

I finished my crab. Jessica still had half her spinach salad remaining when Julia arrived with our entrees.

We enjoyed our dinner and talked about getting away for a long weekend after I concluded the investigation. Jessica was too full to order her own dessert, so I shared some of mine. Not a particularly generous gesture as I could predict it would only amount to two or three small bites.

I drove Jessica to her condo near Charlestown Naval Shipyard Park. I stayed for one drink before I left so she get to sleep for an early morning flight out of Logan. She'd be gone a few days consulting on a case at Pinnacle's London office. I'd cross the Charles River from Cambridge to Boston and meet with some shadowy figures to learn more about the off the books activities of Premier escorts. We shared the same profession, but we mostly operated in different worlds.

I walked back to my car on 8th Street and two goons approached me. One on my left and one on my right. They were at least my size and had broad shoulders, thick necks, and logs for arms.

The guy on my left had a crooked nose from it being broken a number of times. The guy on my right was balding with a bad comb over. They

were both ugly as sin.

Broken Nose placed a vice grip around my left arm. Comb Over jabbed a gun into my ribs. The silencer on the gun let me know he had no qualms about shooting me on the busy street.

A black Escalade pulled to a stop in front of us. Comb Over opened the rear passenger door. Crooked Nose said to me, "Get in. We're going for a little ride."

I didn't see a scenario where my not getting in didn't get me shot, so I got in.

Crooked Nose slid in beside me and closed the door. Comb Over climbed into the front passenger seat and closed his door. The Escalade sped away from the curb.

CHAPTER 18

We turned left onto 1st Avenue and sped past the MGH Institute of Health Professionals on our left. We took another left on Terry Ring Road and drove to the end and stopped.

The Charlestown Naval Shipyard Park was to our left. From where we were parked, I could see Jessica's building. I wondered if she was dreaming about me as she drifted off to sleep. Hopefully, I hadn't just seen her for the last time.

"When you said a little ride, you weren't kidding."

"We heard you're a smart ass," Crooked Nose said.

"Have a certificate and everything."

"Shut up," said Comb Over.

I waited to see if the driver was going to chime in. He simply stared out the front window.

Crooked Nose shifted in the seat. His gun still trained on me.

"Did you box?" I said to him.

"Huh?" he said.

"Were you once a boxer?"

"No," he said. "You think just because I'm big that I was a boxer? Or maybe a wrestler? Or some other physical thing?"

"I think it's because your nose is messed up," Comb Over said.

"If I want your opinion, I'll ask for it," Crooked Nose barked back.

"Touchy," Comb Over said.

Crooked Nose shot him a look. Comb Over turned toward the front. He and the driver shared a quick glance at each other.

"Don't think I didn't see that," Crooked Nose said.

I wasn't sure if Comb Over would dare roll his eyes at the comment. His partner in crime could have a short fuse. And seemed a touch sensitive. I might have been pushing my luck, but it wouldn't have been the first time.

"What were you doing at Premier Escort Services?" Crooked Nose said.

"What do most guys do at Premier Escort Services?" I said.

"Don't be cute."

"I've tried, but it's a natural gift."

"If you don't smarten up, you're gonna end up with a hole in your head."

Crooked Nose held the gun close to my head.

“Not in the car,” the driver said. He had a gravelly voice. Like sandpaper scraping wood.

“Boss got pissed last time you shot a guy and we had to get the car detailed,” Comb Over added.

“Zip it,” Crooked Nose said.

In their exchange, I learned they worked for someone. Not a surprise. They had minions written all over them. Apparently, our little ride was also due to the fact that I had visited Premier earlier in the day.

Perhaps the best piece of news was they were not likely to kill me where I sat. It didn't mean they wouldn't do it. It appeared Crooked Nose got trigger happy at least once before. Unless they were bluffing. But I didn't think they were.

“Now, answer my question,” Crooked Nose said. “And no wisecracks this time.”

“Part of an investigation,” I said.

“See, that's not so hard,” he said. “What investigation?”

“Well, and I probably should have mentioned this at the outset, it's a case that involves the Massachusetts State Police.”

Crooked Nose shrugged his shoulders. “So,” he said.

“So, they would be very interested in looking into anything that might happen to me.”

The Escalade reverberated with the three goons laughter.

“Did you hear that?” Crooked Nose said to his pals up front. “The State Police care what happens to our friend here.”

He waved the gun in my direction. His hand was on the trigger, so I hoped he didn't sneeze or have some sort of muscle spasm.

“Let me guess,” Crooked Nose said, “Detective Captain Robert Burke and Detective Lieutenant Isabella Sanchez?”

“She's a real looker,” Comb Over said.

“Like you'd have a chance,” Sandpaper voice said.

“I didn't say nothing about that,” Comb Over replied. “I'm just sayin' she's attractive.”

“Jeez,” Crooked Nose said. “Want me to pass her a note for you in study hall?”

It surprised me Crooked Nose was aware of study hall. I doubted he had spent much productive time there.

“Seems like you already know everything,” I said. “I’m not sure why you need me.”

“Because our boss said to talk to you,” Crooked Nose said. “So we’re talking.”

“I have to be honest,” I said, “it’s not the most stimulating conversation I’ve ever had.”

“Again with being a wise-ass,” Crooked Nose said. “I thought we were past that.”

I shrugged. “Comes and goes. I have little control over it.”

“Maybe he’s got that trets,” Comb Over said.

“It’s Turret’s Syndrome, you numbnuts,” Sandpaper Voice said.

“Shut up. Both of you,” Crooked Nose said.

“It’s actually Tourette’s Syndrome,” I said.

Sandpaper Voice turned around toward me. He said, “That’s what I said.”

“You said turret,” said Comb Over. Happy to offer his own correction.

“Like on a medieval castle,” I added.

“Who cares what it’s called?” Crooked Nose said.

“People with Tourette’s,” I said. “And historical architects.”

“I swear, I’ll plug you right now,” Crooked Nose said.

He pressed the gun against my forehead. Veins were popping in his neck and forehead. I’ve stayed alive in these situations by knowing when to quit. I was pretty sure I had reached that point.

“Ashley Holland’s parents hired me to find her when she was a missing person.”

“She ain’t missing no more,” Crooked Nose said. He removed the gun from my head but kept it pointed at me. His veins were no longer throbbing. Crisis averted.

“I’m looking into her death,” I said.

“Her parents hire you to do that?” he said.

I shook my head and said, “No. But my investigation is incomplete.”

“Because you’re nosy?”

“Because I’d like to find out what happened to Ashley Holland.”

I didn’t see the point in bringing Hannah Parks into the conversation. They were already aware of her. Whoever employed them had good sources.

“A regular Sherlock Holmes,” Crooked Nose said.

“Her family deserves to know what happened.” I paused a beat. “If someone caused her death, there needs to be a measure of justice.”

“You're a Boy Scout, too,” Crooked Nose said.

“I was never a Boy Scout. I'm not into sleeping on the ground and insects. I think they are just the Scouts now that they admit girls.”

“Who cares,” Crooked Nose said. “Let me give you some advice. Our boss would prefer you not poke your nose into Premier Escort Services' business.”

“That may make my investigation into Ashley Holland's death difficult.”

Crooked Nose shrugged. He said, “Not our problem.”

“I don't walk away from cases,” I said.

“You need to be like that Kenny Rogers song about the gambler,” he said. “You're not even being paid. Why risk your life for nothing?”

“It's something to me,” I said.

“Drop the case,” he said.

“I don't think I can do that.”

“Then this case will be your last.”

CHAPTER 19

The three goons pushed me out and I watched the tail lights of the Escalade fade into the distance as they drove away on Terry Ring Road. Before they drove off I made a mental note of the license plate. I'd have it run in the morning.

I didn't doubt the threat was real. But it was a warning shot across the bow. I figured I might get another before they tried to kill me.

I cut through Naval Shipyard Park back to my car on 8th Street. My second attempt to get in my car to go home proved successful. I wasn't accosted by big goons. I wasn't shoved into an SUV at gunpoint. It was progress.

My drive back to Cambridge was uneventful. Rather than going home, I drove down Berkeley Street. I stopped in front of my grandparents' old house. I still wasn't comfortable referring to it as my house. Even though, legally, it was. My grandmother left the house to me in her will. It had been my grandparents' wish for me to live in it one day.

I sat in my car for a few minutes. Sports radio was already talking about what to expect from the Red Sox next season. I was still basking in the recent World Series championship.

I turned off the radio when they started looking ahead to the upcoming Patriots game. It was a replay from analysis earlier in the day. I already knew Gronk would be back from a recent injury and Tom Brady would play like Tom Brady.

A couple strolled past walking their dog. A black Labor-doodle with a pink bow on her head. Dash would never go for such humiliation.

I got out of my car and walked to the front door. The house was a lovely mid-nineteenth century Colonial. They had kept it in great condition for all the years they lived in it. My dad and his siblings grew up in the house. Many holidays were spent gathered around the dining room table.

I dug out the keys and unlocked the front door. I stepped inside and turned on the light. The house was empty. Most of their personal belongings had been bequeathed to family members. The rest donated to charity.

My parents and Jessica had been encouraging me to do some renovations and move into the house. The last time the kitchen and baths had been updated Carter was president. I wasn't ready yet. Part of me feared

changing the house as it had been my entire life. So many memories of big Irish family gatherings.

I wondered about the Hollands family gatherings. I wasn't sure Ashley had a similar family experience to mine. Maybe she could have done things differently if she had a family of her own. She'd never get the chance.

What about Hannah Parks? I had no information about her personal life. Whatever life she had, like Ashley's, had been tragically cut short.

It was for those reasons I wouldn't stop investigating their deaths. They had families. People who loved them. Imperfect as that love may have been the Hollands and Parks families deserved answers. They deserved closure. They deserved justice.

Any family would deserve the same. If anything were to happen to me, I'd want it for my family. As I walked into the dining room I thought again about my family.

My great, great grandparents, on both sides, immigrated to the United States from Ireland. Family folklore says they were acquainted back in Ireland.

I crossed the hall and stood in the middle of the living room and remembered all the Christmas stockings hanging from the mantle above the fireplace. My grandparents insisted on having stockings for all of us, even though we had ones in our own homes. My grandfather was a History professor at Harvard. My dad followed in his footsteps. The matriarch of the Patrick household was my grandmother.

My cell phone rang. It was my mother. My father and mother recently retired as professors at Harvard. They had met in graduate school and married soon after they joined the Harvard faculty.

"Hi, Mom," I said.

"Where are you?" she said.

"I'm at the house."

"Hopefully making plans for renovations."

"Not quite. How's Dash?" I wanted to change the topic of house renovations.

"He's fine. Sleeping on the couch next to your father."

"Can he stay with you tonight? I need to go into Boston early for the case I am working on."

"I hope nothing dangerous," she said.

"No. Nothing like that."

I didn't think sharing my encounter in Charlestown would be helpful. My parents worried enough about my profession. I never shared the dangerous cases, but they suspected.

"Well, okay," she said. "And of course Dash can stay over. Our grand dog is always welcome. We love having him here. He misses you, though."

"It's good for him. Helps with the separation anxiety. I'll pick him up tomorrow afternoon."

"Whenever is fine."

"Goodnight," I said. "Love you."

"Love you, too, sweetie."

Conversations with my mother would probably ruin some of my street cred, but I wasn't all tough PI. I walked through the rest of the downstairs and went back outside. I closed the door and locked it.

As I walked back to my car my phone rang again. "Unknown number" appeared on the screen. In my business, I get a lot of those. I answered.

"Drew Patrick," I said.

"How are things on Berkeley Street?"

I recognized the voice of Crooked Nose on the other end of the phone. Not as distinct as Sandpaper Voice, but recognizable enough.

I looked up and down the street. I didn't see the Escalade. But I was sure they hadn't trailed me. That they knew so much about the case, and where I was, could be a cause for concern.

"What do you want?" I said.

"Just a friendly reminder of our conversation," he said. "In case you get any stupid ideas about continuing with your investigation."

"I don't scare easily."

"So I've heard. That's the reason for the call. I'd hate to see anything happen to you. You sort of amuse me." He paused a beat. "Like I said, just a friendly reminder."

The call ended. I put my phone in my pocket and ran my hand along the underside of my car's rear bumper. That's where I found the GPS tracking device. I dropped the device on the ground and crushed it under my shoe.

CHAPTER 20

“The Escalade is registered to Dirty Water Companies.” Detective Lieutenant Sanchez told me over the phone. I was standing in line at Dunkin' Donuts on the corner of Eliot and JFK streets. The woman in front of me was having difficulty deciding on the flavor for the last three donuts to round out her dozen.

“As in *Dirty Water* by The Standells?” I said.

“Huh?” Sanchez said.

“You've never heard that song?” I said. “They play it at Fenway after every Red Sox win.”

“I'm a hockey girl,” said Sanchez. “That the same one they play after a Bruins win?”

“Yep.”

“Then I have heard it. I don't recognize the band.”

“1960s garage rock band,” I said. “Some say they inspired the Sex Pistols and Ramones.”

“How much useless knowledge do you carry around in your head?” she said.

“Lots,” I said.

The woman in front of me finally ordered a Boston Creme and two Jelly. I always started with Jelly.

“Listen to this,” Sanchez said. “Premier Escort Services is a subsidiary of Dirty Water Companies.”

“Looks like Rita Osbourne employs some muscle,” I said.

“They probably front as security for the company,” she said.

I nodded. Not that Sanchez could see I nodded. Habit.

“How do you want to play this?” she said.

“I'll keep poking my nose into Premier's business and wait for them to make the next move,” I said.

“The next move could get you killed,” Sanchez said.

“And you'd miss me.”

The woman in line collected her dozen donuts and a Box 'O Joe. I stepped forward to order.

“Be serious,” Sanchez said.

“Hold on a sec,” I said to Sanchez. I tipped my phone away, ordered a dark roast coffee and paid. Then I went back to the call.

"I am being serious," I said. "You would miss me if I got offed."

"I'd feel bad for Dash losing you," she said. "And Jessica. Of course men would be lining up to help her fill the void."

"They line up now," I said.

"And somehow she sticks with you."

"I am the complete package."

Sanchez groaned. I imagined a roll of the eyes accompanied the groan.

"So you can't admit you'd miss me even a little?" I said.

"I won't even get the chance," she said, "because you're going to watch your back."

"And my front and my sides," I said.

The girl at the counter handed me my coffee. I thanked her, dropped a tip in the jar and exited. I took a right onto Eliot Street and headed in the direction of my office.

"Anything new on your end?" I continued.

"With limited information," she said, "Grant Worthington still makes the most sense."

"But you don't have enough to act on yet?"

"Not yet."

"I'll let you know what I learn," I said.

"Drew," she said, "be careful. Burke would be pissed if you went and got yourself killed."

"Sure thing," I said.

"I'd be a little pissed too," she said.

"See, you do care," I said. Sanchez had already hung up.

When I got to my office I had visitors. Big Lou and his bodyguard Little John were standing next to my office door.

"If I knew there would be company, I would have bought a Box 'O Joe," I said.

"I think I scared the guy with the bow tie," Little John said.

Little John was a large man dressed all in black. His neck disappeared into his oversized body. Little John's bald head glistened under the fluorescent lighting.

"Be nice to George," I said. "He does my taxes."

George Saunders was the CPA who had the office across from mine.

"He any good?" Big Lou said. "I'm looking for a new accountant."

I shifted my slightly upward gaze from Little John downward to Big Lou. He was a small guy at four feet ten inches. I had never seen him in anything other than custom-tailored Armani suits.

His selection for the day was a charcoal gray suit, white shirt, and a solid red silk tie. He had a matching hankie neatly folded into a triangle in the front breast pocket. I didn't know too many men who still had hankies. Big Lou was old school.

"I didn't know you even filed a tax return," I said.

"For the businesses the IRS knows about," he said.

"I'll get you his card," I said as I opened my office door.

We stepped into my office and I closed the door behind us. I had one of George's business cards on my desk, so I handed it to Big Lou. "George is a great accountant, and a good guy," I said. "Just make sure you only involve him in legitimate businesses."

Big Lou took the business card and said, "You have my word."

I first encountered Big Lou and Little John working a case to help out a family friend in trouble with a loan shark. We didn't get off to the greatest start, but they showed up to help when my back was against the wall.

Big Lou owned a restaurant in the North End of Boston. I don't know about his other ventures, and I didn't ask. At one point Big Lou was a major loan shark in Beantown, so I figured he hadn't strayed too far afield of what he understood best.

"To what do I owe the pleasure?" I said as I sat down behind my desk. Big Lou took a seat in one of the client chairs on the other side of my desk. His feet dangled above the floor. Little John stood leaning against the wall. I think he may have been counting the Red Sox bobbleheads on my desk.

"I've heard some talk you should know about," Big Lou said.

"Do tell," I said.

"Seems you have agitated Eddie Garavito," he said.

"I do like being an agitator."

I leaned back in my chair and sipped my coffee. "You want me to throw on a pot?" I said pointing to my cup.

"You got Hazelnut blend?" Little John said.

I shook my head. "Regular black coffee."

"What are you drinking?" he said.

"Dark Roast. Thought I'd switch it up this morning."

“You don't need no coffee, Little John,” Big Lou said. “Can we get back to business?”

I tilted my head and extended my open left hand toward Big Lou to continue.

“As I was sayin’,” Big Lou said, “word is Eddie Garavito ain’t so happy with you.”

“I thought Grease was the word?” I said.

“I liked that movie,” Little John said. “Especially Greased Lightning.” He moved his left arm across his body, hand laid out flat, like John Travolta in the song and dance number in Rydell High's garage.

“Enough from the peanut gallery,” Big Lou said looking over at Little John.

“Sorry, boss,” Little John said.

As I turned back to look at Big Lou, I swear I saw Little John mouthing the words to *Greased Lightning*.

