

# Welcome

Welcome

Introduction

Foreword

Disclaimer

Copyright

*PRELUDE*

Part 1. The Mirage

*CHAPTER 1*

*CHAPTER 2*

*CHAPTER 3*

*CHAPTER 4*

*CHAPTER 5*

*CHAPTER 6*

*CHAPTER 7*

*CHAPTER 8*

*CHAPTER 9*

*CHAPTER 10*

*CHAPTER 11*

Read the Conclusion!

Other Titles by I Q Cameron

*Killer Novels . com*

Welcome to KillerNovels.com



## The Penthouse

(Free Novel Portion)

Copyright © I Q Cameron, [www.killernovels.com](http://www.killernovels.com), 2006, 2018

(Version: V8.0W, 2018)

(A novel by)

**I Q Cameron**

# Introduction

Thank you for choosing to read this free novel portion from [www.killernovels.com](http://www.killernovels.com)

As stated on my website, this novel portion is offered free of charge for your consideration.

As a writer, I make every effort to make available novels of the highest quality, and I sincerely hope that you will enjoy this free portion so much that you will purchase the remaining portion of the novel from [www.killernovels.com](http://www.killernovels.com) for a small fee. Please remember that by doing so you will receive a fantastic novel conclusion, while also helping me to be able to continue this writing venture.

*The Penthouse* is an action-thriller with a particularly twisted and a rather shocking plot, quite frankly. It is frequently violent – with none of the characters ever truly safe from harm. If you enjoy thrills and suspense, as well as the spectre of multiple murders, brutal, cold killers, explosive action and an amazing plot, you'll definitely enjoy this.

It's devastating, impacting and violent, and offers you the thrill of trying to work out the *real goal* of the perpetrators. But beware – this story is loaded with shocking action! It's definitely *not for the faint-hearted!* I cannot stress that enough! Be warned!!!

And if you're still game to read after that, then please, by all means take the test to see if you can work it out...

I should point out that *The Penthouse* is one of the novels I wrote that contains no particular Christian message. Standards still apply; that is to say that I keep sex and language to a minimum, even if the violence is totally confronting and, quite honestly, jolting, I think.

All that said, *The Penthouse* is simply an opportunity to look at what is (frighteningly) possible in the age of terror in which we live. So, if you are into that mix of *Bond meets Schwarzenegger meets Willis meets Butler...* (you get my drift), then just enjoy this novel for what it is. In the meantime, I think you will see potential threats that actually *could* arise, and *that* provides us all with plenty of food for thought...

Also, please consider ['liking' or sharing my novels and/or website on Facebook®](#), since this helps me to continue writing novels for you to enjoy ☺, or simply email them my address. The address is

<<http://www.killernovels.com>>

I sincerely hope you enjoyed this story.

Thank you,

*I Q Cameron*

*Now, please enjoy!*

## Foreword

There is no particular message in *The Penthouse*. No moral. I simply wrote this novel at a time when terrorism was becoming a real problem to the western world. So, where most of my novels include a Christian message these days, this novel was written before I did that, and somehow I just enjoy it for what it is – a brutal, surprising and particularly satisfying multiple-murder and terror(ism) story.

If you *are* looking for Christian input in a novel with teeth, please consider some of my other novels, which you can find at [www.killernovels.com](http://www.killernovels.com) My novels are clearly marked as having a Christian message or not. Also, I plan to write some articles with Christian messages for free viewing, which should be available under the *My Articles* tab as time goes on.

Having been a Christian for some decades, I always found it difficult to find novels that properly captured lifelike action, terror or even romance, while still maintaining Christian values or the deep truths and freedom that having a *real* relationship with the living God brings. Often (I found) writers sacrificed the reality or impact of life's sometimes horrible events, watering things down too far in an effort to make their story appear more 'Christian' or inoffensive.

The Bible, on the other hand, does not hide from the awful things that men (and women) are capable of. Nor does it play down horrible events such as war, murder, sexual misconduct, treachery, etc. With that in mind, I have tried to keep my novels as realistic as possible without glorifying such things as violence, murder, sexual misconduct, terror and every other human activity.

Jesus Christ died for us so that we could live forever (Heaven), as well as live fulfilling and meaningful lives right here and now – *true healing and true freedom!* So often Christians are portrayed as weak and 'just too good' to be real, in a world that we all know is *very real!* I would like to break that mold, since I believe a Christian hero or heroine should probably be one of the best examples of Godliness-meets-humanness we could ever find in this life.

Just like my books, such heroes are not perfect! (Neither am I 😊)

Jesus Christ has a life-changing impact on the genuine believer, because the two enter into a *real, living and loving relationship*. This, however, does not mean that our Christian heroes

will ever be perfect, nor should they be portrayed that way. Indeed, the whole reason for Jesus Christ's intervention in history and in our individual lives is that we will always remain in need of His divine help, forgiveness and salvation, whether it be with external forces, internal ones, temptation, sin or any other factor.

Needing His help and forgiveness will never change.

Some of my earliest writings lacked Christian input. *The Penthouse* is one of them. That said, I have done my best to withdraw most older versions of my novels from circulation, and have replaced them with something I think that both Christian and non-adherent will find challenging to say the least. And while some may find my stories too violent or suggestive, I have tried to write about real issues without shying away from reality, and yet without glorifying sexual issues, crudity or coarse language.

These things exist. I don't ignore them, but neither do I exalt them.

Perhaps you the reader, will be kind enough to show me a measure of grace (should you deem that I go too far in some of the things I write, etc), as I endeavor to explain in my own very fault-riddled way, what salvation in Christ, God's love, forgiveness and some other key Christian values and teachings really mean to us all.

And I sincerely hope I don't fail you too greatly... ☺

## Disclaimer

This is a work of fiction. No person or event described within this novel is intended to represent any real person, living or dead, or any event in history. It is purely a work for entertainment, and any similarity to any real or fictional person or event is purely coincidental.

## Copyright

This novel (in print, electronic or any other form) remains the property of IQ Cameron and [www.killernovels.com](http://www.killernovels.com). No part of this work may be copied, altered, broadcast or used in any manner other than the intended private use by a single reader without prior, express written permission from the author and/or publisher.

Even free-to-download portions of any novel may NOT be copied, altered, given or sold.

Readers are encouraged to invite other readers to download free files directly from [my free downloads page](#).

At no time may any part of this work be taken and used for any other purpose (such as plagiarism, piracy etc). The intention is that this work remains whole and unchanged, and advertised as a product of its original author and of [www.killernovels.com](http://www.killernovels.com).

Furthermore, this work in its electronic state (or otherwise), especially as found via [www.killernovels.com](http://www.killernovels.com), is intended only for use by the single person by whom it is originally purchased. Sharing of this work is strictly prohibited and is illegal. Novels therefore may not be copied or loaned to any other individual; neither may they be used in a group setting without specific, written permission.

## ***PRELUDE***

Retired Captain George Samuel limped toward the imposing structure of the Pentagon. The morning was particularly bright and breezy, and he could not help but think it was a great day to be alive. As he walked, his cane bumped his metal right leg, where once flesh and bone had carried him into war. He was no longer in uniform, and no longer at the front, but in his mind he was still very much in the fight. War had cost him his leg, but not his heart.

George never tired of the sight of the Pentagon. Like his metal leg, it seemed that the building would be with him forever, always a reminder to all of those who would fight for their country – the veterans he was so proud of.

He gave the young marine guard a brief smile, and the guard welcomed him by name. And just before he entered the building, George glanced along the seemingly endless side of the building, his mind recalling a fateful day when he had seen the aftermath of those who had tried to destroy the American monument to military might. Just for a few fleeting seconds the veteran recalled the awful aftermath of the plane that had careered through, killing so many innocent victims.

George Samuel shook his head, then tapped his cane on his false leg once more, this time on purpose. *Surely*, he thought, there had to be a better way...

## **Part 1. The Mirage**

### ***CHAPTER 1***

Shelley Peterson floored the news bus as she reefed the wheel to the left, just missing a particularly expensive looking Jaguar.

Her sudden move caused Eddie Winter to cringe as he held on tight to the edge of his seat in the back of the van, while never releasing the motherly grip with which he cuddled his beloved camera. Eddie cried out in sudden fright, doubting the young woman's ability to control the lumbering bus at such speed, especially in traffic. It was an involuntary reaction to Shelley's terrifying pace, and he was immediately ashamed.