Big Lou must have seen it too. He was shaking his head. He looked up at me and said, “You do realize who Eddie Garavito is, right?”

“A member of the Garavito family?” I said.

“Always the wisenheimer,” he said.

“Yeah, a member of the Garavito family. So what do you know about the Garavito family?”

“One of Boston's oldest crime families. Rivalled Al Capone in the sale of alcohol during prohibition. They've changed with the times and control a fair amount of the illegal drug trade throughout New England.”

“Then you should understand you don't want Eddie pissed off at you.”

I spread my hands apart and said, “Comes with the territory.”

“And how does that work out for you?” Big Lou said. “I seem to recall you fighting off a big goon, intent on putting a bullet in your head, by starting a snowball fight.”

“It was a solid ice ball to buy the time I needed to jump him.”

Big Lou shook his head. He couldn't understand either Little John or me.

“Thing is,” he said, “Eddie is sending some of his guys to warn you off.”

“I think I already met them,” I said. “Moe, Larry, and Curly. They drive around in a black Escalade.”

“When did this happen?” he said.

“Last night in Charlestown.”

“They didn't waste no time. My news is really fresh. Came over as soon as I heard it.”

“I'm touched you care,” I said.

“I don't care that much. Me and Little John are attending a lecture at the Kennedy School later this morning.”

I looked at Big Lou quizzically.

“I'm not crazy about politicians,” he said, “but I'm fascinated by politics.”

I caught Little John out of the corner of my eye. He apparently was making his way through the Grease soundtrack as he mouthed the words to *Summer Nights*. I wondered if he was performing both the T-Birds and Pink Ladies.

“Whatever floats your boat,” I said.

“Anyhow,” he said, “you need to make sure whatever you are looking into is worth the risk. Eddie Garavito ain't playin' around. He won't hesitate for one second to put you six feet under if he feels you're getting too close to somethin' he don't want you near.”

“I think I want to be cremated,” I said. “My ashes spread at Fenway Park.”

“They don't let you do that,” Big Lou said.

“Unless they don't know about it.”

Big Lou wagged his finger at me and offered a crooked smile. “I wouldn't put it past you,” he said.

“I'm looking into the deaths of two escorts from Premier Escort Services,” I said. “The parents of one of the young women were clients.”

“Were?” Big Lou said. “You're risking your neck for former clients? I think you need a class in cost-benefit analysis.”

“Their daughter was a missing person when she turned up dead,” I said. “I feel a sense of obligation.”

“You're nuts,” he said.

“Maybe,” I said. “But I'm going to see this case through.”

“Unless Garavito pops you.”

“Unless that,” I said.

I glanced again at Little John. He had moved onto *Hopelessly Devoted to You*. He made quite the contrast to Olivia Newton-John's Sandy. If Big

Lou and I talked long enough, Little John might make it all the way to the closing *We Go Together*.

"I don't know about Eddie Garavito's connections to Premier Escort Services," Big Lou said, "but he don't like you sniffing around there."

"Which means I'm on to something," I said.

"May not even be related to your case," Big Lou said.

"Perhaps not, but I'll never find out if I don't keep digging."

"Just hope you're not digging your own grave." Big Lou paused a beat. He snapped his fingers, "Oh yeah," he said, "you want to be cremated."

Big Lou got out of the chair. I stayed seated so we would be more at eye level.

"You're a big boy," he said to me, "so I can't tell you what to do. But if I were you, I'd leave this alone. You're only asking for trouble."

"Trouble does have a way of finding me," I said.

Big Lou turned toward the door. "Let's go, Little John," he said.

Little John stopped somewhere in the middle of *Beauty School Dropout*. He opened my office door. Big Lou paused at the open door and turned toward me.

He said, "Watch your back, Drew. Those guys Garavito sent were the warning. You may not get another."

I nodded my head. Big Lou stepped into the hallway. Little John followed, closing the door behind him.

CHAPTER 21

“Why'd you have to sit so far up,” Tommy Two Fingers said. “I nearly had a heart attack climbing the steps.” He was hunched over and breathing hard.

“You need to improve your cardio,” I said. Tommy used just one of his fingers to express his feelings. He sat down next to me. We were in the back row of Harvard Stadium.

Tommy shoved his hands into the pockets of his Patriots sweatshirt. He was medium height and medium build. His thinning brown hair and unremarkable facial features meant he looked similar to many middle-aged men. Tommy used this to his advantage in running cons.

It had made him difficult to remember and identify back in the days when he picked pockets around Boston. The legend is that Tommy only needed two fingers to lift a wallet and be gone before anyone knew what had happened.

“The last time I met you I nearly froze to death on Boston Common,” he said. “Now I'm about to have a coronary from hauling my ass up all these steps. If I didn't know better, I'd think you were trying to bump me off.”

“And miss out on all our stimulating conversations?” I said.

“It's on me, really,” he said. “I'm stupid enough to keep meeting you at places of your choosing. Next time you come to me.”

“Sure. I like to get out and about.”

Tommy took out a hankie and blew his nose. It sounded like Dizzy Gillespie blowing his trumpet. Tommy put the hankie in his back pants pocket.

“That's the second hankie I've seen in as many days,” I said. “The other was silk.”

“Silk hankies are for showing, not for blowing,” Tommy said.

I wondered if Big Lou knew that. He probably did. Being a hankie guy.

Tommy placed his feet on the bench in front of us. “So,” he said, “what you bring me all the way out here for?”

“All the way out here?” I said. “You live in Allston. I bet it took you less than ten minutes to get here.”

“The point is I showed up. What is it you want?”

“What can you tell me about Eddie Garavito's businesses?”

“You'll have to be more specific. Eddie's got lots of businesses.”

“Does he have any ownership in Dirty Water Companies?”

Tommy thought a few beats. He said, "Maybe."

"Maybe?" I said. "Come on, Tommy, don't yank my chain."

Tommy looked around. I'm not sure who he thought would be listening from where we were sitting. Other than a few pigeons, Tommy and I were the only ones in the stadium.

"Look, the Garavitos don't like people talking about them and their businesses."

"But word of mouth is the best form of advertising," I said.

"Not for the kind of businesses they run."

I stretched my legs out over the bench and leaned against the back wall.

"I need to know if Eddie Garavito owns any part of a business named Dirty Water Companies. Dirty Water owns Premier Escort Services. Three gorillas warned me off of looking into Premier. Big Lou tells me Eddie Garavito sent them."

"Jeez," Tommy said. "That's bad news."

"My investigative prowess has me convinced they are all related."

Tommy looked at me and said, "You don't need to be Sherlock Holmes to figure that out."

"It would be nice to have it confirmed. Facts are better than assumptions."

"True," he said. "You know what they say about when you assume?"

"So, what can you tell me?"

"I can't tell you anything, because I don't know anything," he said. "Do we understand each other?"

"Sure."

"I need to know we're clear about the fact I can't tell you anything, because I don't know anything."

"I got it," I said. "You're Sergeant Shultz."

"I liked that show," Tommy said. "What was it called?"

"Hogan's Heroes," I said.

"Right. Hogan's Heroes."

A couple in running shorts entered the stadium and started jogging up the stairs on the other side.

"Why do people do that to themselves?" Tommy said.

"You mean exercise?"

"More like torture," he said.

"People like to stay in shape," I said. "Be healthy."

“I only ever ran when I was being chased by the cops.”

“I thought no one ever made you?”

“Mostly not,” he said. “But I wasn't as skilled when I first started out.”

I nodded my head and grinned. I had never been on the wrong side of the law, but I often relied on criminals for information. No different, I guess, than the criminal informants police use to help them catch more serious criminals.

“And this information you don't know, and couldn't tell me, would be?”

“A certain person with the initials EG owns a controlling interest in a company whose name resembles a song by The Stendells.”

“I mentioned that very song to Detective Lieutenant Sanchez,” I said.

“Good for you,” he said. “Are we done?”

“You've been a big help,” I said.

“I didn't help you with nothing,” Tommy said.

“Of course you didn't.”

“But you owe me,” he said.

“Story of my life,” I said.

“Catch you around, Drew.”

Tommy pushed himself up and started slowly down the stairs. For every step he labored to take, the runners across the stadium strode effortlessly up three. Tommy stopped and turned his head back toward me.

“By the way,” he called out, “Be careful. You have a big target on your back.”

“So I've heard,” I said.

CHAPTER 22

The Leonard P. Zakim Bunker Hill Bridge and TD Garden were lit up as I drove past them on my way to Logan to pick up Jessica. My phone rang and the Bluetooth took over my car's audio system, interrupting Aerosmith's *Dream On*. Steven Tyler was about to hit his high note.

Another unknown number. Or the same unknown number Crooked Nose had called me from the other night.

"Drew Patrick," I said. "Private investigator for all seasons."

"Cool it Chuckles." It was definitely Crooked Nose.

I hadn't heard a clown reference in a while.

"Calling to check up on me?" I said.

"Have you considered our offer?"

I paused a beat. "Remind me," I said, "what offer was that?"

"The one where you stop sticking your nose in where it don't belong and we let you live."

"I always say live and let live."

"Only if you've changed your mind," he said.

"That would be a hard pass," I said. "I wouldn't be worth the title on my business cards if I didn't actually investigate."

"You sure about your answer?"

"I'm sure. Thanks for calling."

"I was pretty ticked when you destroyed our tracking device," he said.

I switched lanes to pass a slow-moving Honda Civic. I passed on the left and got back into the right lane in front of the Civic.

"I prefer to move about freely without being monitored," I said. "But how much was it? I can send you a check."

"You won't live long enough to write the check."

The phone call disconnected. When the radio returned, Sting was belting out *Roxanne*.

A familiar Escalade pulled up to my left. The rear passenger window slid down and a gun barrel appeared. I hit the gas and rocketed forward. I left the Civic in my dust.

The Escalade sped up and pulled in behind me. I heard the pop as my rear window shattered. I instinctively ducked, but the bullet had already lodged into my glove box.

They got out from behind me and sped past. My phone rang again. I answered.

“That was your last warning,” Crooked Nose said. He hung up and I watched as the Escalade entered the Callahan Tunnel ahead of me.

I got strange looks from the other cars in the tunnel. The noise and exhaust from the traffic invaded my car through the broken window.

There would be no choice but to tell Jessica what was going on. Unless she was so jet lagged and missed the broken window and bullet hole in my glove box.

She didn't.

We had a long conversation on the ride back from the airport about my letting the State Police continue the investigation without my assistance. I should say Jessica had that conversation. I mostly listened. Then gave her the only answer she knew I would give.

“If you won't drop the case,” she said, “at least let Pinnacle back you up. Let me back you up.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay? Really? Just like that?”

“It seems the smart move,” I said.

Jessica was silent a beat. Then she said, “I honestly didn't think you would go for it.”

I glanced over at her and said, “Eddie Garavito isn't playing around.”

CHAPTER 23

The internet has simplified many aspects of investigating. Many newspaper and magazine articles are available to me online without ever having to leave the comfort of my office. Kids today don't know how easy they have it when researching school papers. I wonder how many of them could navigate a stack of reference books in a library or an old microfiche machine?

After several hours of reading *The Hollywood Reporter* and other entertainment magazines, I learned two things about Grant Worthington. The first is he is one of the biggest players in the entertainment industry. Maybe the biggest. The second is that rumors of his infidelity are as common in Hollywood as sunshine.

It appears Grant Worthington uses escort services like Premier as his own personal ATM for mistresses. So why have Ashley and Hannah killed? What made them different from the others? I wrote a big question mark on my pad of paper.

"What do you think, Dash?" He ignored me and continued sleeping. I got up and looked out my office window. All was as it should be on Brattle Street.

No sign of Garavito's men lurking around the corner. No Escalade driving by slowly. Maybe they had lost interest. Somehow I doubted that. But not being grabbed at gunpoint or having my window shot out was an improvement.

I checked my watch, Terry and Dave from Pinnacle would be arriving soon. They would serve as my backup as I continued to stick my nose into places where Eddie Garavito preferred I did not. First on the list of visits for the day was Worthington Entertainment Group's Boston offices. I doubted anyone would have much they wanted to share with me, but you never find out if you don't ask.

After rubbing elbows with Hollywood east, I'd head over to Brookline to meet with Brooke Chambers. That meeting may get Garavito's attention. Good thing Terry and Dave will have my back.

A blue Volkswagen Jetta pulled out of a parking spot in front of my building and a black Ford Fusion pulled in. Timing is everything. Two men in dark suits got out of the car. Terry and Dave from Pinnacle.

I texted Terry I was on my way down. Dash woke from his slumber when he heard me take his leash off the hook by the door. We went downstairs and greeted Terry and Dave. Well, I greeted them. Dash first had to mark his favorite bush.

Terry was a big guy who stood a head taller than me with broad shoulders and long arms. Dave was closer to average height and looked like he was carved from stone. They looked every bit the part of two former Secret Service agents. I was disappointed to learn Terry and Dave had investigated financial crimes, but I figured they must have had some protective training. Either way, I appreciated the back up.

After we dropped Dash off at daycare, we crossed the Charles River into Boston. All was quiet as we drove to Worthington Entertainment Group's Boston offices. I only hoped it wasn't a calm before a storm.

Worthington Entertainment Group occupied several floors of an office building along the Boston waterfront. I expected more pizzazz from the office of a movie studio. But Worthington Entertainment Group's office looked like any other I had ever been in. The outer offices did have great views of Boston Harbor, but most of the workers occupied a cluster of inner cubicles. I wondered if those workers felt like Dilbert.

Despite my first-rate business cards, no one wanted to talk to me about Grant Worthington. Security politely asked me to leave, and I complied. Given I had pretty low expectations for the visit, I wasn't terribly disappointed. But hope does spring eternal.

"Mr. Patrick," a young woman's voice called out to me as I waited for the elevator. I turned around. The woman's eyes shifted from me to Terry and Dave.

"My babysitters," I said.

"We can wait downstairs," Terry said as the elevator doors opened. Terry and Dave stepped on the elevator.

"They work for another detective agency and are helping with my case," I said to the young woman as the elevator doors closed. She nodded her head.

"I could get fired for speaking with you," the young woman said looking over her shoulder. Satisfied no one was around, she turned her head back in my direction and continued, "You should speak with Walter Meyers. He is directing a film for us here in Boston."

"Okay," I said. "How might Walter Meyers help with my case?"

“Walt had done a number of films with us over the years. He’s been in lots of meetings with Mr. Worthington.”

“So he has some good firsthand knowledge?”

“Yes,” she said nodding her head. “And he can’t stand Mr. Worthington. He’ll be happy to talk.” She paused a beat. “Off the record, of course.”

“Of course,” I said.

“Here’s a pass to get you on set,” she said as she handed me a laminated card on a lanyard. “I’ll call Walt and let him know you are coming. They are filming on location near Old North Church. According to the schedule, they’ll break for lunch soon, so he can give you a few minutes.”

“Thank you,” I said. “Not that it matters, but why did you decide to help?”

“Grant Worthington is a creep,” she said.

“Reason enough,” I said. I put the set pass in my jacket pocket and pressed the elevator button. The young woman went back into the office suite. The elevator doors opened, and I got on.

CHAPTER 24

The film crew was set up on Salem and Hull Streets across from Old North Church. Extras wandered in and out of Caffè Lil Italy. I flashed my set pass in front of the security guard. He scanned the bar code with a reader and nodded his head for me to go ahead. Terry and Dave sat back on Salem Street.

“Can you tell me where I can find Walter Meyers?” I asked the guard.

“Over on Paul Revere Mall,” he replied.

“Thanks.”

I walked past Old North Church along the Freedom Trail. Lights, cameras, and sound booms were being set up on Paul Revere Mall. A man sat in a director’s chair with the name ‘Walt Meyers’ stenciled on the back. Either he was my guy or someone was bold enough to sit in his chair on set.

“Walt Meyers?” I said as I approached.

“Yeah,” he said. “Who are you?”

Walt Meyers was short and wiry. He had wispy black hair under a Red Sox baseball cap. He wore jeans and an Emerson College sweatshirt.

“Drew Patrick,” I said. “I’m a private investigator.” I handed him my card.

“We have all the security we need,” he said. “Or maybe we don’t. How did you get on set?”

“Free country,” I said. Walt frowned. I showed him the set pass. “A young lady at Worthington Entertainment gave me this. She told me she was calling to let you know I was coming.”

“I haven’t had time to check my voice messages,” he said. “I’m in the middle of making a movie.” Walt got up out of his chair and walked over to a set of cameras. “I need camera one ten yards over. Camera two should be near the Paul Revere statue.”

I followed and waited for him to finish giving directions to the crew. Then I said, “she told me you might be willing to discuss Grant Worthington with me.”

Walt turned and waved for me to follow him. Which I did. We went into a trailer parked on Unity Street.

“Have a seat,” Walt said to me. I sat in a captain’s chair that swiveled. Walt grabbed a Coke out of the fridge. “Want one?” he asked.

“No, thanks.”

Walt sat on the couch and cracked open the can. He took a sip and seemed refreshed. "So what is this about Grant Worthington?" he said.

"I've read pretty much every Hollywood magazine and too many newspaper articles to count," I said, "but I'd like to know about the man from someone who actually knows him."

"You have some sort of detective confidentiality?" Walt asked.

"I'm not an attorney or a priest. But I'll keep your name out of it."

Walt leaned forward and looked me directly in the eye. "I need your word," he said. "I've been fortunate to have a steady stream of projects. I can't afford to blow that all up in talking to some guy I don't even know."

"Who's the cop handling security for the film?" I asked.

"Thomas Kelly."

"Give Kelly a call and ask him about me."

"You seem pretty sure of yourself," he said.

"I am sure of myself," I said.