Sitting in the passenger-side in the front, just ahead of Eddie, reporter Suzie Anderson lowered her hairbrush just long enough to hold tight to the van's interior, and then she continued her ritual of preening in the mirror she held precariously in her other hand. She flicked her long wavy blonde hair, then brushed some more, making a cursory effort to check her perfect face for non-existent imperfections as she was tossed about with each of Shelley's lunging moves.

Suzie puckered her thick red lips, noting that a little more lipstick might have been in order, but dismissed the thought, knowing that any such attempt within the confines of the swaying, lurching bus could only result in causing her to resemble something of a circus clown rather than a serious newswoman.

She glanced sideways at her young assistant as their bus hurtled along a short stretch of vacant lane. The bus accelerated hard, making the most of the short vacancy, then braked and swerved again as Shelley cut off a white sedan on their left. The blast of a car horn somewhere behind them alerted the thirty-year-old newswoman to just how close the vehicles must have come.

Shelley Peterson was younger, just turned twenty-three. She was athletic and fit, with a wild side about her that made the young assistant worth keeping on, especially at times like this – when the team needed to be somewhere in a hurry. No point in having Eddie behind the wheel when speed was required, they all knew. But Shelley – she would get them there or die trying. Suzie screwed up her face at the thought. She hoped it wouldn't come to that.

They all braced as the tires of the news bus howled in protest to harsh braking, then the pale blue van lurched once more as Shelley continued the hunt. She leaned forward over the wheel, relishing the action, and taking only cursory glances to ensure the streets were void of police. In Shelley's mind, she had every right to speed – as much as the police themselves. After all, she and her crew were on the trail of a great news story. She flicked her long auburn hair and shot a quick grin to her boss. Her green eyes flashed with delight at the thrill of the chase.

Suzie Anderson didn't even have time to respond to the younger woman's wild and brief gesture before Shelley was glaring forward again, hammering the bus once more. Yes, Suzie decided – Shelley was definitely the right girl for the job.

In the seat behind, Eddie Winter shook his head and checked the tension of his seatbelt

yet again. They had worked together as a team for almost two years now, and worked well. Shelley's driving was the only part of the whole scenario that Eddie had never gotten used to, or enjoyed. Well, he mused, perhaps that and the fact that she had never accepted his offer of a date. Shelley was a fox in Eddie's eyes, and it hurt him greatly that she had never found him as interesting as he found her.

Eddie ran a hand through his scruffy, sandy hair from front to back to keep it out of his eyes. For just a moment he felt relief that he was behind the camera, and had no need to be continually preening himself the way Suzie did. He was strictly a jeans-and-T-shirt man, and combing his hair was definitely an optional extra – not like his two rather attractive female accomplices. For the most part Eddie was quiet and calm, as relaxed in life as his dress sense suggested. Shelley's erratic driving was one of the few things that managed to ruffle his calm demeanor.

He stared forward, trying to focus on his two familiar female workmates, rather than look at the busy, veering road ahead. What a contrast they were, these two. Suzie certainly had the looks, Eddie knew, but she was a reporter and sometimes-anchor, and took herself far too seriously to ever date anyone as ordinary as him. She was a hunter in her own right, always looking for a story, and while she had the smooth, sophisticated look of a news anchor, she could be ruthless and brutal in the same breath with which she charmed her prey. She was definitely in the right job.

And then there was the delightful Shelley. Not as much of a looker as Suzie, perhaps, but cute enough in a more athletic, Amazon way. Eddie tried to console himself; between her outgoing, daring personality and her lethal driving ability, perhaps the fact that Suzie refused to date him might help to keep him alive longer. If he could have changed anything about their young assistant, it would have been her driving habits.

"Hit it, Shelley!" Suzie's words were loud above the roar of the engine, and served to tear Eddie from his brief moment of escape.

"I am!" the auburn-haired girl shot back. "Haven't you noticed?"

"We've only got fifteen minutes," explained Suzie, glancing again at her wristwatch.

"Do we even know who this *Mirage* character is?" called Eddie from behind.

"No," admitted Suzie. She shrugged as though it didn't matter. "Trust me. I can smell a story and I just *know* this guy is on the level. Whatever it is, it's going to be worth it."

"Worth *this*?" asked Eddie, motioning with his eyes in the direction of yet another close call.

"Definitely," called back Suzie. She adjusted her fringe with her fingers.

“So what are we supposed to be reporting on?” argued Eddie. “We’re risking our lives to get across town and we don’t even know what for. Suzie?”

Suzie turned in her seat to view her trusted cameraman. She had never found Eddie to be attractive, but valued him for his loyalty. He was experienced at his job and always tried to make her look good, and to Shelley, that was what counted. She gave a conciliatory smile.

“Please, Eddie, just trust me on this. Okay. I took the call, and I can tell you this guy means business. I don’t know what – but I know he’s the real deal.”

“How do you know he’s not just calling us across Washington to shoot us?” demanded Eddie, far from placated. “This Mirage might be an A-grade fruitcake for all you know.”

Suzie nodded negatively, remembering the softness and warmth of the man’s voice on the phone. He had the kind of charm that seemed to naturally instill trust and respect in her. Sure, he had been secretive, and the meeting to which she sped was cloak-and-dagger to say the least, but something in that wonderful voice had driven her to believe him. This man was authentic, she could tell. Worth meeting at *any* price.

“Not a fruitcake,” Suzie countered. “You’re just gonna have to trust me on this, Eddie.”

He shook his head, then gave a weak smile as the van lurched again. “Just remember,” he joked, doing his best to salvage just a hint of satisfaction. “If he’s a shooter, they always take out the reporters first. Remember that, okay?”

Suzie grinned, then turned forward to view the wild panorama of Shelley’s driving dogfight. She glanced again at her watch, then snapped the urgency of their quest to her young driver once more. “Fourteen minutes now, Shelley!”

Shelley shot her boss another grin as the bus roared beneath them. “Relax,” she called back confidently. “I’ll have us there in ten.” She leaned on the vehicle’s horn in an effort to clear the way.

On the seat behind, Eddie swallowed, hugged his precious camera to himself once more, and cringed at the thought.



Samantha Drewery led her daughter Trudy by the hand, and together they entered the dazzling maze of majestic crystal towers and archways that was the Chandler Memorial Palace in Washington D.C.

With its glistening, sharpened spires and sweeping curved arches and domes, the structure was a relative newcomer to the city, but a particularly popular one. Made almost completely of clear plastic and smoked glass, the palace looked just as its name suggested, its wonder and



beauty accentuated by the fact that it appeared to be truly, a crystal palace. And while it was not tall enough to be accurately described as an addition to the skyline, it was nonetheless a towering monument to modern artistic design, and was remarkably well patronized.

Designed purely as a tourist attraction, the Chandler Memorial Palace served the city with distinction. While other local destinations may have been more frequented by tourists, few settings were more popular for wedding photographs. The four-storey building's popularity had grown rapidly, with countless couples taking advantage of the large open areas around and within the marvelous structure to immortalize their wedding days. Tourists flocked from across the country and around the world to have their photos taken before the gleaming marvel. It was truly one of the city's more recent success stories.

Doorman Harold Stein stood tall and proud, somewhat overdressed in his regulation red and blue uniform, which he wore with pride and a smile. The gold braiding gave him almost the appearance of a navy officer's uniform, and reminded Samantha of the English army uniforms that had invaded her nation some centuries earlier. Still, he looked very smart, she thought, and fitted in with the overall grand experience that was the Chandler Memorial Palace.

Harold Stein grinned broadly at Trudy Drewery, a pretty little girl ten years of age. Like her mother, Trudy sported long, straight fair hair, though hers was tied into pigtails where her mother's was not. They were unmistakably mother and daughter, both pale and each neatly dressed in pink for their visit to the palace.

"Welcome to the Palace," Stein offered warmly to the pair as they ambled past him.

Samantha nodded and thanked him for his kind welcome, but like her daughter she could barely take her eyes off the wonders of the tall, transparent archways and hanging chandeliers above and before her. In keeping with the crystal theme and the ornate nature of the palace, almost as many spires hung vertically down as stood tall and upright. Each majestic spire, whether aiming up or down, was sharpened to a point and glistened in the morning light. The entire structure was divided into large rooms, each sporting a myriad of crystal and glass statues or figures in accordance with its theme.

One room represented nature, and comprised crystal birds and animals, and a dazzling crystal river complete with lighting to give it the appearance of flow. Set amid the glistening features was the room's centerpiece, a life-sized glass lion that sat proudly amid the ornate, semi-transparent world.