Walt sat back and nodded. "Alright. We'll see." He took out his cell phone. "Officer Kelly, this is Walt Meyers." He paused while Kelly spoke. "Everything is fine on the set. Although I may need to tighten the reign on set passes." He paused as Kelly spoke again. "No, no. I think it's okay. Listen, what can you tell me about a PI named Drew Patrick?"

I waited as Kelly talked on the other end of the phone. He seemed to have a lot to say. Walt was smiling. He even laughed a few times. When Kelly was done talking, Walt thanked him and hung up.

Walt looked at me and smiled. "Kelly says you can be a real pain in the ass, but you're a stand-up guy and I can trust you."

"It seemed like he said a lot more than that."

"He went into additional details and used some colorful language, but he respects you. Also said you were with the FBI."

"I got tired of wearing suits," I said.

"So what do you want to know about Grant Worthington?" Walt said.

"Are the stories in the Hollywood magazines true?"

"For the most part. Grant has a different girl with him nearly every night of the week."

"What about Mrs. Worthington?"

"I'm sure she knows," Walt said. "I guess she puts up with it because of all the money and power. She certainly didn't marry him for his looks."

"Were you aware Grant Worthington uses escort services?" I said.

“Like legitimate escort services or fronts for prostitutes?”

“Either? Both?”

“I’ve heard rumors he uses an escort service here in Boston,” Walt said. “Mostly because he doesn’t spend as much time here and isn’t as connected into the social scene as he is in LA.”

“Have you heard rumors about him sleeping with any of those escorts?” I said.

“I just assumed he was sleeping with all of them. Isn’t that what an escort service is?”

“Not all of them,” I said. “There are legitimate escort services.”

“Point is,” Walt said, “Grant liked to sleep around. He’s ugly as sin, but he has power and money.”

“Would he have any reason to silence any of the women? Particularly those from the escort agency?”

“Silence them? In what way? Like pay them off to keep quiet?”

“Sure,” I said.

“I suppose he could have secrets I don’t know about. But it’s hard to keep secrets in Hollywood.”

“How about in Boston?”

“Easier here,” Walt said. “But word eventually gets around.”

Walt finished his Coke and went for another. “I need the caffeine to keep me going,” he said. “These fourteen-hour days can drag you down.” Walt sat back on the couch and cracked open the new can.

“Is there any history of violence?” I said.

“With Grant?” Walt shook his head. “No. Not that I’ve ever heard.”

“And you would have heard?”

“Most likely,” Walt said. “I’ve done enough films for Worthington Entertainment to know pretty much everything that goes on there.”

I leaned forward in the captain’s seat. “Does Grant Worthington have any criminal connections?”

“Like the mob?” Walt said.

“Like the mob. Or any criminal connections.”

Walt took a sip of his Coke as he thought. “No,” he said shaking his head. “Grant’s a bit of scumbag, but I don’t think he has any criminal connections.”

“Does he know people who do?” I asked.

“Grant Worthington has a wide circle of people he associates with,” Walt said. “If you scratch hard enough, you’ll probably find somebody with connections to organized crime.”

“Did you hear about the murders of Ashley Holland and Hannah Parks?” I said.

“Read about them in the *Globe*.”

I sat back in the captain’s chair and swiveled gently from side to side. “Were you aware they were escorts at Premier Escort Services?”

“No.”

“Grant Worthington was a client of the company and those two young women had escorted him to various functions in recent months.”

Walt paused mid sip. His eyes grew wide. He leaned forward and rested the Coke can on the couch between his legs.

“You don’t think Grant had something to do with their deaths?” he asked. “The news said they were accidents.”

“Even with the 24/7 news cycle,” I said, “once in a while the cops can keep some details out of the press.”

“So they weren’t accidents?”

“No.”

“Shit,” Walt said as he dropped back against the couch cushions. He took off the baseball cap and scratched his head. “So you think Grant killed them?”

“Not directly,” I said. “But he is a suspect in hiring a professional hitman.”

“Jeez,” Walt said. “This is like the type of stuff in the movies we make.”

I stopped swiveling and rested my hands on my legs. “Can you recall anything that might help with the investigation?”

“Grant plays the field,” Walt said. “And he is a real jerk most of the time. In fact, personally, I can’t stand the guy. But I don’t think he is capable of having two girls murdered. Why would he?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” I said.

CHAPTER 25

Brooke Chambers lived in a ninth floor condo on Longwood Avenue in Brookline. I stood at her living room window looking out over Coolidge Corner. Brooke was in her well-appointed galley kitchen making coffee using fresh beans and French press coffee maker. Premier escorts are sophisticated.

A ginger cat walked into the living room wearing a sparkly necklace with a little bell on it. She stopped when she saw me. Considered me a moment, and then scampered across the parquet wood floor toward the bedroom. Perhaps she sensed I was a dog owner. Though I have nothing against cats.

"Here you go," Brooke said as she handed me a cup of the freshly pressed and brewed coffee.

"Thank you," I said. The coffee smelled great. I took a sip. It tasted even better.

"You approve?" Brooke said.

"It's delicious. And I'm not just being polite. This really is fantastic."

"I get it from a local shop in Coolidge Corner," she said. "It's not far from the Coolidge Corner Theater."

We sat at a cafe style table Brooke had in a nook. The nook's window offered a similar view as the living room window.

The ginger cat made another appearance and padded across the floor.

"She's decided to give me another try," I said.

Brooke smiled. "She's a little shy at first. I recently adopted her from the shelter. Her name is Cookie."

"Because she's the color of a ginger snap?" I said.

"You are a detective," Brooke said.

"Not just a license from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts," I said. I took another sip of coffee. I couldn't get enough. Then I said, "I'm glad you got Cookie from a rescue shelter. I adopted my dog from a shelter in Cambridge."

Cookie took a few cautious steps toward me. I slowly held out my hand. She sniffed and then inched closer. She took a closer sniff and then nuzzled up against my hand. I patted her and she began to purr.

"Now you're friends," Brooke said.

"Dash might be jealous," I said.

“Dash is your dog?”

“Yes. He's a beagle-mix.”

“Does he have floppy ears?”

“Yes,” I said. I took another sip of coffee. I may need to get a French press coffee maker.

“Thanks, again, for agreeing to speak with me,” I said.

“Anything I can do to help. It is just so awful what happened to Ashley and Hannah.”

Brooke held her cup with both hands. Like the other women at Premier, Brooke looked like a fashion model. She had long chestnut hair and warm brown eyes. Her work wardrobe would be similar to the clothes I saw in Ashley's closet, but Brooke was dressed casually for her day off in blue jeans and a Boston College sweatshirt.

After she took a sip of her coffee Brooke said, “So by their deaths being suspicious, I'm assuming that means they may not have been accidents?”

“Exactly,” I said. “The evidence is circumstantial at the moment, but when you've seen enough cases you sense when foul play is involved.”

“Even if you can't prove it?” she said.

“Every case is a process,” I said. “Eventually I'll know enough.”

Brooke considered me a moment. She said, “Have you ever not been able to prove it? Not be able to solve a case?”

I gave a slight nod of my head. “Unfortunately, there are a few cases from when I was with the FBI that we couldn't officially solve. Leads went cold.”

Brooke looked at me with genuine concern on her face. “Those must bother you,” she said.

“They do,” I said. “It is one of the reasons I left the Bureau. As a private investigator, I can continue to investigate even if leads go cold. I can also pursue a case when there isn't much of anything to go on from the start.”

“Because those cases matter to you?” Brooke said.

I liked her. She was intuitive and caring, without prying.

“Perhaps you should be a therapist,” I said.

“I'm actually getting my masters in psychology at BC. Premier helps pay the bills while I go to school. I hope to go on for my doctorate.”

“I'm pretty good at reading people,” I said. “I imagine psychology will be a good profession for you.”

Brooke smiled. She had a comforting smile. "Thanks," she said. "If I can just get through my upcoming exams."

"What about Ashley and Hannah? Did they have any plans beyond Premier?"

Brooke shook her head and said, "Not that I'm aware of. To be honest, I didn't know either of them all that well. With school, I don't have time to socialize with the other escorts. I can give you the names of the escorts I know they hung out with it. If that helps."

"It would. Thanks."

She picked up her coffee mug. "Refill?" she said.

"Please," I said as I handed her my mug. She took our mugs and went to the kitchen. I watched Cookie follow her. Dogs and cats were the same in hoping for treats.

Brooke returned and handed a full mug to me. "Thanks," I said. She sat back down, again holding her coffee mug in both hands.

"My hands tend to get cold," she said.

I nodded and smiled. "My girlfriend often holds her coffee mug in both hands for the same reason."

We each took a few sips of coffee. After a few beats, I said, "I understand about client confidentiality at Premier, but I know you, Ashley, and Hannah all had Grant Worthington as a client at one time or another. What can you tell me about Mr. Worthington?"

"You don't think their deaths are connected to him, do you?" Brooke had a realized concern in her voice. "Am I in danger?"

"Grant Worthington is someone I need to look into because he is a connection Ashley and Hannah shared. Beyond that, I can't say for certain if he's involved in their deaths. And I don't believe you are in danger."

Brooke looked somewhat relieved I didn't feel she was in danger, but still surprised one of Premier's clients could be responsible for Ashley and Hannah's deaths.

I continued, "If what Ms. Osbourne told me is true, you haven't escorted Grant Worthington in nearly a year. Ashley and Hannah were very recent escorts."

"That's true," Brooke said. "It has been nine or ten months since I last escorted Mr. Worthington."

"My gut and years of experience tell me there is something more to their connection with Grant Worthington."

Cookie mewed. Brooke picked her up and Cookie curled into a ball on Brooke's lap.

I said, "It may have to do with the fact Ashley and Hannah had both slept with Grant Worthington."

Brooke looked up at me from petting Cookie. Her eyes were wide.

"I'd heard rumors," she said. "But I didn't want to consider it. Perhaps I'm naive, but our contracts are clear about not getting intimate." She paused a beat. "Not to mention the fact that wanders into prostitution territory."

"My next question is a sensitive one," I said. "And you probably know where this is going?"

"I never slept with Grant Worthington. Or any Premier clients."

"That's what I figured," I said. "But I had to ask."

"I understand," she said.

Cookie began purring. Brooke lifted her hand from petting Cookie and placed it on the table. She wrapped her fingers. Then she looked at me. "So you suspect their sleeping with him has something to do with their deaths?" she said.

"I do," I said. "And the fact that they did so recently. It's a combination of those two factors."

"Neither of which applies to me," Brooke said.

"Correct."

"Which is why you don't believe I'm in danger," she said finishing my thought.

"All the same," she said, "I'm going to stay with friends out of town while I study for my exams."

"If it makes you feel better."

"Is that silly?" she said.

"No," I said. "I might do the same if I were in your shoes."

Brooke laughed. "Imagine you trying to fit your feet in my shoes?" she said.

"Are you saying I have big feet?"

"Yes. But not out of proportion with the rest of you."

"To your point, though," I said, "It would be a comedy of errors."

Brooke took a final sip of her coffee. As she placed her mug on the table she looked at me a moment. Then she said, "I don't imagine you scare very easily."

“I try not too. It would be hard to stay in my line of work.”

I finished my second mug of Brooke's freshly pressed coffee. I was smitten with the concept. Probably too lazy to actually press coffee beans myself.

“What were your impressions of Grant Worthington?” I said.

“I recognized him as a big Hollywood producer,” she said. “And he liked to play that up. I think he wanted people to know he was important.”

“Anything else?” I said.

“He commented how I had the looks and smarts to make it in Hollywood. And that he could make me a star.” Brooke smirked, and then she continued, “I know he runs a movie studio, but I imagine he said that to every escort.”

“Did any of them take it seriously?”

“Ashley and Hannah were taken enough by the idea to go to bed with him.” Brooke shivered.

“Not your cup of tea?” I said.

“I believe that what's inside matters most,” she said, “but have you seen him?”

I nodded my head. “I've seen pictures. Not an attractive man,” I said.

“If he was a nice person,” she said, “his looks wouldn't matter. Even a good-looking guy needs to be a good person. Otherwise, I don't see the point.”

Cookie woke up and hopped down from Brooke's lap. Her bell tinkled as she trotted off.

Brooke said, “Oh yeah, there was one escort who moved to Los Angeles a few months ago. I don't know if it's related, but I think she had been an escort for Mr. Worthington a few times.” Brooke scrunched her nose as she thought. “Vicki something,” she said. “I'm sorry, I don't recall her full name.”

“No problem,” I said. “I can find out.”

I thanked Brooke again for the coffee and information. As I got up to leave, Cookie came over and rubbed up against me. I bent down and scratched her behind the ear.

“Let me get you the names of those escorts,” Brooke said. “Just a second.”

She went over to the coffee table in the living room and picked up her purse. She pulled out a business card and handed it to me.

I glanced down at the Premier Escort Services card with the name “Stacey Becker” and her cell phone number printed on it.

Brooke said, “Stacey gave me her card one day in case I ever wanted to join them for drinks. They like to go to The Hawthorne.”

“Thanks,” I said as I pocketed the card. “It looks like I should plan on a drink at The Hawthorne.”

CHAPTER 26

The Hawthorne is a swanky lounge. So I figured anyplace swanky called for slacks, a button-down shirt, and a sport coat. I felt it best to blend in as much as possible, but I drew the line at a tie.

Jessica attended with me wearing a Navy Blue lace bodycon dress that fit above the knee. She got the usual glances as we entered. Her hair danced around her shoulders as we walked down the stairs of the Hotel Commonwealth to the subterranean rooms which comprised The Hawthorne.

The lounge was modern and sleek with light gray walls and framed photo art. Wall sconces and candles on tables dimly lit the room. People enjoying conversation and drinks crowded long tables. Our former Secret Service friends, on loan from Pinnacle, mingled nearby as backup.

We went to the bar and ordered our drinks. I had what they called a Real McCoy. It was a rum drink. Jessica ordered a red wine. I paid and then texted Stacey Becker.

Jessica tried to hide a yawn. She was still on London time and her body was telling her it was the middle of the night.

"You didn't have to come," I said.

She shook her head and said, "Are you kidding? I know what escorts at Premier look like."

"They have nothing on you," I said.

Jessica smiled. "You're sweet," she said.

"It's true." And I meant it. Jessica always left me breathless. She was beauty and brains.

"And it's not that I don't trust you," she said. "But my presence ensures you won't forget what you already have."

"How could I ever forget?" I said. "Plus, with Eddie's guys gunning for me, it's good to know I have help."

Jessica was skilled in several martial arts and had already proved herself against brutal thugs.

"Funny," she said, "I only ever need to use my training when I help with your cases."

"It gives you real-world experience," I said.

"I could do without all the danger," she said, "but it is never dull with you." Jessica smiled and then took a sip of her wine.

“True,” I said. “Pinnacle's hoity-toity clients don't offer the same level of excitement.”

Stacey replied to my text and told me they were in the back room just through the door near the bar. I texted we were on our way into the room.

The back room had a living room feel to it. There were two long white and black checkered couches on either side of a glass coffee table, positioned in front of a modern fireplace with a simple white mantle. More framed pictures covered the wall above the fireplace. The far side wall had a dark wood floor to ceiling bookcase filled with books and vases, to round out the homier feel.

Stacey Becker waved to us from the couch to the right of the fireplace. She had dark hair, dark eyes, and wore a pink and blue sequined dress. Stacey introduced us to the other two Premier escorts, Brianna and Nicole. They were all drinking fruity looking cocktails.

Brianna wore a light green cocktail dress that matched well with her light complexion, blond hair, and brown eyes. Nicole had a similar cocktail dress to Brianna in a deep red. Nicole could have been a younger Halle Berry celebrity look alike.

“I love your dress,” Stacey said to Jessica.

“Thank you,” Jessica said. “I picked it up in London.”

“I love London,” said Nicole. “One of my favorite cities.”

“I wanted to wear the Sherlock Holmes deerstalker hat Jessica bought me in London, but she vetoed the idea.”

Stacey, Brianna, and Nicole giggled. They were in their early 20s so it was a more mature giggle than teenage girls, but not quite the laughter of women who had reached at least their third decade.

“It's intended for display in your office,” Jessica said.

“So I shouldn't smoke the Briar pipe either?”

“You two are cute together,” Brianna said.

“Please sit,” Stacey said as she patted the empty couch cushions next to them.

Jessica sat next to Stacey. I sat in the open space next to Jessica. I think she liked being a buffer. It sent a subtle message to Stacey, Brianna, and Nicole.

“I've never met real private investigators before,” Brianna said.

“We put our pants on one leg at a time just like everyone else,” I said.

“How exciting,” said Nicole.

I shrugged.

“Like the case you’re working on now,” said Stacey. “I mean it's sad what happened. But what intrigue.”

Brooke mentioned Ashley and Hannah socialized with Stacey, Brianna, and Nicole, but it didn't appear the relationships were close or deep. I wondered if they would have anything of substance to offer.

“How well did you know Ashley and Hannah?” I said. I took a sip of my Real McCoy. It went down smooth.

“We'd go out for drinks a few times a week,” Nicole said.

“We socialized, but we didn't learn much about their personal lives,” Stacey said.

“Except they both talked about working for Premier until their acting careers took off,” added Brianna.

“So they both wanted to be actors?” Jessica said.

Brianna leaned back into the couch and crossed her long, toned legs. The tallest of the three, she could play center for the Premier basketball team. “Oh yeah,” she said. “They talked about it all the time.”

“Did either of them have any acting jobs?” I said. I finished my Real McCoy and placed the empty glass on the table. A waitress came by. I ordered another and bought a round of drinks for the ladies. Jessica passed, still nursing her glass of wine.

“Our schedules at Premier keep us busy,” Stacey said. “I'm not sure they would have had much time to act in anything.”

Nicole leaned forward and placed her hands on her lap. She said, “Didn't they take acting classes together?”

“I think you're right,” Brianna said as she tapped the top of Nicole's hand.

“Do you know what acting school?” I said.

The three shook their heads. I still considered Ashley and Hannah sleeping with Grant Worthington as the reason they were murdered. Why that resulted in their killings, I still had no clue.

But the acting class was another connection the two shared, so I'd need to check it out. Solving a case was often a process of elimination. Eliminate enough things and you end up with the only thing that explains what happened. And, hopefully, why.

“What can you tell me about their connection to Grant Worthington?” I said.

The waitress came back with our drinks. "Cheers," Brianna said as she held up her glass. We all joined in. My Real McCoy went down just as smooth as before.

"Now, what was your question?" Stacey said after sipping her fruity cocktail.

"What did you notice about Ashley and Hannah with Grant Worthington?"

"We're not supposed to talk about clients," Nicole said.

"I understand," I said. "Was Grant Worthington ever one of your personal clients?"

Stacey, Brianna, and Nicole all shook their heads.

"Then I think there is wiggle room in your answering," I said. I turned to Jessica. "What do you think counselor?"

"I'd have to see the contract," she said, "but we won't tell."

Stacey, Brianna, and Nicole looked at each other. I could see the hesitation on their faces.

"Let's handle it this way," I said. "What can you tell me, without giving a name, about a client Ashley and Hannah shared? A client who had professional connections in a field they desired to work."

Stacey spoke first. "Ashley talked about being promised a spot in a movie."

"Hannah did too," Brianna said.

"I think the client used it as a way to seduce them," Nicole said.

"When did this begin?" I asked.

"Ashley had been escorting the client for three or four months," Brianna said. "She only started going to bed with him within the last month or two."

"What about Hannah?" Jessica said.

"Hannah was even more recently escorting Mr.," she caught herself with a momentary pause. "She started two months ago and went to bed with him shortly after that."

"So Ashley and Hannah started sleeping with the client around the same time?" I said.

"Yes," Stacey said.

"And they were aware of that fact," Jessica said.

"Sure," Brianna said. "It was a means to an end for them both."

"A Hollywood career?" I said.

Brianna nodded her head. She said, "I think Victoria moving to Los Angeles about two months ago inspired them."

"Whose Victoria?" I said.

"Victoria Clark," Stacey said. "She had been an escort at Premier."

"And she had been an escort for the same client?" Jessica said.

Stacey said, "Yes. And she took the same acting classes with Ashley and Hannah."

Jessica and I looked at each other.

"I don't think Victoria went to bed with the client while an escort at Premier," Nicole said. "She just up and moved to LA on the mere mention of getting an audition."

"My guess is there was no audition waiting for her," I said.

Nicole nodded her head in agreement. "Victoria needed to sleep with the guy first," she said. "Which she did out in LA. There have been promises of an acting career and a relationship."

"So you keep in touch with Victoria?" I said to Nicole.

"Yeah. We started at Premier around the same time. I've known her a few years."

"Can you give me her contact information?" I said.

"No problem," Nicole said. She paused a beat. Then she looked at me. "You don't think Victoria is in any danger?"

"She might be," I said. "I'd like to talk to her."

Nicole picked up her phone and scrolled through her contacts. I gave her my cell phone number and she texted me Victoria's information.

I'd learned more from them than I had expected. They confirmed Grant Worthington was a creep who used his position of power and influence to get sex out of Ashley, Hannah, and Victoria. It also seemed likely, in one way or another, that Grant Worthington was responsible for Ashley and Hannah's deaths. I wanted to prevent Victoria from becoming another victim.

As we waited for our security detail to give the all-clear for us to leave, I dialed Victoria's number. It went to voicemail and I left a message. I also called a friend in the FBI's LA field office for him to locate Victoria and provide safe lodging until we determined what was going on.

"I need to update Burke and Sanchez," I said to Jessica as we waited in the Commonwealth Hotel's lobby. One of our guys was at the front door while the other brought the car around.

An unassuming couple walked into the hotel. Our guy looked at them. They didn't look like the Garavito crime family had sent them to off me. The woman carried a small dog in her arms. The man wore a business suit and carried a folded copy of *The Boston Globe* in his right hand. A bellhop carried their luggage behind them.

The woman approached the front desk, and the bellhop followed. The man stopped next to me. "Mr. Patrick," he said, "We need to talk."

I glanced down as he lifted the *Globe* to reveal a gun. Our guy at the front door looked over, reaching for his gun. I shook him off like a pitcher who doesn't like the catcher's sign. We were in a crowded hotel lobby, I didn't want to turn it into a shootout at the O.K. Corral.

Jessica knew me well enough to realize we would let this play out. We were both fast enough to make a move on the guy, and we outnumbered him, but the risk of someone getting hurt was too high. Also, he might have associates placed around the lobby.

"What about?" I said.

"We have a mutual interest," he said.

"Which is?" I asked.

"I'll explain it all over a drink."

"I recently finished having drinks," I said. "I'm good."

"I think you can make time for another drink."

I smiled at him. "I'm pretty perceptive," I said, "even on a bad day. But why don't you humor me and offer me your name? Since we'll be having a drink together."

The man smiled back at me. "Edward Garavito," he said. "But you can call me Eddie. Now let's go have that drink."

CHAPTER 27

“You were a hard man to get to after my men's last encounter with you,” Eddie said as we rode in the back of the Escalade. Sandpaper Voice was driving and Crooked Nose sat in the front passenger seat. Comb Over hadn't come along for the ride.

Eddie had put away the gun. His hands were interlocked and resting on his stomach as he sat comfortably back in the seat. Not a care in the world.

He considered me a moment, then said, “Having former Secret Service for protection is rather impressive.”

“And yet here we are,” I said.

Eddie smiled. “There isn't anybody I can't get to.”

“Apparently,” I said.

Eddie flicked away a piece of lint from the sleeve of his Brooks Brothers suit. It was navy blue with thin light blue pinstripes. His crisp white shirt was high quality with French cuffs. I had no doubt his cufflinks cost more than my entire wardrobe. His silk tie matched the pinstripes.

“You see, Mr. Patrick, I have people all over Boston. Those people have been keeping an eye out for you.”

“I am easy on the peepers,” I said.

Eddie sat expressionlessly. We weren't quite hitting it off.

“Your lady friend and the other two won't get any crazy ideas about following us, will they?”

“No,” I said. “But if anything happens to me...”

“Don't cause any trouble and you'll be home safe and sound tonight.”

“I have to ask,” I said, “was that woman and dog really with you back at the Commonwealth Hotel?”

Eddie nodded his head. “Yeah,” he said. “The wife gets a few nights being pampered at the hotel in exchange for providing the cover.”

I had to hand it to Eddie, he slipped right past our defenses. Of course I wasn't the president, so the attention to security details wasn't as high. We were looking out for Eddie's goons, not for Eddie, his wife, and dog to walk right up to me. If I actually survived my visit with Eddie, it would be a lesson learned and not forgotten.

Sandpaper Voice pulled the Escalade over and we stopped. Crooked Nose got out and opened the rear passenger door on my side.

“After you,” Eddie said to me as he motioned toward the open door.

“Don't get any funny ideas,” Crooked Nose said.

“Those are the best ideas,” I said. He frowned at me and tilted his head for me to get out of the SUV.

I climbed out and we waited for Eddie to follow. Sandpaper Voice joined us on the sidewalk. He stood with his arms crossed and gave me his best tough guy stare. It wasn't bad, but I could give him a few pointers.

“This way, Mr. Patrick,” Eddie said. We followed him into a hole in the wall bar just a few blocks from the Commonwealth Hotel. It was closed for renovations. Wires hung from light sockets in the ceiling and drywall was in various stages of being hung.

We passed through the main bar to an anteroom. Unlike the bar area, the anteroom was finished and well-appointed with fine green leather and mahogany furniture. The mahogany furniture matched the built-in bookcases and wood paneled walls. The scent of cigar smoke blended with the leather and wood.

“This was a cigar bar,” Eddie said. “I'm renovating the main bar area to appeal more to the Millennials. Need to stay relevant. But I'm keeping this room for myself.”

He sat down in a high-backed leather chair. “Have a seat,” he said. I sat in the high-backed leather chair's twin opposite Eddie. They were on either side of a fireplace.

Eddie was average height and slender. His dark hair was neatly trimmed and parted on the left side. He had almond colored eyes that sat close together. His clean-shaven face looked younger than what I knew to be his fifty years.

Sandpaper Voice flipped a wall switch and a fire roared to life. Cozy.

“Scotch?” Eddie said to me.

“Sure,” I said. “Neat.”

“I'll take mine on the rocks,” Eddie said. Crooked Nose went to a wet bar and prepared our drinks. Comb Over walked in carrying a cigar box.

“Hey, look,” I said, “the gang's all here.”

“We'll get to that in a minute,” Eddie said. He waved at Comb Over to approach. Comb Over crossed the room. He held out the open cigar box. The unlit cigars smelled like a newly-sown field of rich loamy soil. Eddie selected one. I did the same.

Eddie took out his cutter and clipped the ends on each of our cigars. He said, “They're Cuban. Still the finest in the world, even if no longer such a

forbidden fruit in the United States.”

“To consume,” I said. “Not to sell.”

“True, you still can't go to your local tobacconist and purchase them legally,” Eddie said. “But that doesn't mean commercial sales aren't being made.” He smiled at me as he lit our cigars. The pungent aroma filled the space between us as smoke swirled upward from the ends.

Crooked Nose walked over and placed our drinks on the serving table between the chairs. He stepped back and stood near the back wall with Sandpaper Voice and Comb Over.

“I realize you have had less than pleasant experiences with my men,” Eddie said as a matter of fact.

“This is certainly a more civilized encounter,” I said as I puffed on my cigar and held up my scotch glass.

“Don't mistake my hospitality this evening for safety, Mr. Patrick. I was prepared to kill you.” He paused a beat as he let scotch pass across his lips. “I still am.”

“At least I'll go out in style,” I said.

Eddie ignored my comment. He said, “I sent my men to deliver a message and you ignored that message. I sent a second message, and you ignored that too.”

“I've never been big on being told what to do.”

“Amazing you are still alive,” Eddie said, “given some of the people you cross.”

“Like you?” I said.

“Yes, like me,” he said.

I allowed for a contemplative moment as I joined a puff of cigar with a sip of scotch. “Luck of the Irish,” I said.

“I'll hand it to you, Mr. Patrick, you seem rather unflappable.”

“Never let them see you sweat.”

Eddie tipped his head toward me. Almost a nod, but not quite. “I can respect what you do,” Eddie said. “As long as it doesn't interfere with my business.”

This wasn't my first rodeo with a crime boss. Eddie was about to launch into a monologue. A perfect opportunity to drink my scotch and smoke my cigar.

Eddie put down his drink on the serving table. He leaned forward, holding the cigar in his right hand. A thin line of smoke drifted upward

toward the ceiling.

"Here's the thing," he said, "at first I figured you'd be trouble. I don't like people poking around in my business. I have come to understand you are a half-decent investigator, so you are presumably aware I have a controlling interest in Premier Escort Services. Most of its profits flow to me although I'm more of a silent partner."

Along with his drug money and, as I surmised, the illegal sale of Cuban cigars. Eddie took a puff of his cigar. He blew out a perfect ring of smoke. It impressed me. I continued enjoying my cigar and scotch. Eddie was delivering his own version of Macbeth.

"What I have concluded, at least for the time being, is that you looking into the deaths of two of Premier's escorts might serve my interests." Eddie sat back in his chair. He picked up his scotch glass. "It's why you are still alive." He drank his scotch. I didn't know if he wanted to act out a scene from *The Godfather*, so I held back on kissing his pinkie ring.

"How so?" I said.

"Somebody whacking two of my employees is bad for business," he said.

"Not to mention somebody killed two young women," I said.

Eddie offered only the slightest recognition there was human loss of life. He was more transactional. Business assets lost. His bottom line affected. The concern of damage to his street cred.

Eddie ignored me and said, "That somebody needs to pay."

"Justice for the deaths of Ashley Holland and Hannah Parks is all I am after," I said. "I don't care about your business."

"Then we understand each other?" Eddie said.

"Enough to work together on this," I said. "But I'm not into revenge killing. I want whoever did this punished through the legal system."

"I need to send a message," Eddie said.

"Life in Cedar Junction is a strong message," I said.

"Maybe in your world," Eddie said. "Not in mine."

I didn't like where the conversation was going. A different tact was needed. I put down my drink and leaned forward with my cigar in my hand.

I said, "This case is too hot. The Massachusetts and Maine State Police are involved. The FBI is likely to get involved for murders in two states. You don't want any of the heat coming your way."

I sat back and waited. Eddie considered what I had said as he puffed on his cigar. After several minutes he nodded his head. "You might be right," he said. He paused another few beats. "Okay, we'll do it your way. But you don't breathe a word to anybody about our working together."

"Not exactly something I want on my website," I said.

"From what I hear these were contract killings," Eddie said.

I nodded. "That's the angle we're pursuing," I said.

"Nobody local put out the hits. No reason to. Plus, no one in their right mind wants to go up against me."

"Assuming they know your connections to Premier," I said.

"Anybody in Boston would know."

I nodded again.

"Word is that a former local guy has been in town," Eddie said. "Grew up in Dorchester. Now he moves around the country from job to job. He was spotted in town around the time the girl in Quincy was killed."

"It may be something," I said.

"Mostly rumors," said Eddie, "But I figured a professional investigator could help confirm those rumors. Especially an investigator with connections to the cops and feds."

"Lucky for you I'm already on the case," I said.

"Lucky for you," Eddie said. "It kept me from whacking you."

I didn't want to press my luck, so I left it at that. "Do you have a name?" I said.

"Mercado," Eddie said. "A real head case, from what I hear. But very dangerous."

"He has proven to be," I said. "But if we find evidence Mercado was the killer and he can be put away, we can learn who hired him, and maybe even why."

I had formed an uneasy alliance with one of Boston's most notorious crime bosses. The upside is I was still alive. And I had the name of the person who most likely killed Ashley and Hannah.

CHAPTER 28

“You’re what?” Big Lou said. We were sitting in a booth at his restaurant in the North End. I was finally trying the tiramisu. I wasn’t sure about the world’s best, but it was pretty darn good.

“How can you be working with Eddie Garavito?” he said before I had an opportunity to swallow the tiramisu and answer.

“It appears we have a common interest,” I said.

Big Lou snorted. “I find it hard to imagine you have any common interest with a guy like Eddie Garavito.”

“I sometimes have a common interest with you.”

“Hey, hey, hey. Hold the phone a minute.” Big Lou held up his pudgy little hand. “I may have some business interests I don’t disclose to the government, but I’m no thug like Garavito. I certainly don’t go around killing people.”

“Word on the street not that long ago is you would beat your own grandmother if she owed you money.”

“Vicious lies,” he said.

“Or stories you planted to gain street cred?” I said.

“No comment.”

“Have you ever heard the saying about the enemy of my enemy is my friend?”

“Sure,” he said. “An old proverb or something.”

“From around the fourth century BC,” I said.

“Whoopdido,” Big Lou said as he waved his little hand around. His Rolex slid around on his tiny wrist.

“Listen, I don’t like the idea of cooperating with Garavito. In fact, it makes me ill thinking about it. But I don’t see another alternative at the moment.”

“Not one that doesn’t get you killed,” Big Lou said.

“So, you see my dilemma?”

I took another bite of tiramisu.

Big Lou peered up at me. He looked like a puppy waiting for praise.

“What ya think of the tiramisu?”

“It’s very good,” I said, wiping my mouth with the cloth napkin.

The restaurant sound system kicked on in preparation for the upcoming lunch crowd. Dean Martin was singing *That’s Amore*.

“Saying pizza pie is redundant,” I observed.

“Huh?” Big Lou said.

I took a sip of water and said, “The word pizza is Italian for pie. Saying pizza pie is like saying pie pie. Redundant.”

“I don’t get how your mind works,” Big Lou said to me.

“Few do,” I said. “But I have to admit Dino sounds good singing it.”

“I loved the old Martin and Lewis movies,” he said.

Little John walked over and seismic activity registered for the North End. He had on a button-down black shirt with a black leather tie. They matched his black slacks and a black leather jacket. He probably couldn’t see his own feet, but I could confirm he was also wearing black shoes.

“Little John,” I said with a nod of my head.

“How ya doin’, Drew?” he replied in his baritone voice. His bald head reflected the light from the ceiling.

“Rosie wants to know if she should start the pasta,” Little John said to Big Lou.

Big Lou glanced at his Rolex. “Yeah, tell her to go ahead and start the pasta.”

Little John nodded and headed back toward the kitchen.

“You don’t have him watching the door?” I said.

“I feel safe with you here.”

“What makes you think I’d protect you?”

“It’s in our common interest,” he said. “I am a useful source of information to aid in your investigative services.”

“And in the case I am working on now, Eddie Garavito has provided a useful source of information.”

“Must be some damn good information. Especially seein’ how he was just lookin’ to bump you off.”

“Does the name Mercado mean anything to you?” I asked.

Big Lou’s small eyes grew large. Like the pizza pies, redundant as they are, Dean Martin sings about. “Been a while since I heard that name.” He let out a low whistle. “He’s really bad news, Drew.”

“That’s the understatement of the year,” I said.

Big Lou leaned forward and rested his arms on the white and red checkered tablecloth. “You think Garavito is a bad man.” He shook his head. “Nothing compared to Mercado.”

I had polished off the tiramisu and sat back in the booth. “What can you tell me?”

“As you are aware, Garavito is one of the most dangerous guys in Boston. A ruthless killer when he needs to be. But the violence is measured. Eye for an Eye.”

I crossed my arms. “And Mercado?”