The next room was devoted to all things mechanical, and boasted scaled down replicas of an early motorcar, a steam train, an airplane and other advances of the twentieth century. A glass, working computer sat atop a slowly rotating table as the room's main feature, dedicated to

the changes that the device had wrought. Only a few internal components were not made of transparent materials, a feat of engineering in itself.

Not all of the building was transparent. Certain support beams, electrical conduits and other devices were by nature unavoidably opaque, but for the most part, the designers and builders of the Palace had worked wonders. Somehow those things that were necessarily opaque went almost unnoticed amid the miracle of clear and ice-like constructions.

Samantha Drewery watched as her daughter let go of her hand and ran to view the computer up close. Trudy turned and grinned as she beheld the crystal centerpiece, taken by its mix of beauty and oddness. Samantha shook her head, also intrigued by the display, and she cast her eyes upward to view again the myriad of downward hanging sharpened crystals. The entire scene seemed not to be real, just as it was intended, and Samantha imagined it to be an ice cave she had visited as a girl.

*Truly marvelous*, she mused. The amazing complex was a wonder to behold.



Suzie Anderson glanced at the small screen of her cellphone to gauge the identity of the caller, but the number did not present itself. She flipped open the phone and held it to an ear, announcing herself. The voice that replied was masculine and yet soft, and very calm. As Suzie listened to the enigmatic caller, who by now she recognized as Mirage, she felt strangely at ease. His voice was controlled and firm, and strangely soothing.

“You did well,” he said in a complimenting tone. “You’re four minutes early.” Suzie felt that she could love that voice.

“My driver has a death wish,” she joked. She looked around, up and down the busy Washington street, hoping to spy the mystery-man who had obviously seen the news bus arrive. “You have the advantage on me,” she noted. “You can see me and I can’t see you. I don’t even know your name.”

“Patience, Suzie,” he chided softly. *Romantic*, she mused. Yes, she would definitely like to meet this secretive man who had so easily gained her interest and trust. “Have your man set up his camera facing the cream building to your south. Quickly now – you don’t want to be late.”

Suzie shot the order to Eddie Winter, who was already setting up a tripod for his beloved camera. Shelley Peterson appeared a moment later with a microphone and small makeup kit, from which she took a mirror for her boss to scrutinize her perfect television-face. While Suzie continued to wait for further orders from her secretive caller, Shelley made small and unnecessary adjustments to the reporter’s face, as Eddie completed readying his camera. A

minute later and Eddie was panning in the general direction of the pale building in accordance with the orders relayed from their caller.

“What makes you think this guy is even going to give us something?” grated Eddie cynically. “He could be going to blow up a building or something, but I’m guessing he’s just yanking your chain, Suz.”

“His sexy voice,” she responded, temporarily lowering the phone and clamping a palm over the small mike of the cellphone. “Just trust me, Eddie. Have I ever got it wrong?”

“Well, there was that time when you did the story on the jumper,” he countered. “The stuntman – you remember, Suz. Turned out to be nothing more than a hoax as I recall. You had us speeding all over town to get *that* guy.” His voice became more sarcastic. “Just like today, if I recall correctly...”

“Hey,” she shot back. “He *jumped*, didn’t he?”

Eddie snorted and did not bother to answer. They all knew it had been a wasted exercise, but in reality, they also knew that Suzie had always possessed a genuinely accurate nose for a good story. If she trusted this secretive individual who insisted on a cloak-and-dagger routine, then neither Eddie nor Shelley would argue.

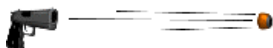
“Ready,” Eddie announced. “Tell your friend I’m in position. So what is it we’re supposed to be looking for anyway?”

Suzie Anderson strode in front of the camera, armed with her mike, but she did not bother to face it. Instead she kept her gaze sweeping the busy street beside her, with its constant rush of morning traffic. The sharp blast of car horns continually stabbed the air as a sea of cars and buses jostled for position at the crowded intersection just over half a block down, directly across from the cream building. Suzie held the cellphone to her ear once more.

“What is it I’m supposed to be looking for?” she asked quizzically, her brow furrowing slightly.

“Patience, my dear,” the voice returned. “I told you I’d give you the scoop of the day, and I promise I won’t lie to you. Patience now, Suzie.” Suzie took a deep breath. It was a perfect morning, with the sun shining and a cool breeze to give a crisp quality to the air.

*Ah yes, she nodded. It was a very good morning for a story.*



Officer Chantelle Connelly leaned back in her seat and spun her helmet in her hands.

She had never managed to find a way to avoid the knot that always rose in her stomach on mornings such as this. She flicked her long brown hair so that it all fell down the right side of her

neck, then gathered it up with her left hand and twisted it into a tight bun. She lowered her head and forced her helmet on, holding the brown mass in place as long as possible in a bid to control it. The whole thing was done in seconds, and as casually as possible. Chantelle hated the idea that her colleagues might know just how nervous she really felt.

She hated riot duty.

Sadly though, with that simple task carried out, she could think of little else to do. She longed for some simple habit that might occupy her trembling hands – anything to give her something to do for a few more agonizing seconds. But there was nothing. She was fully dressed and she had checked her automatic three times already. There was simply nothing else to do. Eventually there was nothing left for her but to face her fellow officers.

Ned Bentworth, who sat beside Chantelle, felt little better than she did. But like her, he would never admit to his apprehensions. He smiled when finally his young female colleague was left with nothing else to do but face him, and in a strange way, Chantelle was glad of his gesture. A hint of seriousness in her face told Ned that his fellow officer felt the same dread that he always battled with.

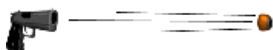
“Not keen, huh?” he asked simply. Chantelle nodded negatively, perceiving that he was genuinely interested, and not making fun of her.

“No,” Ned admitted, leaning closer so that others might not hear. “I never like storm duty either. Don’t worry. Just stay close and we’ll be cool.”

She nodded, then her eyes flitted about the bus. Many of the seats were unoccupied, and Chantelle guessed that there were about twenty officers on the detail that morning. Each, like her, was dressed in full riot gear, complete with batons and helmets, formidable black monsters to those they would face, and yet just as frightened beneath it all if the truth was told. It struck Chantelle as ludicrous – going out to face a very unknown enemy on the streets for the sake of a politician, but that was the job. Some days they would be called upon to do nothing but be present, and other days ended in full running battles with a mob-mentality on the streets.

Chantelle hated the prospect of facing the unknown. And it was the unknown that made it so frightening for her. She could handle confrontation, even open danger. But she had never learned how to deal with what *might* happen. It was the *might* that was the source of all her stress.

*Should have stayed at the resort*, she told herself. Working the bar wasn’t fun, but it was a living – and there were fewer surprises. She touched the comforting bulge of the automatic strapped to her right thigh. Yep. *Should have stayed at the resort*.



“Are you ready?” the soft voice asked.

Suzie closed her eyes, momentarily enthralled by the mix of masculinity and secretive gentleness she perceived within the romantic tones – *his tones*. Oh yes, she decided, this was a man she would definitely have to meet – in time. She swam in his audible, yet invisible presence.

“I’m ready,” she answered. “But I still don’t know what I’m looking for. It’s not a bomb, is it? You want to tell me?”

“Patience, Suzie. Patience,” responded the dreamy, manly voice. “I promised you.”

There was a pause as Suzie Anderson strained her eyes in an effort to see just what it was that her secretive caller had so persuasively insisted that they record. The next words spoken sent a small chill through the reporter.

“Did I tell you how lovely you look this morning, Suzie?”

She spun her head in several directions, trying desperately to glimpse the man who was claiming to spy on her. Then she called his bluff, running a hand through her crowning blonde tresses.

“Oh yeah,” she whispered. “What am I doing now?” A short silence made her believe the stranger was faking, but then came the stunning truth.

“Oh, Suzie,” he answered. “You’re just going to have to learn to trust me. Now, put your hand down and look at the cream building.”

Suzie’s eyes widened. There was no mistake now. *He was watching her*. She tried again to see him, but to no avail. With sudden fears that he might be about to harm her, she forced herself to gaze in the direction he had prompted.

“Have your man start filming, Suzie,” came the small voice in the phone. Even amid her sudden fear the voice remained warm and calming. She felt herself trusting her clandestine caller, almost without reserve.

“Roll the camera, Eddie,” she ordered.

“At what?” he insisted.

“Just point it at the building and start recording,” she shot back.

She clipped the cellphone to her belt and pushed a small earplug into one ear, running the thin connecting wire behind her back. She knew she could hear her secret caller’s instructions without her viewers ever knowing, and even speak to Mirage with the aid of a tiny microphone connected to the earplug. Unsure of the reason for their presence, and yet confident as always, Suzie stepped before the camera. With her camera-mike in hand, a slight smile began to dawn upon her lips.