“Bat shit crazy,” Big Lou said. “He was abused as a kid. It scrambled his brains or somethin’. Fell in with a gang. Became their enforcer. He developed a taste for killing the members of rival gangs.” Big Lou sat back and spread his arms apart. “Pretty soon not even his own gang could control him.”

“What happened after that?” I said.

Big Lou shrugged. “Nobody really knows. Lots of rumors, but few facts. All I really know is that he left Boston over a decade ago. He hasn’t been seen from around here since.”

“Until now,” I said. “Garavito says Mercado was seen in town recently. The timeline and MO match the killings in my case.”

Big Lou let out a deep sigh and shook his head slowly. “Drew, you don’t want to go up against this guy.”

“You are warning about that too much lately.”

“I meant it with Garavito. Fortunately for you he’s decided Mercado is the real threat. But whether you got Garavito on your side with this or not, Mercado is a very dangerous man. Violent and crazy are a bad combination.”

“Downright lethal,” I said.

A song in Italian was now playing. I only knew a few words, but I liked the tune. It had that old-world feel of family, friends, and good wine.

“Do you know who might know more about him” I asked. “Maybe where I can find him?”

Big Lou shook his head. “No. I hadn’t even heard about him being back in Boston until you told me just now.” He paused a beat. “And even if I did, I’m not sure I would tell you.”

“See, despite your resistance, I’m growing on you. Don’t worry, it happens to the best of them.”

Big Lou ignored my comment. He hopped out of the booth and looked at me. “Let Garavito take care of Mercado.”

“I can’t do that,” I said.

“Because Garavito will kill him?”

I nodded.

“You and your ethics,” he said. “It just might get you killed.”

“I want to see him go away for the rest of his natural life. I want him to spend every day thinking about why he’s locked away. I want him to know who put him there.”

“I don’t know if Mercado thinks like that. Like I said, he’s crazy.”

“All the same,” I said. “I can’t let Garavito go around killing people.”

“You may not get a say in that.”

“He and I have an agreement.”

“If you say so,” Big Lou said.

“Too much heat for him,” I said. “Staties and the Feds are involved.”

“Be careful, Drew,” he said. “And the tiramisu is on the house.”

“Thanks,” I said.

Big Lou nodded and began greeting the lunch crowd. I watched him work the room for a few minutes. He offered lots of smiles and back slaps. He was a little guy with a big personality.

I had every reason to believe Big Lou was right about Mercado. But I never quit a case. I certainly wasn’t stepping aside to allow Boston’s criminal underworld solve it for me. One way or another, I knew the only direction this was heading was toward a confrontation with Mercado.

I’d be ready. I hoped that would be enough.

CHAPTER 29

Taking stock of the case led to one reasonable conclusion—Mercado was a hired killer. Grant Worthington made the most sense for putting out the contracts for the murders of Ashley Holland and Hannah Parks. Nonetheless, I lacked evidence. I didn't even have a concrete motive.

All I really had was Grant Worthington as the common denominator. Not enough. At least not yet.

While it was unlikely someone from the acting class Ashley and Hannah had taken were responsible for hiring Mercado, it was currently the only lead I had left to explore. So exploring I went. More a process of elimination rather than expecting to find the proverbial smoking gun. But many investigations operate this way. I eliminate what I can to lessen what I need to look at.

The acting studio was located on the edge of Boston's Theater District. It was a small, one-room studio with a slightly elevated stage. Folding chairs were set up in front of the stage. A teacher and students watched as two students acted out a scene from *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

I was no theater critic, but I hoped this was the introductory class. I had seen better performances in elementary school productions. It was painful to watch.

"End scene," the male student on stage said.

The audience of fellow students were silent. Maybe it was customary they don't applaud in class to avoid awkward moments after a train wreck of a performance. Or maybe the performance really was as bad as I thought it had been.

The teacher gave her constructive criticism of the performance. Not enough emotion. She didn't believe they were the characters they portrayed. The dialogue fell flat. But an excellent first effort.

Whew, I thought. The silver lining is they are beginners. Nowhere to go but up. Unless they don't go anywhere. Which, I had to think, was a possibility. Acting isn't for everyone.

"Let's take a fifteen minute break," the teacher said. "Marty and Jan, you are up when we return."

The students, about twenty in all, headed toward a table with bottled water and snacks. They were talking amongst themselves. The teacher turned toward me.

She was average height and weight. I guessed she was in her sixties, but she presented herself as more youthful. She had mostly gray hair that had once been light brown. Her dark brown eyes were soft and inquisitive.

“May I help you?” she asked. Her voice projected the confidence of a classically trained actor. She wore beige slacks and a Phantom of the Opera t-shirt.

“Drew Patrick. I’m a private investigator.” I handed her my card. She took the card and inspected it. I’m sure was impressed with the fine quality.

“Elizabeth Franklin,” she said. “You can call me Liz.”

“Okay. Nice to meet you, Liz.”

“Are you looking to add to your repertoire of characters you need to play?” Liz said.

“I don’t play any characters,” I said. I held my arms out wide. “What you see is what you get.” I paused a moment. “Kinda like Homer Simpson.”

Liz didn’t get my humor. She obviously wasn’t a comedic actress.

“If you aren’t here for acting lessons, then it is safe to assume you are investigating a case?”

“I was hired by Ashley Holland’s parents.”

Liz let out an audible sigh. “Such a tragedy. For both Ashley and Hannah. Did you know Hannah Parks was also one of my students? They were in the same class.” She paused a moment as she looked at me. “You must know that. Why else would you be here?”

“Yes. I’m looking into any connections Ashley and Hannah shared. One of them was your acting class.”

Liz nodded. “I understand they worked at the same company. They signed up for the class together.”

“Yes,” I said. “Work is another connection.”

Liz opened a bottled water and took a sip. “Would you like water?” she asked.

“No. Thank you.”

She took another sip of water. Then she said, “I don’t know if I can be of any help. But please feel free to ask me any questions you deem relevant.”

I wanted to ask her if she thought the two actors who did the scene from *A Streetcar Named Desire* had any talent, but I’m sure she meant relevant to my investigation, not her class. Maybe another time.

“How did Ashley and Hannah get along with others in the class?”

“They seemed well liked. Both were supportive of the others.”

“Do you recall either of them mentioning any problems they were having?”

Liz thought about my question. “No,” she said after a moment. “They seemed easy going, yet focused on the class. I can’t say either stood out in any negative way.”

“Any reason you can think of why anyone associated with their class would want to harm them?”

Liz shook her head. “I don’t know why anyone would want to hurt them,” she said. “It makes no sense.”

I agreed with Liz. It made no sense. Except I needed to find a reason someone hired Mercado to kill them.

“Did either Ashley or Hannah ever mention the possibility of an acting career in Hollywood?”

Liz considered the question. Then she said, “Mr. Patrick, they were nice girls. Decent enough actors for, say, community theater. But no one in Hollywood would have seriously considered either of them for any acting role.”

“There wasn’t a greater talent waiting to be unleashed?” I said.

Liz smiled as she shook her head. “No. I’m sorry to say they reached the height of their talent.”

“Did either of them ever mention Grant Worthington?”

Liz looked at me like I had sprouted a second head. “The movie producer?”

“That would be the one,” I said.

“I don’t recall,” she said. “Why would they?”

“They had met Mr. Worthington through their work.”

“And you’re wondering if that gave them reason to believe they could be discovered?” she said.

“Something like that.”

“You can’t possibly be suggesting Grant Worthington let them believe they had a chance? Are you?”

“It is a distinct possibility,” I said.

“Well, they certainly were beautiful young women,” Liz said. She paused a beat and then looked directly into my eyes. “Producers have been known to seduce young women with promises of fame and fortune.”

“That has been known to happen,” I agreed.

“Makes me sick,” she said.

“Yep,” I said.

“Excuse me a second,” she said. Liz turned toward her students. “Five more minutes. Marty and Jan, start prepping yourselves for your scene.” She turned back toward me.

“I appreciate your time,” I said. “If you think of anything, please don’t hesitate to call.”

“I’m sorry I couldn’t be of any help,” Liz said.

“You have been very helpful,” I said. “Anytime I can cross something off my list, it’s progress.”

Liz smiled at me. She had a comforting smile to go along with her soft eyes. There was a gentleness to her. As I had witnessed, it softened the blow when delivering acting critiques to her students.

“Thank you, again,” I said. “If I ever take up doing characters, I’ll look up one of your classes.”

“I think authenticity works for you,” she said. “Good luck with your case. I hope you find the person responsible.” Liz turned toward her students and clapped her hands. “Okay,” she said to them, “It’s showtime. Marty and Jan, give me your best.”

Marty and Jan walked onto the stage. Liz and the rest of her students sat in the folding chairs. I left before Marty and Jan began their scene. I didn’t think I could take a repeat of the performance I walked in on.

While I couldn’t scrub the performance from my mind, I was confident in eliminating the acting studio as a source for the person who hired Mercado to kill Ashley and Hannah. Grant Worthington still made the most sense. However, there was still a lot I didn’t know.

Nothing new in that department. It comes with the territory. So I would continue to do what I do. Eventually things would break my way.

CHAPTER 30

Mercado

It was a lot warmer in LA than Boston. A comfortable seventy-three degrees with plenty of sunshine. Mercado was sitting in traffic on the 405. He had the top down on the Ford Mustang convertible rented from Hertz. It was cherry red with a V8 engine under the hood.

Mercado wore Ray-Ban sunglasses and a Dodgers cap. He looked the part of an Angeleno. He was in the City of Angels, but Mercado knew he was no angel. If there was a Satan, Mercado had a pact with him.

Mercado hadn't put the Mustang's engine through its paces. He looked forward to opening it up on some open road later. For now, he wasn't going anywhere fast. But he factored LA traffic into his schedule.

The yacht left the dock at eight o'clock for the cocktail cruise. Mercado would be on time. He didn't care much for boats, but he had work to do. Victoria Clark would be on board. She was next on the list.

The yacht belonged to Hollywood producer Grant Worthington. He was hosting a bunch of celebrities and movie backers looking to invest in upcoming film projects. Mercado's client got him the ticket for the event. Easy, considering she was married to the guy.

Evelyn Worthington had no idea Mercado knew her real identity. She made up some story about knowing someone at Grant Worthington's movie studio who could arrange for the ticket. Just like in Boston, he played along.

But how stupid did she think he was? Did she believe he couldn't connect the dots? Not that he hadn't seen it before. Passion blinded Evelyn Worthington.

She passionately loved her husband. She fervently hated the young women who slept with her husband. It didn't matter that her husband used his position of power to get them to go to bed with him. She made them pay, not her husband.

Frankly, Mercado didn't care. She paid him to do the jobs, so he did them. It's what he did—kill people for money. In the end, he figured that's all he ever would be—a killer.

He eventually made it off the 405 and pulled the Mustang into the parking lot of a fleabag motel next to a busy gas station and truck stop near the interstate. Lots of people coming and going. No one paying much attention to anyone else.

Mercado parked the car and went to the front desk. A pimple-faced college kid looked up from a textbook he was reading.

“Sup?” the kid said.

“I need a room,” Mercado said.

“How many nights?”

“Just tonight.”

The kid gave Mercado the nightly rate. Mercado paid, collected his room key, and went outside. Diesel exhaust was thick in the air. Mercado walked to the end of the motel and found his room. He went in and closed the door behind him.

The room was furnished with cheap furniture that had seen a lot of use. The pea green carpet was worn and dingy. The comforter on the bed was stained. With what, Mercado did not care to know. He was certain the mattress would be lumpy.

Mercado looked at the takeout menus on the small table and ordered a burger and fries from a local greasy spoon. The menu said they delivered with Uber Eats. He pulled a chair in front of the television and turned on the Lakers game. They'd be better with Lebron James.

After he ate, Mercado took a lukewarm shower surrounded by moldy tiles. He dried off with the threadbare towel and dressed in the rented tuxedo.

Mercado drove to the Los Angeles Yacht Club and presented his ticket to board Worthington's yacht. It was 170 feet long, three levels tall, and had large deck spaces to accommodate the exclusive list of seventy-five guests—and Mercado. The living and dining areas were elegant with plush burgundy carpets, beige leather seating, and high-gloss wall panels. It was a real contrast to the crap motel where Mercado was staying.

He practiced his story in his head. Mercado knew he looked like a bruiser, and he was. But that factored into the story he would tell. These Hollywood types would eat it up. They loved a good story. And he only had to play the game long enough to get Victoria Clark alone.

The yacht began cruising away from the club towards the open waters of the Pacific. It was a warm evening with almost no breeze. A waitress

came around with flutes of champagne on a silver tray. Mercado took one.

A waiter circled around with a tray of mini crab cakes. Mercado took three. He didn't know the etiquette for hors d'oeuvres, and didn't care. The waiter gave no indication one way or the other as he moved on to the next guest.

Mercado looked around for Victoria Clark. He didn't see her, so he climbed the stairs to the deck on the second level. He spotted several A-list celebrities talking with a group of people he didn't recognize. They looked completely at ease in the environment. He figured they were probably deep pocket investors looking to invest in the next box office blockbuster.

He finished his drink and deposited the glass on a tray for empties. As a waiter came around with filled glasses, Mercado took one. He then scarfed down two more mini crab cakes. He had eaten the burger and fries an hour earlier, and he was a big guy.

Still not seeing Victoria Clark, Mercado climbed the stairs to the third and top level. He spotted her standing with a small group in the center of the deck. She was tall and slender, like the other two. She was beautiful, like the other two. While she didn't know it yet, Victoria would soon have one more thing in common with the other two.

Mercado made his way across the deck toward the group. A man looked over as he approached. It would have been hard not to notice a man of Mercado's size.

"Grant Worthington," the man said as he extended his right hand.

"Dwayne Willis," Mercado said, shaking Grant Worthington's hand.

"Those are some hands you have there," Worthington said.

"I played linebacker in the Canadian Football League," Mercado said. He figured no one would know about Canadians football players in LA.

"Well," Worthington said, "I can certainly see you on a football field."

Mercado said, "Now that my football career is over, I'm looking to invest in Hollywood."

"You have come to the right place," Worthington said. "We will unveil several opportunities after dinner this evening."

"I'm looking forward to it," Mercado said.

"What was it like playing professional football?" Victoria said.

"Where are my manners," Grant said. "This is Victoria Clark. She is soon-to-be a rising young movie star. And I know how to pick them."

Mercado shook hands with Victoria. She had delicate hands with long, manicured fingers. She wore an expensive evening gown that was probably a rental. Too bad the dress shop wouldn't be getting it back.

"It was hard work, but I enjoyed it," Mercado said. "I hoped to make it to the NFL, but I never realized that dream."

"The NFL's loss," Victoria said. Was she flirting with him?

"Yes, well, I really should mingle," Worthington said. He gave Victoria a kiss on the cheek. Mercado figured he was making it clear she was with him. "I will see you later, my love." He looked at Mercado and said, "Nice to meet you, Mr. Willis."

Mercado nodded. Worthington stepped away. The others followed. Mercado was alone with Victoria. And she seemed into him. Perfect, he thought.

"Don't mind him," she said. "We have an understanding."

"Okay," Mercado said.

A waitress came by with mini quiches. "No, thank you," Victoria said. Mercado took one. He wasn't exactly sure why he didn't want to seem like a pig in front of Victoria. It's not like she would even be alive by the end of the night.

"So tell me more about playing football."

"Not much to tell. Lifted a lot of weights. Practiced tackling guys. Played in the games."

"I think you're just being modest." Victoria rested her hand on Mercado's arm for a few seconds. She smiled at him. Mercado didn't like the fact she had a nice smile. It made the job a little harder. But he had a job to do. It's what he did. It's who he was.

"I tried out to be a cheerleader with the New England Patriots," Victoria said. "In fact, I think I have a picture of me in the outfit." She dug through her purse.

"Darn," she said with a frown. "I left my cell phone at home." She looked up at Mercado. "I'm always leaving my phone somewhere."

"Maybe I can see the picture another time," Mercado said.

"I like that idea," Victoria said.

"Everyone," Grant Worthington called out, "please join us on the main deck for dinner."

"Sit near me," Victoria said. "It will give me someone to talk to while Grant schmoozes."

Mercado followed Victoria down to the main deck. They talked casually over dinner. He made up stories about games he never played in. He told her about cities in Canada he had never visited. Others would join in for parts of their conversation. And just like he thought, they ate it up. Every single word.

They talked. Victoria drank and flirted. At the end of the meal, Victoria was buzzed. Mercado felt it had all played out perfectly.

“Time to shake the money tree,” Worthington whispered to Victoria. He got up and began his presentation. Everyone was facing Grant as he spoke. The lights were dimmed so he could show the presentation video.

After the presentation, a band played on the main deck and people danced.

“Let's go somewhere else,” Victoria said to Mercado. Everyone else was dancing and talking. Consumed by their own importance. No one saw them leave. No one would notice they were gone. Perfect, Mercado thought.

He guided her up to the top level. They were alone. A gentle breeze blew across the deck off the Pacific. The sky and water were dark. The yacht cruised in open and empty waters.

The two walked to the railing on the starboard side of the yacht. Victoria looked over the edge toward the ocean three levels below. It was quite a long way down.

Victoria had been drinking. It would be another tragic accident. Mercado didn't want to miss the opportunity.

He quickly hit Victoria over the head and knocked her unconscious. It would be over soon and she wouldn't feel a thing. He propped her up as he removed her shoes and left one by the railing on its side. He tossed the other overboard.

Mercado lifted Victoria off the deck and threw her over the railing. He watched as she hit the water. If she hadn't already been unconscious, the force of hitting the water from that height would have knocked her out.

Mercado turned and walked away. He went back down to the main deck and mingled. He made sure to talk to several people as if he hadn't a care in the world.

The yacht continued cruising forward. Victoria Clark's body left behind in the waters of the Pacific.