“Ready for your scoop?” the voice asked warmly.

Suzie nodded just slightly, but said nothing, aware that her viewers would not understand if she responded verbally.

“Begin,” the voice ordered. “Trust me, Suzie. I promise, you will not be harmed. This will be your biggest story yet.”

Again she nodded, almost imperceptibly. Then she put on a brave, smiling face, and began her spiel. The story *would* come, she told herself. She had heard his voice. He would surely not disappoint her.

There was something in his voice she just *knew* she could trust.



Trudy Drewery struck an exaggerated pose beside the glass waterfall while her mother snapped off another photograph. *Quickly*, she thought – *before that old bearded man comes over and gets in the picture. Quickly!* She grimaced. Samantha Drewery was not nearly quick enough. Now her memory of the magic palace would always be marred by the presence of an old man in the picture.

Still, she could not blame her mother. It was getting crowded inside the palace. People were gathering, and clearly it would be impossible to hope for a photograph alone by any of the pieces. Trudy made a face, then skipped toward the wide arch that led to the exit of the crystal structure. Another photo from outside might be nice, she told herself.

“Come on, Mother!” she insisted in a childish, impatient voice, beckoning with a hand as she ran beneath the arch. “Keep up, will you!”

Samantha shook her head, jostling with the crowd and wishing that her impetuous, young daughter would not rush away from her with such abandon.



Chantelle Connelly let out a sigh as she raised the clear face shield of her helmet. She took another look about the bus and its range of fellow officers, some as subdued as she was, others more verbal and jolly. Some, she wondered, may have actually enjoyed the prospect of a confrontation with demonstrators. It made no sense to her.

Something else made no sense either; like why she was twenty-seven years old and still not married. *Married?* She couldn’t even manage a steady relationship. Often even a date was too much to hope for. Most men saw the badge and the gun and ran away. Others saw her only as a fantasy. Still others, her fellow officers, were taboo. Dating colleagues could only result in

tragedy and trouble, she reasoned. The prospect of working in an environment with an ex-boyfriend was simply too much to face. Chantelle would rather be alone.

She frowned as the bus stopped at traffic lights on a busy corner. From there she knew the bus would turn left, and then it would only be two blocks to their destination – a political rally set to take place later in the day. Her stomach churned once more. She should have stayed on the farm, she mused. Or at the resort... *Anything* would have been better than riot duty.

Her eyes caught the reflection of some mirrored windows on a pale cream building to her right as the bus began to move away from the traffic lights.



Eddie Winter focused on Suzie Anderson's lovely face as she announced the lead-in for her story, and he wondered what the reporter was going to say next. He smiled, glad as he so often was that his career had led him to be on the operational side of the camera. Suzie was about to do some serious ad-libbing, there could be no question, and unlike the reporter, Eddie had little doubt that they were all wasting their time.

"Good morning," announced Suzie, her face metamorphosing with a well-rehearsed smile. "We're standing here on busy Domain Road in uptown Washington, D.C. It's a beautiful day, and we just thought our viewers would appreciate a heads-up on some breaking news."

She looked confident, her experience managing to completely disguise the fact that she had absolutely no idea where the story was about to go, or even if there really *was to be* a story.

"We've been called out here today to..." She trailed off, her left hand rising to her ear to press the device a little harder there, and to try to block out some of the traffic noise. She nodded, forgetting the usual, smooth veneer of an experienced reporter. Instead, still trusting the hidden voice of her secret source, she spoke in open, honest tones to her cameraman.

"I'm not sure what's..." Again she did not complete her sentence. "Eddie, get the van."

She turned almost completely away from the camera – something she never did. Eddie managed to keep her in the shot while both of them focused on a pale gray van parked against the curb on the opposite side of the bustling six-lane street. By zooming, Eddie could see the innocuous vehicle considerably more clearly than his reporter could, and noticed immediately that it had no driver. An uneasy feeling began to tease him.

Suzie pressed the earphone tighter into her left ear, completely dismissing usual protocol as she continued to face almost fully away from the camera. "Folks, I'm not really sure what we're looking for here, but..." Again she surrendered to the overwhelming interest that her secret, hidden caller was evoking within her. She nodded again as she continued to listen intently

to Mirage.

“Eddie, the bus,” she snapped. “Get the bus...”

“I’m getting it,” he replied, also forgetting that he should remain silent at all times.

“Suzie, I’m not sure I like this...”



Trudy Drewery skipped by the doorman, Harold Stein, and he could not help but smile when he saw her pass by. He turned, drawn by an insistent voice calling from behind, and immediately remembered the girl’s mother from earlier that morning. Something in the mother’s voice prompted an almost involuntary response from the amicable doorman, and he called Trudy back.

“Hold on there, Honey,” Stein called. “Your mother is calling you.”

Trudy stopped skipping through the crowd. Something in the man’s bright red and blue uniform and his authoritative voice halted her innocent escape. She turned back and walked slowly toward the kindly man.

Just five meters back her mother was jostling with the crowd to reach her.



Chantelle Connelly glanced once more at the pale cream building as the police bus turned into Domain Road.

From her window seat she had a good view of the pedestrians who paced quickly along the sidewalk, all intent on reaching their destinations. It was a hurried life, she mused, and on mornings like this, when she had to face her most despised of all duties, city life seemed to make no sense at all.

They were like sheep, she thought – these scurrying pedestrians. If they were in such a hurry, why didn’t they simply leave for work a little earlier? Was *anything* really worth all the worry and haste? But then, was her life any better? Not really, if she was honest. She mulled the thought over, desperately wishing that she was not due for riot patrol. Why was she doing this job anyway? She could barely remember. She removed her helmet and scratched her brow. Life on the farm was boring, but was *this* any better.

Perhaps when she got home later that day it might be time to take a serious look at her life...

They approached a pale gray van, its wheels parked actually on the curb. On the other side of the van an obese man walking his dog on a leash was forced to move off the cement



sidewalk to allow another man in a suit to pass by the van. The sight of it annoyed Chantelle immediately, and she suddenly remembered why she had so desperately wanted to become a cop in the first place. It was life's small wrongs that had driven her to join up. All she had ever wanted, even from childhood, was to right the wrongs, no matter how trivial. If she had not been on the riot bus, but on foot, she would have ticketed that van – just for parking on the curb. Why should pedestrians have to move around it? Drivers like that got all they deserved...

The riot bus crawled closer to the van, moving slowly in traffic, and giving Chantelle plenty of time to survey the situation. She shook her head, first at her annoyance at seeing the van parked as it was, and then at the intensity of her own reaction to it. So petty, she thought. It was hardly a capital crime.

When she got home that day, she mused, it would definitely be time to re-evaluate her life...



*“Get the police bus, Eddie!”* Suzie repeated, her voice somewhat intense.

Something in the hidden voice in her ear had evoked a reaction she might not normally have allowed to be seen – least of all while on camera. Eddie Winter panned from the pale van to the dark police bus as it turned into Domain Road. He zoomed in, then out, to take in the broader picture, leaving Suzie nowhere in the field of view.

Suzie Anderson continued to push the small earplug in tight, straining to hear the soft, soothing masculine voice within.

“Can you see the bus now, Suzie?” the voice asked.

“I see the bus,” she answered, raising her voice for the sake of the combination earphone-microphone connected to her cell, and for the mike she held in her right hand. “I see the bus. My cameraman has it.”

“Good girl,” came the warm reply. Then her caller added in a tone that was almost casual, “We’ll talk again very soon, Suzie. You take care until then.”

Suzie was about to ask him to repeat what he had said, when the world at the end of the block erupted into a massive fireball.

## **CHAPTER 2**

Packed with explosives, the gray van almost completely disintegrated. Mercifully, and as

planned, the van was not loaded with extra shrapnel, which would have made the murderous act much more lethal. Such an act would surely have doubled or tripled the number of casualties.

It was, however, of no comfort or consequence to Chantelle Connelly.

Chantelle was directly beside the van, staring at it as her bus passed by within less than two meters. She knew nothing of the explosion except for an awareness of percussion. She saw no shredded metal, though there was ample to see, and she saw and felt no flames. Her young face was torn completely off as the first shards tore through the riot bus, dicing all those on board and tearing their bodies apart. A cop on the opposite side of the bus actually wore Chantelle's face and a large part of her brain for mere milliseconds before he too was annihilated, physically torn limb from limb.

The pulverized matter that made up their bodies just a second earlier was sprayed across the street and the surrounding vehicles amid the debris. It was as though the police bus suddenly split wide open, vomiting human matter across the passing movement of morning traffic.

From their position over half a block away Eddie Winter gritted his teeth and continued standing by his camera while his two female colleagues dropped to the grass, both screaming in natural reaction to the shocking spectacle unfolding before them. With the riot bus strategically positioned between the bomb and Mirage's invited guests, the camera was merely rocked by the shockwave from the device, and continued to record as planned.

Eddie watched in disbelief more than fear, as the police bus was hoisted up and sideways, while a large section near its center was torn away and strewn across the crowded street. The bus moved as though in slow motion, lifted by an enormous, invisible hand, vomiting its human cargo as it went. Then both it and its pulverized innards were flung across the top of passing cars.

A massive ball of bright flame accompanied the devastating explosion, incinerating many of those who might have otherwise survived the initial blast. Several passing cars that were not crushed by the hurtling bus were scorched by the intense heat.

Hidden from Eddie's view on the opposite side of the van, two pedestrians seemed to simply disappear as the powerful bomb shredded their bodies and painted nearby shattered buildings with their blood and body matter. Inside the police bus, all perished instantly, smashed and pulverized, with many of their bodies never to be recovered.

For Chantelle Connelly the evaluation of her life was over. Her body would never be found, nor any piece large enough to necessitate a coffin. She left only scattered teeth and DNA to prove that she had actually been on the bus, and an empty apartment to prove that she had ever even existed.



When the Chandler Memorial Palace exploded, the initial destructive effect was not near so instantaneous as the bus. It was, however, equally cruel and callous.

Planted in two areas just above the first floor, the bombs exploded simultaneously, fragmenting the immediate portions of the building into countless shards of glass and plastic, and thrusting them at unsuspecting patrons over an area almost forty meters in diameter. Those closest to the blast sources, naturally, bore the worst of the onslaught.

Human bodies were shredded by the myriad of shattered fragments, each shot forth with sufficient force to puncture or pass completely through the flesh and bone they struck. Almost all those within the actual confines of the palace were killed instantly, their bodies minced and blasted about the structure, transparent shards passing through them like long crystal bullets.

Trudy Drewery actually saw her mother's chest and right cheek explode as shards passed cleanly and instantly through her. Samantha's clothing danced about on her body as the projectiles slipped easily through her, a spatter of blood marking the lethal injuries quite starkly. For the young girl, it was like watching the event in slow motion as her mother's face registered complete shock, and then slumped forward with the percussion of the blast.

Even before the girl thought to scream, the old doorman was falling upon her. Whether intentionally or by pure good fortune Harold Stein moved just slightly to his left, enough to shield Trudy from almost all the shards, except those few which passed right through him. Trudy was unaware of the impact of several thin shards that embedded in her thighs and left shoulder, as the old man's frame toppled and fell directly on to her. She was pushed down hard, and crashed painfully to the floor as the doorman's dead body fell over her to form a life-saving barrier while countless, glistening shards danced and ricocheted inside the building and through the open, arched doorway.

Trudy was pressed flat to the floor, and was unaware that her mother's body, along with several others, was ejected with force from the shattered building. The Memorial Palace spat forth unrecognizable bodies like vomit, bloody hulks shredded and speared through by the vicious rain of glass spears as the building disintegrated.

The young girl tried to lift the old man's body, her small arms pushing his lifeless form in a natural action even while deadly glass spears were still falling around her. With a mammoth effort she managed to push on both his rosy cheeks, raising his head just enough to peek out from under the large man.

The last thing Trudy saw before closing her eyes for the last time was the entire building

caving in on itself, shattering and roaring as it crumbled and died a noisy and brutal death. Then, with Stein's head pushed away as far above her as she could force it, she saw a falling shard, shattered and razor-sharp, longer than a man's arm and half as thick as her forearm smash right through the old man's forehead. The crystal stalactite pierced the doorman's head from back to front, spraying Trudy with his blood. The glass splinter drove hard into the floor where it turned to powder and small crystals like sugar until the downward plunge of the enormous shard was halted.

As Trudy crunched her eyes shut with terror, and to keep out the blood and glass particles, she was aware of the cruel bite of the shattered, fallen spike slicing her scalp. Then, mercifully, she passed out.



Eddie Winter turned away as the percussion of the explosion passed over the three news gatherers. Momentarily deafened by the blast, he could barely hear the instinctive curse that passed his lips. He recovered quickly, checking in one smooth movement that his camera was still standing on its tripod, and that it was still recording.

As Suzie Anderson and Shelley Peterson spun and picked themselves up, each stood dazed and staring at the destruction half a block down. The riot bus was torn wide open from the inside, its human cargo torn apart for the most part, and strewn about in a wide arc. Other cars had joined the horrific display, some upturned and some burning, and all skewed at angles across the asphalt.

*"What the hell...?"* Shelley did not finish her sentence, the scene before her being so horrific that it stole away her will and ability to speak. She stumbled, then looked about, dazed and unsure what to do next.

Eddie panned, his senses returning, but in the end he could not help but focus on what remained of the riot bus. Where there had been metal mesh over the windows, with faces behind just seconds earlier, now there was a gaping hole large enough to drive a car through. The metal frame and side of the bus were hanging, torn and shredded as though a huge fist had punched through from the opposite side. Moreover, it appeared that another giant hand had reached in from the closest side of the bus and pulled forth every shred of living tissue, and strewn it over the width of the road and beyond. The closest pieces of metal debris lay just meters from their own news bus.

Suzie Anderson's knees began to buckle, and she was forced to reach down with both hands to grip them, steadying herself before she rose again. She stared about her, not quite sure

what to say, or even what had happened. When finally her senses returned enough to prompt her to action, she pressed the earpiece hard into her hidden, left ear once more.

“*What...? What have you done?*” she cried aloud. At first she could hear nothing, the ringing in her ears so loud that she could not discern Mirage’s soft voice.

“Have I got your attention now, Suzie?” came the soft reply.

She swayed, staring in dismay and disbelief at the horror on the street.

“*Suzie*, do I have your attention?” he asked again.

“*Yes! Damn you, yes!*” It was all she could say. It made no sense – she wanted to abuse him, but the words would not come.

“Listen to me, then.” The voice was calm as ever. “You need tell them, Suzie. My name is Mirage, and I have chosen to speak through you. And for that privilege you will have to do what I say – *everything* I say. Do you understand, Suzie?”

She nodded, struck almost mute.

“Good,” he replied. “I see you are nodding. We will talk again, Suzie. I will protect you, and you will always listen. Do you understand what I am saying?”

The reporter’s head spun as she looked quickly all about her, trying to discern where he was – this maniac. But she could see no one who was not diving for cover or wandering aimlessly toward the carnage.

“You’re mad,” she blurted, no longer thinking like a reporter.

“Maybe,” he answered softly. “And I will strike again, Suzie, but you will be safe – a part of my plan – as long as you do *all* that I tell you.” There came an eerie silence during which she could still not think of how to respond. Instead, she simply waited for him to finish.

“Now, Suzie,” he demanded. “Are you listening to me? This is your first test.”

“I’m listening,” she answered, terrified. She divided her time between Eddie’s camera and the carnage behind her, her senses returning.

“Very good,” Mirage replied. “Take your time. Record what you see. Remember, you have the scoop on it because *I* have chosen you. So make the most of it. Don’t talk to the police, Suzie. *Not yet!* That can come later. For now, record it. Report it. Do what you do best. After all, *that* is why I chose you. But I want you back in your studio in two hours. Do you understand?”

She nodded, bewildered but obedient. “I understand.”

“Make sure you do,” he said. “Remember, this is your first test, Suzie. I’ll be watching.” Ever soft and charming, the voice seemed warm, and Suzie could not fathom the link between it and the horror she was witnessing.

The line went suddenly dead.

Somewhere down the street she watched in horror as the first injured survivor staggered from the chaos. The man was bloody and disoriented, crawling and falling from within an upturned car. Suzie snapped an order to Eddie Winter to leave the tripod behind and accompany her into the horror. And then, as the ringing in their ears slowly dissipated, they could hear the first screams and groans of agony from down the street.



Suzie Anderson sobbed, her face in her hands as the trio returned to their studio in heavy, somber silence.

The trip was considerably slower than the earlier dash through the city, due as much to congestion and confusion as Shelley's more conservative manner. For all, shock was beginning to set in, and while none had completely succumbed to it, all were deeply and irreversibly affected. Unable to ignore those who suffered, Shelley bore the blood of several injured victims, those she had helped to limp from the dreadful scene.