When Grant finally realized Victoria was missing, he had the entire yacht searched. A crew member found her shoe by the railing on the upper

deck. Grant ordered they turn around and search the waters.

They called the Coast Guard and an official search began. It was no use. She had been overboard too long. Her body could not be located. Victoria Clark was gone.

CHAPTER 31

Drew Patrick

Robert Burke sat in my office drinking a cup of freshly brewed coffee. He had removed his tie and his shirt sleeves were rolled up. It had been a long day and he was in Cambridge to take his wife to dinner at Border Cafe. He was waiting for her to get off work at the Harvard School of Education.

"Maybe next time I can offer you a cup from a French coffee press," I said.

He waved his hand dismissively. "Nothing wrong with a plain old cup of Joe," he said. Detective Captain Robert Burke was a meat and potatoes and plain black coffee kind of guy.

"Jessica wasn't happy about you going off with Eddie Garavito," Burke said.

"It's not like I had planned it that way," I said.

"But you learned something?" Burke said.

I nodded. "Garavito said crime boss land is all abuzz that a hit man named Mercado was in town shortly after Ashley Holland was killed and the same day when Hannah Parks was killed."

"You believe him?" Burke said.

"No reason not to," I said. "He decided not to kill me in the interest of helping find Mercado."

"Because having dead escorts hurts his bottom line?"

"That and he has a reputation to uphold in the criminal underworld," I said.

Burke leaned forward in the client chair. He said, "You could be walking a very thin line between lawful justice and being an accessory should Garavito decide to seek revenge."

"You know I would never willingly be a party to that," I said.

Burke sat back in the chair. "Doesn't matter what I know," he said. "It's how it looks to the DA's office."

"I think I convinced Garavito that a revenge killing would bring too much heat down on him."

Burke nodded. "If you're satisfied Garavito will hold off and let the justice system handle Mercado's fate, I'll back you up."

"I'm as satisfied as I can be," I said. "As much as I need to be to try and find Mercado."

Burke took a sip of his coffee. He was drinking from a mug in my Red Sox collection. The 2007 World Series Champions mug. Alex Cora played on that squad. Now he was the team's skipper. A World Series victory in his first season as manager.

"What is the official word on the case?" I said.

Burke shrugged and held his hands apart. "Not much solid evidence. We still like Grant Worthington. He makes the most sense. But he has solid alibis for both murders. There is nothing to suggest he hired a contract killer."

"Mercado is key," I said. "We need him to give us the name of who hired him."

"If he even knows. A guy like Grant Worthington wouldn't just walk up to a guy like Mercado."

"I think Mercado would want to know who he is dealing with. In case things went south, he'd want some sort of bargaining chip. I'd bet you a dozen jelly donuts he found out."

Dash looked up from his spot on the couch when he heard the word donut. He sniffed the air to check. He looked disappointed at not smelling anything other than office coffee. He sighed and put his head back down.

"Is that a veiled reference to the stereotype of cops liking donuts?" Burke said.

"Not so veiled," I said. "And it's not a stereotype if it's true."

Burke nodded. "I do like jelly donuts."

"I've seen enough of the stains on your shirts to know," I said.

Burke finished his coffee and moved aside my David Ortiz bobblehead to make room for the mug on the corner of my desk.

"Hey," I said. "I have those arranged just so."

"Sorry," Burke said. He slid the bobble-head of Big Papi back in place. He rested the empty mug on his right leg.

"You ever hear back from the Clark girl?" Burke said.

I shook my head and said, "No. All my calls have gone to voicemail."

"Nothing from the cops out in LA either," Burke said. "They went by her place and a neighbor said she was away for a few days."

“You think with Grant Worthington?” I said.

“Could be,” Burke said. “His office said he was on his yacht out to Catalina Island. Would be back tonight to pick up guests for a dinner cruise.”

“I’ll keep trying her number,” I said.

Burke’s cell phone rang. “Just a second,” he said as he dug his phone out of his suit jacket pocket. “Burke.” He listened for several beats. “Alright,” he said. He listened a little longer and then said, “Thanks.” He ended the call and looked at me.

“Victoria Clark’s body was just discovered washed up on shore.”

“Shit,” I said.

“She was on Worthington’s yacht for the dinner party. Apparently, she had too much to drink and fell overboard. By the time they realized she was missing, it was too late to locate the body in the water.”

“What are the police in California saying?”

“Not much,” Burke said. “They just found the body. The passengers aboard the yacht had already been questioned after they reported her missing and presumed to have gone overboard.”

“And no one reported seeing anything?” I said.

“Nothing.”

“We need to find out if any of the passengers match the description Garavito provided of Mercado?” I said.

“I’ll make some calls,” Burke said.

“I don’t like it,” I said.

“Neither do I,” Burke said. “But why would Mercado toss her off Worthington’s yacht? Assuming it was Mercado.”

“Would you want to bet against it being Mercado?” I said.

“No,” Burke said. “I’m pretty certain that would be a losing bet.”

“It would pose a higher risk for Worthington,” I said. “While it doesn’t make sense he would want any attention related to her death, he could be getting bolder. I saw cases with the FBI where that happened.”

Burke nodded. He said, “Yeah, we’ve seen it too. Criminals start getting away with stuff and push the limit. Usually when they start getting sloppy, and that’s when we get them.”

“He’s still the only connection we have to all three women,” I said. “I checked the acting class out. There is nothing there.”

“I’m not surprised,” Burke said, “but at least we can rule it out.”

“Although we should leave open the possibility it's not Grant Worthington,” I said.

“Something is always possible. Until it's not.”

“Are you getting philosophical on me?” I said.

Burke shook his head and waved his hand dismissively. “I'm more educated in the school of hard knocks,” he said.

“This is a tough one,” Burke said scratching his five o'clock shadow. “Worthington has rock solid alibis for the first two murders. And even though Victoria Clark was last seen alive on his yacht, he was surrounded by a hundred guests the entire evening.”

I said, “It all comes back to finding Mercado.”

“Good thing we have an ace private investigator on the case,” he said.

“Someone has to solve your cases for you.”

Burke grunted as he got up from my client chair. “Thanks for the coffee,” he said. He placed the mug on the counter next to my coffee maker. “Let's talk in the morning. See where things are then.”

I stood and saluted. Burke smirked and shook his head. He grabbed his suit jacket off the back of the client chair and left.

CHAPTER 32

Jeffrey Holland asked to meet at a diner in Newton. We sat at the counter on round stools that rotated 360 degrees. Black and white photographs of the diner throughout the years decorated the walls. An old-fashioned jukebox played oldies from the 1950s and 1960s. *Jailhouse Rock* by Elvis ended and *Wake Up Little Susie* by The Everly Brothers started.

The waitress placed our milkshakes, served in old glass milk bottles, and two glasses of water on the counter in front of us. A Chocolate milkshake for me, and vanilla for Jeffrey.

"You gentleman know what you'd like?" the waitress asked. She had on a dress like the waitresses on the sitcom *Alice* wore. I ordered a cheeseburger and fries. Jeffrey ordered a tuna melt and potato chips.

"I wanted to tell you how much we appreciate you continuing with the case," Jeffrey said. He stared blankly into his milkshake and unconsciously twirled his straw.

"We're making progress," I said. "I believe we have identified the man responsible, and we're looking for him."

Jeffrey Holland wiped away a tear that streaked down his cheek.

"I understand this is hard," I said. "But when we catch this guy, we should get the answers we're looking for. Who hired him, and why."

Jeffrey shook his head. "This is all so surreal," he said. "I feel like I'm in a nightmare I can't wake up from." He paused a bet and then turned toward me. "What can you tell me about the man you are looking for?"

Everyone was different in a tragic situation such as the one the Hollands were dealing with. Some wanted few details. Others wanted as much information as they could gather. It was all how a person processed the evidence and handled grief.

Jeffrey wanted to know more than his wife, but only enough facts to convince him there was progress. Eventually, enough to provide closure.

"His name is Mercado," I said. "He's a contract killer. Other than that, and a basic description, we know little else."

"The State Police detectives don't have any more facts?"

"Mercado isn't in any crime database," I said. "But we'll keep digging. I'll keep digging."

Jeffrey Holland sat silent for a moment. He looked off into space, but I could see the pain and confusion in his eyes.

“Someone paid him to...” he choked on his words. “Someone hired this Mercado to kill Ashley? And the other girl, Hannah?”

“Yes,” I said. “And now we believe a third young woman in California. She had been a former escort at Premier.”

“Why?” He asked in disbelief rather than for an answer from me.

I had no answer. Even if we discovered the motive, I still don't think I could ever answer the question why someone would hire Mercado to kill Ashley, Hannah, and Victoria. Not in any meaningful way. How could you make sense of it?

I had long ago concluded that you can't.

Jeffrey turned back toward the counter. I allowed him as much time as he needed. He was still trying to process shock, grief, and to figure out how to move forward after losing his daughter. He would never forget her or stop missing her. And it would take time to figure out how to take the next step in life. First he needed a sense of closure.

“When Ashley was a little girl,” he began, “I would take her to the park. She loved to climb the monkey bars and swing on the swing set. It was our daddy and daughter time. As she got older, she wanted to spend less time with me. The mall, her friends, and, eventually, boys, were more interesting.”

“A normal part of growing up,” I said.

“But even then, we still talked. She didn't want to be seen in public with her old man, but we still had a good relationship.” Jeffrey paused a beat. “We always had a good relationship. Right to the end.”

He used his napkin to wipe tears from his eyes. He took a sip of water. His milkshake was essentially untouched.

Jeffrey continued, “Ashley wanted to be an actress. She took classes at a small acting studio near the Theater District in Boston. She took the position at Premier just to pay the bills while she looked for acting jobs. The money was so good, she stopped auditioning.”

“Did she give up the dream of acting?” I said.

“Not really,” he said. “I think she simply lost the desire to go on all those auditions, only to be rejected.”

“I could see losing motivation when you have a healthy paycheck.”

“Yes,” he said. “Although a month or so before her death she expressed a renewed interest in acting.”

“Did she ever mention the name Grant Worthington to you?” I said.

Jeffrey thought for a moment. "The movie producer?"

I nodded.

"No. I don't recall her mentioning him. Why?"

"He was the client Ashley was sleeping with," I said.

The waitress came with our food.

"Can I get you anything else?" she said.

"I'm good," I said.

"Same here," Jeffrey said.

"Let me know if you do." She moved to the other end of the counter to a couple who had just walked in and sat down.

"Do you think he made her promises in exchange for..." he couldn't complete the sentence. I didn't blame him.

"Yes," I said. "It seems he made promises of movie careers to Hannah Parks and Victoria Clark too."

"Sick son of a bitch," Jeffrey said.

I definitely agreed.

"Does that have anything to do with their deaths?" Jeffrey said. "Is he responsible for Ashley and the others being killed?"

I blew out air. "That's tough to answer," I said. "He's the only connection we can establish. At the same time he has solid alibis."

"But you're looking into it?"

"The police are studying him closely. The FBI is also getting involved as each death took place in a different state. But we need more."

"Please tell me you will find it," he said.

I put my hand on his shoulder. "I will do my best. And I don't give up."

Jeffrey nodded. "Please," he said. "Eat before your burger gets cold."

We sat in silence for a time as we ate. Jeffrey made an effort but mostly picked at his tuna melt. I ate, but slower than usual. And I didn't have the same joy in a good diner burger as I ordinarily would.

"How is Mrs. Holland doing?" I said after a while.

"Cynthia is taking this all very hard," he said. "She and Ashley had a strained relationship the past few years. So there is a measure of guilt and anger at unresolved tensions between them."

"I'm sure Ashley knew your wife loved her."

"Yes," he said. "I suppose she did. I reminded her whenever she and her mother argued. Part of it is that they were so alike." Jeffrey shook his head. "They didn't even see it."

“There are some excellent grief counselors,” I said. “I can give you some names.”

“A psychologist friend of ours has recommended someone. But thank you.”

The waitress dropped off the check. I knew the diner had great apple pie, but it didn't seem like an occasion to order it so I paid and left a tip.

I told Jeffrey I would let him know how the case progressed. He thanked me and went on his way. His shoulders slumped and his head was down, diminishing his tall stature. I couldn't blame him for feeling defeated. He had lost his daughter and was struggling. I felt for him. And for Cynthia.

What I held on to is we were late in the game. We may have been playing from behind and facing a difficult lineup, but I sensed we would rally. Our team was too good not to end up with the win.

But a victory could never be complete. Nothing would bring Ashley, Hannah, and Victoria back. Nonetheless, Mercado could not hide forever. When he reared his murderous head, I'd be there to take him down. And he would lead us to the person ultimately responsible for setting everything in motion.

CHAPTER 33

“Nice digs,” I said to Special Agent Mark Sumner as he showed me around the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Boston Division headquarters in Chelsea. The eight story building offered state of the art crime fighting technology. When I had been with the Bureau's Boston Division, we were headquartered at 1 Center Plaza near Boston's Government Center.

“How is it you haven't been here before now?” Mark said. “We've been in this building two years.”

“I've had places to go and people to see,” I said.

“The life of a private investigator,” he said. “The only thing missing is the deerstalker hat and pipe.”

“I actually have them,” I said. “Jessica brought them back as souvenirs from London.”

Mark showed me into his office. It was bright and modern the way newer offices tend to be. He sat behind his desk. I took the seat opposite him.

“How is Jessica?” he said.

“Great as always,” I said.

He shook his head and smiled. “I don't know why she stays with you.”

“I could give you a list,” I said, “but I don't like to brag.”

“Same old Drew,” he said. “Not nearly as much fun around here without you.”

“You probably don't solve nearly as many cases either,” I said leaning back in the chair.

“Actually, I think our success has gone up,” Mark said as he placed his hands behind his head and tilted back. His chair was ergonomic and whisper quiet when it moved. It didn't creak like most chairs in government offices. He continued, “Seriously, though, it's great to see you. It has been way too long.”

“I agree,” I said. “We'll have to catch a Red Sox game next season.”

Mark tipped forward and pointed his right finger at me. “You're on,” he said. “Green Monster seats.”

I pointed back at Mark. “I like the way you think.”

We had always gotten along well. He started as an agent a few years after me. Mark and I had worked several cases together before I left the FBI.

He was three or four years younger than me in his late thirties. Mark was average height and in excellent shape. His face was clean shaven and not a strand of his of close-cropped hair was out of place. I couldn't find a wrinkle on either his dark gray suit or crisp white shirt. An off the rack dark blue tie was neatly in place.

A junior agent rapped on Mark's open office door. Mark and I looked over. "I located those files you requested," he said.

"Thanks," Mark said. He leaned forward in his chair. Whisper quiet. "Sandy, this is Drew Patrick. Back in the day, he was a special agent in the office."

Sandy stepped in and we shook hands. "Nice to meet you," he said.

"Likewise," I said.

Mark said, "Sandy here is a new agent fresh out of Quantico. Naturally, they assigned him to the best."

"And he wasn't available, so they assigned him to you," I said.

Sandy tried not to laugh, but a small chuckle escaped. Mark looked at him. "Don't you have another case to get started on?"

"Right," Sandy said. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Patrick."

I nodded. Sandy turned on his heels and left Mark's office.

"He's a good kid," Mark said as he stared at his computer screen and typed on his keyboard. "He'll make a good agent."

"Despite being assigned to you?" I said.

"You do want my help, correct?"

Mark and I smiled at each other. I don't know how we let two years go by without getting together. We'd need to get together sooner than next baseball season.

"Here we go," Mark said. "The LA Division Headquarters questioned Grant Worthington about the deaths of Ashley Holland, Hannah Parks, and Victoria Clark. He had no information to share. Eventually he admitted to having affairs with all three of them, but denied having anything to do with their deaths. There were no cracks in his alibis, so they had nothing to hold him on."

"How did the agents in the room read him?" I said.

"That he's a creep and probably guilty of major sexual harassment, but they lean toward believing him about the murders."

"Somebody hired Mercado for these killings," I said. "Grant Worthington is still the only plausible connection we have to all three

victims.”

“I agree he's the best suspect,” Mark said, “but we need evidence. And it needs to be solid. As you might imagine, he's pretty lawyered up. No offense to Jessica.”

“She's actually a PI now,” I said. “Works for Pinnacle.”

“Swanky,” Mark said. “And yet she still is with you. Go figure.”

I leaned forward. “No matter what angle I come at this from,” I said, “it always leads me back to Mercado. He's not only the killer, but the key to unlocking this whole case.”

“We have nothing on him in the system,” Mark said. “The guy's a ghost. We've never even had enough evidence to pursue a case. Just a rumor here and there. Whispers.”

I nodded. Then I stood and paced the floor of Mark's office as I thought. Then I said, “How do you hire a ghost?”

Mark leaned back in his chair and looked at his ceiling and thought a moment. I understood the move as I often do my best thinking staring at the ceiling in my office. After several more beats, Mark tipped forward and looked at me. I didn't hear a noise out of his chair that time either.

“Well,” he said, “I guess if you have enough money you can find a way to contact a guy like Mercado.”

“Enough money like Grant Worthington,” I said.

“Yeah,” Mark said. “Or somebody equally rich.”

“They'd also need to have the right type of criminal connections, or know someone who does.”

Mark spread his hands apart and said, “Again, if you've got enough money you can find a way to buy those type of connections.”

“And round and round we go,” I said.

CHAPTER 34

After I left my meeting with Mark Sumners, I headed back to my office. I spent an hour going over the case in my mind. Clearly it required something more than staring at my ceiling. I needed to clear my head and stretch my legs.

I swung by doggie daycare and picked up Dash for a walk. We were walking at a brisk pace along the Charles River next to Memorial Drive. Joggers, bikers, and rollerbladers passed us on the sunny and warmer fall day. Probably the last hint of warmth before winter.