A veteran cameraman, war zones were not a new experience to Eddie. He had seen Iraq and other bloodbaths, each with their own form of terrorism. He had seen the aftermath of explosions aimed at human bodies, the arms and legs and other pieces of victims strewn about city streets. But he had never actually witnessed such a thing on American soil. He trembled, no words able to voice his stunned feelings. He knew that America had been attacked, brutally and personally by an unseen and cold killer, and moreover that nothing would ever be the same, either for his team, or for the nation.

Suzie Anderson stared out of the windshield, noticing for the first time that something had cracked it on the passenger's side. Like so many other things that day, she knew, it had occurred without her even realizing. She watched with dazed eyes as the world changed shape and color through the criss-crossed pattern of cracked glass.

They all listened in renewed fear and disbelief as other reporters relayed the news of the Chandler Memorial Palace via the van's radio. Eddie shot a long look of dread at Suzie, who did not reply as she shook her head at the news. Having already relayed their coverage of the immediate aftermath of the riot bus explosion, others from their studio had arrived to take over, allowing them to return as directed by *Mirage*.

With the six-storey building in sight just two blocks away, Suzie was startled by the sound of her cellphone, and with trembling hands she pushed the headset into her ear once more and pressed the button to take the call. Shelley continued to drive slowly, glancing over as much

as she dared to take in her partner's reaction. Suzie swallowed and Shelley saw the deep fear that her eyes could not hide.

"How are you, Suzie?" Mirage asked, his voice soft as always.

"I'm okay," she lied. Inside she felt like she was dying.

"Good," he said truthfully. "I value you. I want you to take care."

She did not respond, but motioned for Shelley to pull over, sensing something.

"You're going to have to trust me, Suzie," Mirage reminded her. "It will be very important. Today was just to prove to you that you are my chosen one. *My vessel*. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she said. She didn't.

"Good," he repeated. "Since you've stopped the bus, I want you to have your cameraman pick up his camera again."

Suzie glanced about them, searching the street ahead and the mirror closest to her for a hint of where he might be, but she could see no one suspicious. She quickly snapped an order to Eddie, who took his beloved camera in hand once more.

"Not again," she protested, as much to Eddie as to her callous, mysterious caller. "Please, listen..."

"No, Suzie," he insisted. "*You* listen. Now, as my chosen vessel, I want you to know something." His voice was still calm, and yet now a little frightening too.

"What?" she asked.

"You may go to the authorities. You have my permission to do that. In fact, *they* are the ones who will come running to *you*. You may tell them how I had you wait at the scene of the first bomb." He almost laughed. "Well, they know that already, don't they? They certainly do if they've been watching you on television, anyway. So, you may tell them anything you wish, Suzie – as long as it is the truth. You must never lie about me. Is that clear?"

"I understand," she answered, fearful and yet completely unable to resist the driving force within her. "Did you blow up the Memorial building too?"

It was out before she could stop herself, the investigative side of her nature exposing her before she could evaluate just how tenuous their 'relationship' was. A feeling of relief washed over her as he answered, again in soft tones, apparently not troubled by her impetuosity.

"Well, of course, my dear," he assured her. "Of course I did, Suzie. Now listen. When the authorities are questioning you, you must tell them the truth about me. *Never lie*. My name is Mirage, and I am going to bring down great fear on your Western dictatorship. They will *all* understand more in time. But I will speak with only you – unless you fail me, and then I will

replace you.”

He paused, the threat very real. Replace meant *kill*, she knew instinctively.

“Now, Suzie.” She could tell he was about to hang up again. “Take a look at your employer. Take a long look.” Suzie motioned with a hand and Eddie brought the camera before him, filming through the good half of the windshield.

“Please, Mirage,” she murmured. “I have friends in there.”

“You must have absolute trust in me, Suzie,” he explained. “If you do, I will give you the very *best* of my stories.” Another menacing pause left her mute with anticipation and dread. “Now,” he continued, “Look at your building and be thankful that you obeyed me, Suzie Anderson, and be thankful that you have obeyed me this day.”

Suzie’s eyes widened as she thought of her friends and colleagues working feverishly within the ANC25 building. Mirage’s line went dead, just as Suzie knew it would, and even while she was still dialing her editor, a third explosion rocked Washington D.C. that day.

Parked strategically on one side of the building, the small white sedan exploded with devastating force. Suzie, Eddie and Shelley watched as a cloud of fire and flying debris rose high into the air, blowing in most windows on that side of the news building, and for half a block in all directions. All those close to the car were killed instantly, with many others killed or severely injured beyond.

Eddie Winter’s camera rocked as he forced himself to record the nightmare unfolding in the distance – an attack on his own workplace. Even at a hundred meters away, the carnage and destruction was obvious and horrific. Among those offices that bore the brunt of the destruction was an open, shared area filled with reporters and other staff on the fifth floor. And among the debris and bleeding bodies that had been shredded by flying glass and other matter, lay a broken nameplate that read *Suzie Anderson – Reporter*.

Suzie stared in open-mouthed horror, then began to sob at the thought of so many dead and injured colleagues and friends. And when the initial shock was passed, Suzie Anderson was very pleased that she had listened to the soft, soothing voice of Mirage that morning.

## **CHAPTER 3**

FBI Special Agent in Charge Roy Kelly slipped the sunglasses from his face as he strolled slowly amid the debris on Domain Road. It allowed him to better view the scene of total destruction, with pieces of vehicles strewn about the asphalt as though they had been spewed from a volcano. Moreover, he found that he could see the bloody stains of human wreckage more



clearly too.

Kelly folded the sunglasses and slipped them into a pocket within his gray jacket, not far from the bulge of his .38 automatic. He rubbed a hand from front to back through his short, graying hair, the deep lines in his face becoming more like crevices as he stared at the horror of what had happened. Despite how hardened and used he was to investigating murders, bombings and other acts of terror, he had never managed to shake off the personal relationship he naturally felt with the victims, or their pain. His eyes narrowed amid symmetrical patterns of lines on his face as his deep blue eyes moved across the scene, trying not to miss anything.

Special Agent Donna Marshal paced slowly at his side, also taking in the scene of absolute carnage. Somewhere in her forties, she was not unattractive, with long brown hair and a pleasant face. Most of the weight she carried was muscle, the result of a rigorous exercise program, though the suit pants and jacket she wore made it difficult to be sure. Like her partner she sported an automatic, holstered out of sight, just inside the left side of her jacket. She too slipped off her sunglasses, revealing piercing green eyes, and like Kelly, she felt deep dismay at what she saw.

Several corpses remained at the scene, some still propped up inside their smoking vehicles, others lying twisted on the hot asphalt. Worse still were the body parts, unmistakable hands and occasional organs and the like. *Those* were the things Donna didn't like. As the pair neared the epicenter of the explosion, Donna stared down at something she guessed to be the remains of someone's knee.

The burned out remains of the riot bus stood still and silent before them as various officers taped off sections of the road to keep out spectators.

"Give me a whole body any day," she said quietly to Kelly. "I don't mind a body full of bullet holes or beaten to death, but I don't like this anatomy-class thing."

Roy Kelly nodded. To him it wasn't such a big deal. What mattered to him was catching whoever did it so that they could prevent it happening again. From the news of two other blasts across the city already that morning, he had few illusions about stopping the bombings anytime soon.

"Hmm," was all the reply he gave.

They stared at the bus. Most of its center was gone or at best hanging by thin twisted metal shreds in unrecognizable, singed masses. No visible bodies remained in the bus, or even body parts for that matter, most having been blasted out in the initial explosion. Long, gnarled metal fingers seemed to reach outward from within the bus where the blast had extruded them in its outward haste. No windows remained, and what little there was to mark the shape as that of a

bus was charred black from the resulting fire. Steam rose and hissed in a few places where remnants of heat still occupied the burned-out frame, the fire brigade having moved on to cope with other crises along the block.

“Big blast,” Roy finally noted, stating the obvious. “We need to get a team in here now, and make sure those fire fighters don’t come back and hose away any more evidence.”

He paused, noticing a small chunk of human intestine hanging from a sharp hook of metal not far from where he was standing. “Whoever did this, they’re serious,” he said. “I think we can expect some sort of message or demand real soon.”

“Twenty cops,” Donna noted, casting her eyes about. “I’ll pull out all the stops. There’s gonna be hell to pay for this.” Her partner shook his head in disbelief at the horror.

“I’d say there already is,” he replied.



Less than an hour later Roy Kelly and Donna Marshal arrived not far from the Chandler Memorial Palace to find a similar scene of chaos. Unlike the Domain Road scene, there was little sign of fire, but the devastation and carnage were very familiar. Where resultant fire and metal shrapnel had been the prime causes of death and injury on Domain Road, glass and plastic shards had served to kill and maim as many victims at the second site.

Kelly and Marshal passed by many medical teams working frantically to retrieve or comfort particularly bloody victims as they neared the remains of the tourist attraction. Without exception the victims sported deep gashes or actual impalements, where flying shards had done as much damage as any machine gun could possibly have achieved. Glass fragments crunched beneath their shoes as they drew closer to the smoking shell of the building. Numerous wide and stark bloodstains marked the pavement where the many victims had been cut down.

The palace itself lay in ruins, brought down until it was little more than a single storey in height, and a mass of splintered and shattered glass and plastic. What few metal beams had been included in the building to reinforce it lay hidden amid the mass of shimmering, sharp spears. The razor-sharp remains, jutting about in a tangle of lethal shards and chunks made the task of body retrieval almost impossible, though it was quite clear from the first few minutes that no one within the building had survived.

Only one small girl had beaten the odds, found unconscious and with surprisingly few injuries thanks to the presence of a rather large doorman who rested upon her during the worst of the explosion and resultant collapse of the building. Trudy Drewery was lucky indeed, although with the memory of her mother’s body being slashed and speared so cruelly, she might have

disagreed.

Roy and Donna were met by Special Agent Gary Alderman, an experienced colleague from their own Washington unit. Gary was tall and lean, similar to Roy, with graying hair and a gaunt face. He looked particularly somber as he met them close by what remained of the main palace archway. He took several crunching paces in their direction as each agent stepped between large chunks of shattered plastic.

“Two bombs at least – probably planted on the first floor, Muldoon says,” he explained, not bothering to greet them. Gary felt little need for formalities, and wasn’t feeling particularly chatty after all he had seen. “Maybe even three bombs. We’ll know more later,” he assured.

“How many dead?” Roy asked.

“Can’t tell because we can’t get to anyone inside the building,” he explained, shaking his head. “They should never have built this thing. The bomb turned it into a nightmare – bits of glass through the victims for most of a block in every direction. They never stood a chance.” He drew a breath, obviously already bitter at the loss of life caused by the very nature of the building, then quickly answered his superior’s question as accurately as he could. “I’ve got sixty confirmed dead already on-scene, another thirty more acute, and probably another... fifty at least inside the... what remains of the building.”

Roy Kelly nodded. “Let me know as soon as you know anything about the explosive used and how they set it off. Anyone taken responsibility yet?” He knew the answer before he asked, and Gary’s negative nod confirmed it.

“This is already out of hand,” continued Roy. “Three hits in one morning – you can bet these guys are going to keep going. Let me know as soon as you have anything, Gary. *Anything!* You’ve got to know it isn’t going to stop here.”

“We’re on it,” Gary replied, his thin face looking more pale than usual. “I’ve got local enforcement assisting and some of my agents already doing a sweep of local businesses for unusual activity, plus surveillance footage.”

“Good,” replied Roy. He sighed, looking about him at the countless pools of blood amid the sparkling crystals and shards. Where burned charring had marked the first scene as the most common sign of horror, bright red blood stains among the clean, splintered remains of the palace marked the second. “We *really need* to get these people,” he said.

The three agents talked for some time, moving together amid the bloody bodies and splintered glass and plastic of the palace. Eventually, amid a flurry of cellphone calls from senior officers and even politicians, Roy Kelly and Donna Marshal left the splintered remains of the Chandler Memorial Palace, only to move on to yet another scene of chaos and death.



When Roy and Donna arrived at the ANC25 News building, the scene was only marginally better than those the two agents had witnessed earlier that day.

There were considerably fewer deaths caused by the initial blast on the street outside the studio, and the authorities had already been able to remove most of the injured from the scene. That left twenty-eight bodies in the street, and a similar number within the building.

All windows on the western face of the building were gone, along with considerable external plaster work close to the van when it detonated. Each floor contained bodies, with those nearest the windows on the western side bearing the brunt of the explosion and the resultant projectiles.

As with both earlier scenes, Roy and Donna were faced with the sight of bodies that had been speared by flying shards of glass, metal and other fragments, many of which it was obvious would have proven instantly fatal. Again they were forced to step past pools of congealing blood, and each agent was haunted by the constant crunching of glass fragments beneath their shoes.

On the second floor the two were met by Special Agent Ingrid Short, who had been placed in command of operations at the scene. Ingrid signed a request for a junior agent, a piece of white paper attached to a clipboard, and Donna Marshal could not help but think how out of place the clean white sheet looked amid the devastation of the second floor. Desks lay overturned and papers lay spread across the floor until there barely seemed a part of the floor that was not covered. Again there were the telltale pools and smears of blood where the dead and injured had either crawled or been dragged by their colleagues. And the sound of crunching glass was everywhere, as other agents and investigators crept over what remained of the open-area office.

Ingrid Short was younger and rather more attractive than Donna, with a more petit figure than the muscular frame of her superior. She wore her long blonde hair tied up beneath her FBI cap, her shoulder-holstered automatic in plain view, with her jacket removed some time earlier.

Donna had sometimes felt a twinge of jealousy as she considered the obvious beauty of the younger woman, but it was never a consuming thought. Since the fighting arts had always been Donna's passion, along with exercise and general strength and fitness, she considered the pert, slim agent little more than window dressing. Her slim underling might be able to attract men more easily, Donna knew, but she would never hold her own in an up-close encounter with a violent offender – not like Donna could. And to Donna, that was the most important thing.

“What have you got?” Donna asked.

“Van blew up outside the window in that direction,” Ingrid explained, pointing needlessly to the obvious source of the destruction. “We’ve got twenty-eight dead outside the building, twenty-two inside, and at least ten critical. Four of them probably won’t make it. Blast took out the cafeteria below us and did damage all the way up to the sixth floor. I suppose we can consider ourselves lucky that the bomb didn’t go off during the lunchtime rush. Otherwise we’d have something like a hundred dead on the first floor alone.”

“Thankful for small mercies,” Roy Kelly said cynically. “Anyone claim responsibility yet?”

“Not yet,” answered Ingrid. She looked about her at the total shambles left by the blast. “Shouldn’t take long though, I would think.”

They spoke briefly, looking across the room and examining the aftermath of the blast.

“Higher up in the building there were less injuries, fortunately,” Ingrid explained. “Most of the fragments were directed upwards on the upper floors – into the ceiling. There was one poor sod on the fifth floor who was looking out the window at the time it went off – a piece of glass just about took his head right off.”

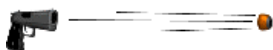
“Picked a bad time to be daydreaming,” noted Donna.

“The worst,” agreed Ingrid. Then she added, “I guess heads will roll for loafing, eh?”

Neither agent answered her, but each fell in step behind as the younger woman led the way up to the floors above. Having inspected the third floor, the three agents came upon several fire fighters on the fourth floor, still inspecting and ensuring that the building was safe from flare-ups. As with the lower floors, bloodstains close to the obliterated windows on the western side of the building marked where several unfortunate employees had been working at the time of the blast, some mortally wounded.

Ingrid Short continued to pass on what little information her fellow agents and investigators had been able to glean from the chaotic scene, but for the most part Roy Kelly and Donna Marshal simply wanted to view the devastation first-hand. When they had completed their briefing, a young male agent came stepping toward them, picking his way between several shattered computer monitors and a twisted spaghetti of cables and office furniture.

“We’ve got someone who says she has information on the bomber, Sir,” he snapped, holding a hand to his mouth as he stepped directly into the edge of a congealing pool of blood. “And there’s more,” he added, pulling a face. “You’re really going to want to see this, Sir.”



“I swear – he didn’t tell us why we were there. *I swear it!*”

The grief etched into Suzie Anderson's face gave her a different look to the polished, plastic appearance Roy Kelly remembered from the evening news. And the grief written deeply into her eyes told him that she was telling the truth. Still, he had to probe.

"So, why didn't you contact us immediately at Domain Road," he asked. "Leaving that scene was an offense, Miss Anderson."

Suzie sat at the rear of the ambulance, draped in a blanket and trying to fend off the veil of dread that had lowered about her. Shock was beginning to take its toll, obscuring her world in a mix so debilitating that she was not sure what was reality and what was imagined. Still, a consummate professional, she spent most of her time trying to force down her emotions, and to concentrate on the matters at hand.