Dash wanted to stop every ten feet to mark territory, but I kept him moving. He had already emptied his bladder and would only be leaving a drop here and there. The act of walking is what helped me think more clearly.

We approached John F. Kennedy Park to our left across Memorial Drive. Harvard students tossed footballs and frisbees. Across the Charles on our right was the Newell Boathouse. Crew shells had been packed away for the season.

Grant Worthington's connection to Ashley Holland, Hannah Parks, and Victoria Clark continued to bother me. But we had nothing concrete to go on other than his affairs with the three young women. Also troubling was knowing, without being able to prove it, that Mercado was the contract killer.

Dash and I continued along the path and stopped at the light on the corner of Memorial Drive and John F. Kennedy Street. We crossed Memorial with the walk signal and entered the park. We walked until we reached the fountain, drained and off for the winter season.

Dash stood next to me, keeping an eye out for squirrels, as I sat on the edge. I wondered if the squirrels were smarter because they were Harvard squirrels, but noticed one struggling to find his stash of nuts and concluded they were not.

Detective Captain Robert Burke called me. "A guy matching Mercado's description was a guest on Worthington's yacht," he said. "Gave the name Dwayne Willis. Said he had played in the Canadian Football League."

"Let me guess," I said, "no one by the name Dwayne Willis ever played in the CFL?"

"The PI wins a prize," he said.

"I hope it's better than your usual prizes."

"Not unless nothing is better than nothing," he said.

"I don't know if you heard," I said, "but the FBI has nothing on Grant Worthington. Questioned him, and had to cut him loose."

"I'm not surprised. Worthington is either extremely clever at covering his involvement, or he's telling the truth and didn't hire Mercado."

"I've been thinking," I said. "Maybe we have been looking at the wrong Worthington."

"You talking about his wife?"

"Why not?" I said.

"Isn't she a client at Pinnacle Detective Agency?"

"That is why I didn't even originally consider her. The fact she was one of their clients blinded me." I paused a beat. "But think about it. There's certainly motive. She knew about the affair with Ashley Holland. Pinnacle provided her evidence of the affair with Ashley for divorce proceedings."

"Okay, you could establish motive," Burke said.

"And means," I said. "Presumably the same fortune as Grant Worthington."

"So instead of filing for divorce, Mrs. Worthington exacts revenge by killing the women her husband is having affairs with?" Burke said.

"And she used Pinnacle to provide evidence on who he was having the affairs with," I said. "Who knows, maybe she never planned on divorcing her husband."

Burke whistled and said, "All an act to get the identities of the women to put hits out on? That's cold-hearted calculating."

"Obviously it's just a theory," I said, "but it makes as much sense as Grant Worthington hiring Mercado. Maybe even more."

"Hell hath no fury," Burke said.

"You said that. Not me. And I wouldn't repeat it front of Sanchez or Jessica."

"Yeah," Burke said, "they'd kick my ass."

"Without breaking a sweat," I said.

Burke was silent on the other end of the phone. After a moment he said, "She's been right under our noses the whole time. I think we all looked past her because she was a Pinnacle client."

"No red flags were raised about her," I said. "Everyone believed she wanted a divorce and half the fortune."

“That's all well and good,” Burke said, “but we still should have listed her as a suspect. A cheating spouse has been the motive for murder before.”

“You're right,” I said. “We missed it.”

We were quite a moment. Burke and I both feeling a heaviness at missing what we clearly should have seen.

“I'm not sure it would have changed any of the outcomes,” I said.

“You're probably right,” Burke said. “If it was Mrs. Worthington, she will have equally strong alibis. The evidence will be no easier to find.”

“We still need Mercado,” I said. “But if our current theory is correct, we should now have a way to draw him out.”

CHAPTER 35

Jessica looked at me from across the small conference table in her office. I had filled her in on my conversations with Mark Sumner and Robert Burke. She considered the most recent working theory and asked, "So what is your plan?"

"First, I'd like to establish whether Evelyn Worthington ever discussed filing for divorce with her attorney," I replied.

"No lawyer will discuss that with you," she said.

"Yeah, yeah," I said waving my hand, "attorney-client privilege."

Jessica sat up in her seat and said, "Drew, you can't just wave it away like it is nothing."

"I know it's a real thing," I retorted, "But in this situation, I don't care."

"It applies in every situation."

"That's the lawyer in you talking. Not the private investigator."

"It's the law," she said. "Even if I'm no longer practicing, we still have to follow it."

I stood and walked to her window. I looked at the building across Washington Street. Some financial building. They employed a lot of number crunchers and bean counters. I wondered if any of them wore bow ties like George Saunders.

"Your old law firm represents Evelyn Worthington, correct?"

"Yes," Jessica said. "They referred her to us when she inquired about hiring a private investigator."

"It would help to know how plausible the motive is," I stated, still gazing out the window. The sun was setting. I always had a hard time adjusting to the sun setting early in late fall and winter.

"She could have filed for divorce and still had those women killed," Jessica said.

"Yes," I answered, turning back to Jessica, "but if she never planned on filing for divorce it makes the motive to have them murdered all the stronger."

Jessica sighed. "I'll make a call," she said. "But it is going to cost you."

"It always does," I said. "But I'm happy to pay." I smiled at her. She couldn't help smiling back.

Jessica said, "Whether Evelyn Worthington planned to file for divorce or not, you still plan to go after Mercado?"

“Yes,” I said. “I’m convinced he killed those young women. He needs to pay the price. Mercado is also our best chance at confirming the name of the person who hired him.”

“And you have leverage if that person is Evelyn Worthington?”

“Yep,” I said.

I sat back down across from Jessica. She had on her standard work clothes. A white button-down blouse and business slacks. She looked stunning in any outfit. I’d seen her make sweatpants and a ratty old t-shirt look sexy.

“And this is where you ask for more help?”

“But you will be handsomely paid,” I said. I raised my eyebrows like Tom Selleck used to do in *Magnum, P.I.*

“Don’t you Magnum me,” she retorted.

“It is cute, isn’t it?” I said.

“It is,” she sighed.

“Okay,” I said, “I think if we, meaning Pinnacle, contact Evelyn Worthington and let her know we have evidence of Grant having another affair, we can draw Mercado out. It will also let us know that Evelyn is the one who put out the contracts to kill Ashley, Hannah, and Victoria.”

“I think that could work,” she said.

“Isabella Sanchez would act as our bait.”

“A dangerous assignment,” Jessica said. “How does she feel about it?”

“It’s part of the job,” I said. “Plus, she volunteered.”

“I can see her volunteering,” Jessica said.

“And, yes, it’s dangerous,” I said, “but she is going to have a Massachusetts State Police tactical team backing her up. Not to mention yours truly.”

“That alone should make her feel better,” Jessica said.

“Probably,” I said. “but she’ll never admit it.”

“I want to help,” Jessica said.

“I know you always have my back,” I said. “And as much as I know you can more than take care of yourself, I never like you being in harm’s way.”

“No more than I like you being in harm’s way.”

“Jess, this isn’t just me going up against somebody. We’ll have a State Police tactical team. You can sit this one out.”

“So could you.”

"It's my case," I said.

"I also feel a sense of obligation to this. Evelyn Worthington used Pinnacle to get to these girls."

"You didn't know that," I said. "It wasn't even your case. Besides, we all missed it."

"Still," she said. "Plus, this is going down just blocks from my condo."

"I'm aware of the location."

"All I am saying is that you can't expect me to sit it out knowing all the action is so close to home."

I let out a breath. "Fine, you win."

Jessica held my hand. "What about Eddie Garavito?"

"I'm not sure," I said.

"I know how conflicted you are about working with him."

I nodded. "In a perfect world," I said, "I wouldn't need to associate with notorious crime bosses."

"But we don't live in a perfect world," Jessica said. "Especially with many of the cases you take on."

"Sometimes there is no better option."

"And this is one of those times?"

"I didn't ask for Eddie's involvement," I said. "But he's involved. I don't have to like it, but it's the reality of the situation."

"Is there a part of you that fears losing some of yourself by associating with men like Eddie?"

"Maybe," I said. "But I need to play the hand I've been dealt. Eddie Garavito gave us the lead on Mercado."

"Because he wanted your help in finding Mercado so he could kill him."

I inhaled and then let out a breath. "As I said, it's not perfect. But I got Eddie to back off a revenge killing."

Jessica kissed me. "Don't worry," she said, "you are too good a man to ever be like Eddie Garavito."

CHAPTER 36

The investigation into Grant Worthington was a suspect in search of a motive. Evelyn Worthington had a clear motive hiding in plain sight. Listing Mrs. Worthington as a suspect was still as much a theory as Mr. Worthington, but it had some teeth.

I was sitting at my desk reading a series of articles about Evelyn Worthington. I came across a television interview she had given to an entertainment news show which proved particularly interesting.

“My mother died of alcohol abuse after her marriage to my father ended. He had been a serial cheater. His cheating destroyed our family. It ultimately destroyed my mother to the point where she drank herself to death. I’ve never forgotten that. I vowed to never to be a victim like she was.”

I hit pause on the video. “Hello,” I said out loud to myself. I hit play.

“I worked my way through college. That is where I met Grant. Even then he was extremely charming. We fell in love. When he inherited family money we decided to invest in a small movie studio. He has such knack for spotting talent. I have a business mind. Together we have built Worthington Entertainment Group from that one small movie studio into what it is today.”

“So you are equal partners in the business?” the television reporter asked.

“Yes. Equal in every way. Equal partners in business, and in life.”

“Well, you two have been a powerhouse couple in Hollywood for many years,” the television reporter noted.

Evelyn smiled into the camera. “Yes, I suppose we have been. And I will never let anything, or anyone, come between us. When I said ‘til death do us part, I meant it.”

I blew out a breath and sat back in my chair. I watched a few more interviews and read more articles. Evelyn often repeated the theme of her mother spiralling downward because of her father’s affairs. Then I came across a quote from Evelyn Worthington in a *Los Angeles Times* article that stood the hairs on the back of my neck on end.

“My father was a weak man. He couldn’t help himself around beautiful younger women. He couldn’t resist their charms. If only someone had

stopped them, maybe our lives would have been different. Better. I know my mother would not have drunk herself to death."

I went back to some other articles I had read. While I couldn't draw a straight line between them, Evelyn had made similar comments about Grant when asked about alleged affairs.

"Grant has a weakness around beautiful young women. He has had trouble, in the past, resisting their charms. But our love has endured through his indiscretions. I refuse to be a victim like my mother was. I won't be destroyed like she had been destroyed."

I looked at the byline and phoned *The Los Angeles Times*. I introduced myself and asked to speak with the reporter.

"Maureen Poole," came the voice of the reporter on the other end of the call. I explained who I was and the case I was working on.

"What was your impression of Evelyn Worthington?" I asked.

"I'm not a psychologist, but I've interviewed many people over the years," Maureen Poole said. "Like in your line of work, we get to know people. We can read them pretty well."

"Yes," I said. "And your impression of her?"

"She's a deeply scarred person. It's made her cool and calculating. At times her comments were almost chilling."

"How so?" I asked.

"The way she talked about her father and her husband. As if they were almost one and the same. She also insisted she would never be like her mother. I got the impression she would do just about anything to prevent her life from turning out like her mother's had." Maureen Poole paused a moment. "But, I guess, it's somewhat understandable. Their family was ruined. She watched her mother die a long death from alcohol abuse. Evelyn Worthington was witness to a slow-moving train wreck."

"Enough to make anyone vow to not let it happen to them," I said. "But how far do you think she would really go?"

There was silence on the phone for a minute as Maureen Poole considered my question. "For most people," she said, "I would say they'd fight hard to save their marriage. Go to couples counseling. Seek out help from their priest. Whatever. But Evelyn Worthington," Maureen Poole paused a beat, "she would never allow her marriage to end. She'd do whatever it takes to keep her life just as it is."

“This is a hard question to answer,” I said. “Maybe impossible. But you’ve interviewed the Worthingtons a number of times. You’ve delved deeply into their lives. So I’d like your honest opinion.”

“Go for it,” Maureen Poole said.

“Do you think Evelyn Worthington would kill to save her marriage?”

“I don’t think Evelyn Worthington could kill someone,” Maureen Poole said. “But I do think she has it in her to have someone killed. Like I said earlier, I find her to be very cold and calculating.”

“What about Grant Worthington? Does he have it in him?”

“Grant Worthington is a real creep,” Maureen Poole said. “If anyone is doing the seducing, it is him. He’s an ugly little shit, but his power and money attract wannabe actresses like a moth to a flame. And he uses that to get what he wants. It makes me sick. But is he capable of having someone killed? I don’t think so.”

“Does Evelyn Worthington have any connections to the criminal underworld?” I asked.

“Not that I know of. And if she did, I would probably know about it. But a woman with her money and power can buy any connections she wants when it suits her.”

I was glancing down at the notes I had taken while on the phone with Maureen Poole. Chilling.

“Mr. Patrick,” Maureen Poole said, “I am a good investigative reporter, but I’m not a professional profiler or anything like that.”

“I understand,” I said. “But like you said, in our professions we get pretty good at reading people. Figuring them out. Sometimes it’s the best we have in pushing an investigation forward.”

“And if we keep pushing,” Maureen Poole said, “we eventually get some real answers.”

“Exactly,” I said. “Thank you for your time. You’ve been a big help.”

“You’re welcome,” Maureen Poole said. “I almost didn’t want to talk to you when I heard you were from Boston.”

“The World Series still stinging for you?”

“What do you think?”

“I think I’m glad you looked past it and took my call,” I said.

After I hung up with Maureen Poole, Jessica called. “Hey, handsome,” Jessica said when I answered.

“I just had a very interesting conversation with a reporter at the LA Times.” I filled her in on the conversation.

“Well, then you can add this to your list,” she said. “Evelyn Worthington never discussed filing for divorce with her attorney.”

“I think it’s time to have Tyrell call Evelyn Worthington and set things in motion.”

CHAPTER 37

Mercado

It was hard for a man Mercado's size to stay out of sight. But he could when he needed to. He traveled back roads and stayed in out-of-the-way places where he could lay low.

Victoria Clark's drowning was all over the news. The media reported it as a tragic accident. She had been drinking heavily and fell overboard. An accidental drowning. But Mercado understood that was the story the cops fed them to spit out to the public.

He had received a call from a cousin in Boston. They ran in a gang together as teens. Mercado hadn't spoken to him in years, but recognized his gravelly voice right away. It was like sandpaper.

His cousin informed him that Eddie Garavito and some private investigator were on to him. Mercado wanted nothing to do with Garavito. It would be suicide to go up against him. Even for Mercado. But he wanted to know more about the PI.

"Give me the 4-1-1," Mercado said to his cousin, Ricky. He wanted all the information Ricky had.

"The guy's name is Drew Patrick," Ricky said. "Former FBI. Been a PI for several years."

"Is he a real threat?" Mercado asked. He shoved a wad of chewing tobacco into his cheek.

"Yeah," Ricky said. "He's pretty badass."

Ricky's voice grated on Mercado's ears. He remembered why he hadn't spoken to him in so long. But he wanted the details on Drew Patrick.

"What else can you tell me?" Mercado said.

"I ain't no frickin' encyclopedia. I've already told you too much. If Garavito finds out, he'll kill me. Literally, kill me."

"I'll kill you if you don't tell me what I want to know."

Ricky chuckled. "Funny, bro."

"Do you hear me laughing," Mercado snapped. "What else do you know?"

Mercado could hear Ricky swallow on the other end of the phone.

“Okay,” Ricky said, “but swear on your mother's grave you won't ever let anyone know I told you.”

Mercado spit the chewing tobacco on the ground. “Don't bring my mother into this,” he said. “I'll twist your head off.”

“Sorry. I didn't mean to—”

“Just tell me what you know,” Mercado said.

Ricky told Mercado that Drew Patrick was smart and tough. As big and strong as Mercado was, Patrick would be a challenge.

“What does he know about my recent jobs?” Mercado said.

“He knows you killed the girls in Maine and Quincy,” Ricky said. “I heard Eddie saying he also thinks you tossed that girl off the boat in LA.”

“Can he prove any of it?” Mercado said.

“I don't know.” He paused a beat. “Probably not.”

“Then why do I need to worry?”

“Because,” Ricky said. “I told you he is smart. And he's working with the cops and feds on this. Not to mention with Eddie. You killed some of Eddie's girls. He's frickin' pissed.”

Mercado grunted. Ricky didn't know what to make of the grunt.

“From what I hear,” Ricky continued, “this Patrick guy won't give up. He'll keep on it until he gets you, or he dies trying.”

“Then he will die trying. But first I want him to suffer. He married? Have a girlfriend?”

“I don't know,” Ricky said.

“Find out,” Mercado said. “Then let me know.”

Mercado hung up. He rubbed at his ear. Damn, Ricky's voice was annoying.

He surveyed the rustic cabin in New Hampshire where he was staying. He had enough canned goods to stay at least a week. Maybe more if needed.

The burner phone Evelyn Worthington provided him buzzed. He didn't think he would hear from her again but saved the phone just in case. She paid well and he didn't want to miss out any more jobs from her.

“Yeah,” he said when he answered.

“I have another job for you in Boston,” she said.

“Good,” he replied. “Because I have other business there.”

CHAPTER 38

Mercado drove from New Hampshire on the cool and clear evening. Evelyn Worthington provided the address for the young woman. She had a townhouse in Charlestown. Just a few blocks from Drew Patrick's girlfriend.

At first, Mercado couldn't believe his good fortune when Ricky told him where Jessica Casey lived. He figured he could take care of both of them in fifteen or twenty minutes. Then he began to wonder if it was too good. Too convenient.

Ricky could have double-crossed him to Eddie Garavito and it was a setup. He considered it more and decided he was being paranoid. Ricky was afraid of his crazy killer cousin. Then again, he would fear Garavito just as much. Maybe more.

Mercado debated the matter. In the end, he decided Ricky neither had the brains nor the stones to double-cross him. But he wanted to be certain.

He paid Ricky a visit when he got to Boston.

"Cuz, what are you doing here?" Ricky said as Mercado pushed his way into Ricky's apartment. Ricky's question was one of complete surprise. Not just at Mercado showing up at his place, but that Mercado was even in town.

"I wanted to ask you some questions," Mercado said. He looked around his cousin's place. It was a small one bedroom on the second floor of duplex. Beige walls with no personal touches. Ricky furnished it with assembled pieces from Walmart.

Mercado said, "Eddie Garavito needs to pay you better."

"I get by," Ricky said.

"Tell me," Mercado said, "while you're getting by, have you been sharing information about me with your boss?"

Ricky froze like a deer in headlights. Mercado patted Ricky's face with his meaty hand. Ricky was nearly as big as Mercado, but Mercado was meaner. And crazier. A dangerous combination.

"What have you been saying to Mr. Garavito?" Mercado said.

"Nothing, really."

"We both know that isn't true."

Mercado grabbed Ricky by the throat, pinned him to the wall, and squeezed. Ricky struggled to breathe.

“Let's try this again. What have you been saying to Eddie Garavito?”

Mercado loosened his grip enough to allow Ricky to speak. “You have to understand, Cuz, Eddie's a dangerous guy. He demands loyalty. I had no choice.”

“Am I not a dangerous guy?” said Mercado. “Does your family not demand loyalty.”

“Our family sucks,” Ricky said. “Look what your parents did to you.”

Mercado backhanded Ricky across the face with his free hand. It snapped Ricky's head to the left and opened a cut on his cheek. “Keep my parents out of this.”

“After that first girl died, I saw you hanging out in our old watering hole. No one remembered you. It had been a long time, and most of the old regulars are dead or in jail.”

“You saw me and didn't say anything?”

“I didn't think you wanted to be noticed so I stayed out of sight. After following you for a few days, you went to Quincy and killed that other girl.”

The veins in Mercado's neck were bulging. Rage was building. Mercado said, “Keep talking.”

Ricky continued, “When Eddie learned two of the escorts at Premier were dead, I put two and two together. Eddie has people all over Boston. I figured it was only a matter of time before he figured out it was you.”

“So you ratted me out?” Mercado said. His face turning a deep red.

“I had no choice, Cuz. I had to come clean to Eddie. If I hadn't, he would have killed me for not telling him about you.”

Mercado threw Ricky to the floor. He stood over him, staring Ricky down. His fists clenched and ready to unload the anger welling up inside him.

Ricky was cowering. It's not often you see a big man like Ricky cower.

Ricky said, “I tried to make it right by tipping you off about the PI and Eddie being on to you. I figured you'd stay away from Boston.”

“You figured wrong,” Mercado said. “Now I need you to come completely clean with me. What's going down tonight in Charlestown?”

“You weren't supposed to come back,” Ricky said. “I warned you to stay away.”

“You should have been more honest with me,” Mercado said. “I'll only ask one more time. What's going down tonight?”

Ricky took a deep breath. His eyes darted around the room. Mercado figured he was looking for a weapon. Even if he found one, he'd never get to it alive. Ricky must have come to the same conclusion. He said, "I'll tell you, but then you should leave town. And stay away."

Mercado's eyes were bulging. Ricky could see them throbbing. "Don't tell me what to do," Mercado said.

"They somehow got that Worthington lady to think another woman was sleeping with her husband. But the woman is a cop. A State Police detective. It's a sting operation to capture you."

Mercado rubbed his hand across the stubble on his face. His face felt the way Ricky's voice sounded. Mercado said, "What about the PI's girlfriend?"

"That's true," Ricky said. "I figured it wouldn't matter."

"Because you assumed I wouldn't come back?" Mercado said.

Ricky nodded.

Mercado bent over and unleashed his violent rage on Ricky. He left his cousin's lifeless body crumpled against the wall.

CHAPTER 39

Mercado drove to Charlestown and parked his car at the Bunker Hill Mall. He didn't want to tangle with Eddie Garavito, but he may not have a choice. He'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

The private investigator was a different matter. While this Patrick guy would be formidable, better to take him on and get it over with. Mercado intended on being the one walking away.

He'd start by inflicting a large measure of pain and suffering by killing Jessica Casey. Then the two could tangle, mano y mano.

Mercado walked the mile to Jessica Casey's building. Along the way he passed the USS Constitution Museum. He remembered going on a school field trip there in elementary school.

He had been so excited when he got home to share what he saw and learned. Neither of his parents cared. His father beat him for leaving the jar of peanut butter on the counter.

When Mercado reached Jessica's building, he waited. He would wait as long as necessary. Eventually she would come home.

At six o'clock he saw her approach the building. She wore a stylish business suit. Jessica Casey was tall and very attractive. Drew Patrick was a lucky guy. His luck was about to run out.

Mercado got up from the bench he had been sitting on and followed Jessica into the building. He stayed at a safe distance in the public lobby. He watched as she got on the elevator. After the doors shut, he took the other elevator by himself to her floor.

The elevator doors opened on Jessica's floor. Mercado stepped out. He looked up and down the hallway. It was empty. He took a right and headed toward Jessica's unit. When he reached her door he worked the lock and entered.

CHAPTER 40

Drew Patrick

The evening was clear and cool. A perfect night for early November. It would have been a nice night for a walk. Instead, I was sitting in my car parked along Monument Square in Charlestown. At least I had a nice view of the Bunker Hill Monument. Lights cut through the darkness to illuminate the 221-foot granite obelisk.

Jessica would join me after she changed into her stakeout clothes of jeans and a sweater. She had arranged for us to use the empty townhouse a friend was remodeling on Bunker Hill. The State Police furnished the place with items seized in drug raids. Sanchez was inside as bait, along with the assembled State Police tactical team.

I was listening to Journey's *Don't Stop Believin'* on the radio as I drank coffee from a mug and munched on a roast beef sub with provolone cheese, pickles, lettuce, and mustard, on wheat bun. Journey wasn't the same without Steve Perry, but the lead singer they have now is darn good. Netflix had a documentary on the guy. The band found him on YouTube doing Journey cover songs in the Philippines.

I finished my sub and took a swig of coffee. I hadn't gotten around to buying a French press coffee maker. I was already losing interest in the idea. There were enough Dunkin' Donuts, Starbucks, and local coffee shops to keep me well caffeinated.

My cell phone rang. It was Robert Burke.

"Detective Captain, O My Captain," I said as I answered.

"Are you sure we can trust Garavito?" Burke said.

"Hello to you too," I said.

"Whatever," Burke said. "It makes me uneasy letting a top crime boss in on our plan."

"He has just as much incentive to take down Mercado as we do," I said. "And his guys have eyes on Mercado."

"We have the frickin' Massachusetts State Police and Boston division of the FBI at our disposal," he said, "I'm sure we could have put plenty of eyes on Mercado."

I couldn't argue with Burke on that one. All I could say was Garavito wanted to be part of taking Mercado down, and, as much as I hated to admit

it, we sort of owed him that. He gave us Mercado.

Burke still didn't like it. Neither did I. But I was trying to make the best of the situation.

"That Journey on the radio?" Burke said.

"Yep," I said.

"Steve Perry or the new kid?"

"Steve Perry. And admit it, you only know about Journey from Glee?"

"I was never a Gleek," Burke said.

"Sounds like you were," I said.

"So was Mike Golic from Mike and Mike," Burke said. "And he played in the NFL."

Burke often equated manliness with playing a contact sport. He was old school in many ways.

"A shame about ending Mike and Mike," I said.

"Seemed like there was some drama around it too."

"And yet the world keeps spinning."

"I'll call you back once any activity starts," Burke said.

After Journey, there was a commercial block. Some great end of the year deals on new cars, and jewelry stores telling me Christmas was a perfect time to propose with one of their diamond engagement rings.

There were probably listeners who better matched their target audience. I didn't need a new car, especially since I just had the rear window replaced. And Jessica and I had no plans on changing a relationship that worked, so I wouldn't be shopping for a diamond ring.

When the commercial block ended, Boston's *More Than a Feeling* came on. I sang along with the chorus and drank coffee on the verses. I had a good system going.

Garavito's Escalade pulled up next to me. I turned off the radio and buzzed down my window. Crooked Nose was driving. Comb Over was in the front passenger seat. Eddie sat in the back.

"You're down a man," I said.

"Ricky never showed tonight," Eddie said. "I'll deal with him later."

I didn't want to know how Eddie dealt with employees who missed work.

Eddie continued, "Mercado has arrived in Charlestown. He parked at the mall and is on foot. About five minutes away. We'll be a few blocks away. I don't like being around all these cops."

"The feeling is mutual for them," I said.

"I'm sure it is," Eddie said.

"Oh, by the way." I reached into my glove box and pulled out the work order for my window and handed it to Eddie.

"What's this?" he said.

"That's what it cost to replace my window."

"Don't you have insurance?"

"Yeah. I wrote down the amount of my deductible. It's a bargain."

Eddie placed the paper in his jacket pocket. "You're a real piece of work, Patrick," he said.

"Hey, it was your guys who shot out my window."

"Not that I have to," Eddie said, "but I'll write you a check."

"I'd prefer cash," I said. "I might get funny looks at my bank if I try to deposit one of your checks."

"Fine," Eddie said. "Do you prefer any specific denominations?"

"Surprise me," I said. "And no counterfeit bills."

The Escalade's windows powered up and they drove away. I buzzed my window back up and called Burke. "Mercado is about five minutes out. He's approaching on foot."

"Okay," Burke said. "Let's switch to the police radios."

"Oh, goody," I said.

"Just be sure to use the designated channel."

"Yes, sir, Captain."

I switched on the police radio. I checked my watch. Jessica would be along any minute. She'd be just in time for everything to go down.

My phone rang. A private number. That hadn't gone so well for me recently. But since Eddie and I had a truce, I surmised it would be safe to answer. What were the chances another crime boss had a threatening message for me?

I answered, "Drew Patrick."

"We lost sight of Mercado," Eddie said.

"How?"

"He went a different way. Headed toward the water. I have a guy trying to locate him as we speak."

"I'll stay on the line," I said.

The minute I waited seemed like hours.

Eddie said, "He entered a building near the Naval Shipyard Park."

“Which building? What's the address?”

I heard Eddie relay my question. Either Crooked Nose or Comb Over was on another phone with the guy tracking Mercado. I heard a response. I couldn't make out the voice or what he said. Then Eddie gave me the address.

“That's Jessica's building,” I said out loud. “Get over there!”

CHAPTER 41

I gave Eddie Jessica's condo number and set a new land speed record getting to her building. On my way, I radioed Burke. He told me he would head over and divert some of the tactical team.

I was the first to reach Jessica's condo. I kicked in the door with my gun drawn. Jessica was locked in hand-to-hand combat with Mercado. She was bloodied and bruised, but still in the fight.

There wasn't a clear shot, so I rushed Mercado. He turned toward me as I landed a right hook. His head popped back, but he didn't move off his spot. He lurched forward and wrapped his beefy arms around me, trying to wrestle me to the ground.

We danced in a circle, each trying to establish some leverage. Jessica came at Mercado, but I could see she was spent. She managed to land a roundhouse kick to the side of his head that got him to loosen his grip on me. I charged into him with all my weight and drove him into Jessica's bookcase. I brought up my right leg up to knee him in the groin when I heard the shot.

Blood formed on Mercado's chest as he fell to the ground. I turned and saw Eddie Garavito standing in Jessica's doorway. He lowered his gun and left without a word. I didn't need to check Mercado to know he was dead.

I wrapped my arms around Jessica and hugged her into me. "Are you okay?" I said.

"Yes," she said. "Better than I look at the moment."

I pulled back slightly and looked into her eyes. "You're always beautiful to me. Come on, let's get you cleaned up."

Burke and several State Troopers arrived on the scene.

"Day late and a dollar short," I said to Burke.

"Story of my life," he sighed. He looked over at Mercado lying on the floor. "We'll need to go over what happened here."

"Sure," I said, "as soon as I get Jessica cleaned up."

"You want a medic?" Burke asked Jessica.

She shook her head. "No, I'm fine. Just a few scrapes and bruises."

"Most guys wouldn't have lasted thirty seconds against him," Burke said as he tilted his head toward Mercado's body.

"She's not most guys," I said.

"You got that right," Burke said.

CHAPTER 42

Jessica and I were sitting in folding chairs at a card table in the living room of my grandparents' old house on Berkeley Street. My house, as I was still getting comfortable saying. We were eating takeout from P.F. Chang's. I accompanied my meal with a Sam Adams. Jessica was drinking red wine. Dash was waiting expectantly to see if a boneless pork rib or some sweet and sour chicken might end up on the floor.

"This is such a lovely home," Jessica said.

"Yes. I still don't know how I feel about remodeling."

"Your grandparents wanted you to make this house your own. They certainly didn't expect you to keep the 1970s décor."

I nodded. "I'm getting there," I said.

Jessica picked up a piece of sweet and sour chicken with chopsticks. I'm not as adventurous with my eating and was using a fork.

As I looked at Jessica across the table, I was thankful for sharing the moment with her. Mercado had posed a threat to our being here like this. Eddie Garavito explained how Jessica had become a target. He uncovered the connection between Ricky and Mercado after discovering Ricky's body. A neighbor identified Mercado from the news, and it didn't take Eddie long to connect the dots.

Jessica and I discussed it afterward. She took it better than I did. In her calm demeanor, she reminded me of why we do the work. And, whether we like it or not, there is a level of risk involved. We could walk away, but neither of us saw that as a real option. So we live with the risk. Minimizing it as best we can.

After Jessica ate the piece of chicken she said, "How did Burke take Garavito shooting Mercado?"

"It was in defense of our lives. There isn't anything more to it."

"How are you feeling about it?"

"I would have preferred no one got killed. But given the circumstances, I'm not going to lose much sleep over it."

"But you'll lose some?"

Jessica ate rice with the chopsticks. A feat which amazed me. Maybe I could manage the chicken with chopsticks, but definitely not the rice.

"A little," I said. "We were gaining control over the situation. Mercado was not going to win against us. He didn't need to be killed."

“Is it possible Eddie Garavito couldn't be so sure of that outcome? He had a quick decision to make.”

“It's possible,” I said. “But not likely.”

“You think he intended to kill Mercado all along?”

I took a sip of my beer as I pondered Jessica's question. Then I said, “If we had already defeated Mercado, Eddie would have kept his word. But he was more than willing to find a reason to pull the trigger.”

Jessica gracefully took a sip of her wine. I took another swig of beer from my bottle of Sam Adams. We were a perfect compliment to one another.

Jessica said, “No doubt the crime world heard how Eddie Garavito exacted revenge.”

“Before Mercado's body was even cold,” I said.

“Not the justice you sought, though?”

“No. But there is closure for the families.”

“How is he handling the fallout over Ricky?” she said.

“I didn't ask,” I said. “But I'm fairly certain he's not broadcasting that to the rest of the crime world.”

I put a second helping of ribs, chicken, and rice on my plate. Jessica was a quarter of the way through her first, and what would be her only, helping. In our small ways, we helped bring a balance to the universe.

As I worked on my second helping, we discussed how the case against Evelyn Worthington was progressing. The Worthington's lawyers were throwing up everything they could, but Evelyn cracked. The weight of what she had done finally came crashing down on her. She admitted hiring Mercado to kill Ashley Holland, Hannah Parks, and Victoria Clark. Evelyn would spend the rest of her natural life in prison.

The shock of Evelyn's confession forced Grant to examine his own role in what had transpired. The Worthington entertainment empire would continue on, but without a Worthington involved.

I looked at Jessica. “We are so fortunate,” I said. “We have wonderful families. We have each other. And Dash.”

Dash looked up when he heard his name. As soon as he realized he wasn't getting anything, he put his head back down. One track mind.

“You're right,” Jessica replied. “We are very fortunate.”

I had the life I wanted. Even the life I needed. What I did, and who I shared my life with, had purpose and meaning. I couldn't help but contrast

that to the case just concluded.

There were lives so broken and fallen they served only to render tragedy. Beautiful young lives were taken away before they ever realized their full potential. All of these lives were shattered. It was up to the rest of us to pick up the pieces and make something better with the lives we had to live.

As Jessica and I finished our dinner, I shared my plans for remodeling the interior of the house. One day. The more we talked, the more excited I became. One day was feeling closer and closer. Before I knew it, I was talking about going to the home improvement store. It was becoming real. And I felt hopeful and positive about the changes.

All the memories of Patrick family gatherings would live on. And new memories would be made. Not in the same way as the past, but no less meaningful for those of us who would share in them. At that moment, I realized there wasn't anyplace I would rather be. I was home.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank you for taking the time to read what I write. None of this would be possible without my readers. THANK YOU! It is also true that a writing project does not come into existence without the help of others. I want to thank my editor Lois for her dedication to making what I write better. A big thanks to my family for their unending support, especially to my wife and our son.

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Jason Richards is the author of the Drew Patrick private investigator series. He has enjoyed reading detective stories and thrillers since he was a child. His biggest writing inspirations are the tough and witty hard-boiled detectives Spenser by Robert B. Parker, Elvis Cole by Robert Crais, and police detective Harry Bosch by Michael Connelly.

He loves writing the Drew Patrick novels and hopes his readers enjoy being part of the adventures. Like his main character, Jason is a lifelong fan of Boston sports – especially his beloved Red Sox. Jason lives in Massachusetts with his wife, son, and their Beagle-mix dog (the inspiration for Dash).

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Shattered: A Drew Patrick Crime Thriller Novel

by Jason Richards

First published in the United States 2019.

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