Not only did she anticipate a long and draining interrogation at the FBI building, but there was still the pressing need to tell her story to the world before news hour. Even though her own local news station was off the air, other syndicates would be only too happy to purchase her story. Her boss, though shaken and slightly injured by the bomb, had wasted no time in assuring her of that very fact.

"Because he specifically told me *not to*," Suzie explained. "And he was watching us. We couldn't see him, but he *sure could see us*. He even told me what I was doing. You've *got to* believe me, Agent Kelly. I *had* to obey him or... I was in fear of my life."

The last part was somewhere between the truth and a lie. She *had* been afraid – completely afraid, but having heard Mirage's promise not to harm her, there was just enough hard-nosed journalist in her to believe him. Still, Suzie was happy that the comment served two purposes. It threw Roy Kelly off just enough to cause him to desist from that line of questioning, and it also helped Suzie to fend off the effects of shock, for while ever she lied, she knew her mind was in control.

"Where's the footage?" demanded Donna Marshal.

Suzie Anderson nodded toward her cameraman. "Eddie's got it," she said.

Eddie Winter handed over a digital recording, slapping it into the hand of the female FBI agent. Suzie gave Eddie a barely perceptible flash of her eyes, conveniently neglecting to mention to her interrogators that her boss had already copied the entire tape using a portable studio based in one of the station's news buses.

"You're going to find it real interesting viewing," noted Shelley Peterson, ecstatic to have been included in the discussions with the federal agents. "It's the biggest thing I've ever seen. Knocked me clean off my feet." She thought about it for a moment, then realized how carried away she had become with the moment.

“After that, it’s pure horror,” she noted, trying to tone down her exuberance. It was too late; they had already seen her enthusiasm.

“This the only one?” asked Roy.

“It’s all I took,” explained Eddie, taking special care to avoid the truth. “It’s also got the stuff I took of our studio. We had friends in that building, you know.”

Donna Marshal nodded. “I’m sorry for the loss of your friends,” she said.

Suzie Anderson studied her bloody shoes for a few seconds, then looked up and caught Roy Kelly’s gaze once more. “He’s going to call again – Mirage, I mean. You know that,” she said. It was not a question, but a statement, and Roy pounced upon it.

“We know it,” he agreed. “And for that reason we’re going to need your cooperation, Miss Anderson. I know you’ve been through a lot today, but we’re going to need your help. This... *Mirage* has let off at least two bombs in the city area this morning – and he’s more than likely responsible for the Chandler Palace bomb too.” He moved closer, appealing to her, and yet very forceful. “I need you to do this.”

Suzie Anderson stared back, her face hardened with a mix of pain and need. “Okay,” she said simply. “I want this maniac stopped too.” She looked about, as if *Mirage* might be right there in the room with them. “He could be anywhere, you know?”

Roy Kelly nodded. “Our people are on it, Miss Anderson. Why don’t we get things rolling? The sooner we get started, the more chance we have of heading off another attack.” He didn’t believe it for a moment, but it sounded positive. Besides, the one and only thing he really knew was that Suzie Anderson was their most promising lead and hope.

For Shelley Peterson it was a dream come true. As much as she detested the carnage and rued the loss of her colleagues, she could not help but recognize the hidden thrill that burst inside her at the knowledge that not only was she at the center of a world-wide news story, but she was to become part of a federal investigation. She felt a mix of guilt and excitement at the prospect.

It would be more fun to be *in* the news, she decided, than simply the sound-girl helping to report it.

## **CHAPTER 4**

Sirhan Khan toyed with the keys of the portable computer, examining the screen at length before snapping his right index finger down hard on the Enter key. He paused just long enough to view the result, then spun on his swivel-chair to eye each member of his team.

Khan’s olive skin and dark hair gave him an Eastern look, perhaps Mediterranean, and his

dark eyebrows and gently lined face made it somewhat difficult to guess his age. He was handsome, with dark, almost black eyes and just enough ruggedness to give him a mysterious air. But what had always made him most attractive to those he met, especially women, was a remarkable softness to his manly voice. Somewhere between educated sophistication and raw roughness, he had charmed his way through life, possessing a measure of charisma and control few could match.

Khan's chief skills were easily identifiable. He was a gifted leader, utilizing a mix of measured softness and brutal harshness that left his followers both devoted and yet careful never to cross him. Mostly he inspired trust, encouraging the traits and skills that he valued in each of his team members – the very traits and skills that had led them all to his side.

His second and arguably his most valuable skill was his ability to utilize computers. A hacker by nature and by trade, Khan had studied and worked tirelessly until he had become proficient, writing his own viruses, and breaking into secure installations for practice over a number of years.

He smiled, saying nothing at first, but simply watching his valued colleagues.

As he slowly cast his eyes from left to right across the seated, sprawling group, he was pleased with what he saw. Leftmost was Sylvia Gunter, otherwise known to the group as *Miss White*. She was by far his most trusted ally, having helped to hatch their daring plan, and while their relationship had moved into the personal realm, they had never allowed the team to see unnecessary physical contact. In front of the team they were mostly about business, and little else. Besides, romance was most definitely not the primary reason for Miss White's presence.

With the long natural blonde hair of her German ancestors, and a sharp-featured face, Miss White was quite attractive. But again, even those assets had nothing to do with her presence. Above all her natural gifts, Sylvia was a lethal killer, gifted in the use of a knife, garrote and many other hand-held weapons of close contact. She was a well-practiced karate student who kept her thirty-something year old body nimble with a daily regimen of exercise and gymnastics. In short, Miss White was feminine, but lethal, a trained killer who showed no mercy and little restraint.

Khan smiled at the sight of her. Miss White made him very happy indeed.

Next to Miss White was Anthony De Salve, a Frenchman otherwise known as *Mister Silver*. Another valuable asset and a trusted one, mused Khan. Mister Silver's forte was explosives, and at forty-five years of age he had been around them most of his volatile life. If someone could get him into a building, Mister Silver could demolish it, or at least do some serious harm. Trained and experienced in the use of C4, chemical weapons and even a few



homegrown ones of his own, Anthony De Salve had already proven himself invaluable to their cause.

As his code-name suggested, he was clean and bore an expensive look. De Salve was dressed neatly in a suit, minus the jacket because of the warmth of the room, dress-trousers and shining black shoes. His hair was short and dark, his body lean and tall, and his green eyes and placid face gave nothing away.

Next in the line of sprawling individuals was Leonard Tan, Khan's weapons expert. It seemed fortuitous to Khan that in allotting each of his comrades a color for a name, that *Mister Tan* was able to keep his real one, though even that was not quite true. After all, Khan knew, there was not a person present who was operating under their real name. It was an accepted part of the lifestyle, and only wise considering the stakes and the nature of their business.

Of Oriental extract, Mister Tan had spent so long in the Middle East that it was difficult to tell exactly where he belonged, or even from where he had come. In any event, no one knew and no one cared anymore. Mister Tan was brilliant at the handling, procurement and modification of weapons, and best of all he could be trusted. Tan was a heavy man, not as tall as the other men on the team, but very muscular and very tough. His balding head and scarred face gave him an added look of menace, and few had any delusions that a confrontation with him could end well for the opponent.

Next was Andrea Anger. *Miss Green* to the team, Andrea lay at the absolute opposite end of the scale to Mister Tan's brutal force. She was tall and leggy and quite young, somewhere in her early to mid twenties. She was not tough, nor was she an experienced fighter, and at first her presence had surprised others on the team. She wore her hair, which today was fiery red, plaited and hanging attractively behind her long neck and slender shoulders. The previous day she had worn a dark wig, and the day before that she was pale blonde.

Miss Green's presence was based on three things: The fact that she had been recommended to Khan, so that even though her loyalty had not been tested, it was promised. Another was her ability to act and dress up. Her acting talent had proven helpful in planting explosives in the Memorial Palace, and Khan nodded with pleasure when he recalled how she had posed as a young, blonde girl in the crowd, while carrying in the deadly cargo for Mister Silver.

The young woman's third strength was that she was fluent in English, French and Japanese, as well as possessing limited ability in Hebrew and Arabic. Not a fighter, perhaps, but Miss Green was definitely an asset. A thought crossed Khan's mind and he smiled. He had little doubt that she could have earned an acting award if she put her mind to it.

Next to Miss Green sat another woman, Jessica Leah.

Jessica sprawled across most of the length of a couch, her nonchalant nature visible in her body language. At thirty years of age, Jessica was fit like the rest of the team, a dedicated and trusted member. *Miss Gray* to her colleagues, her pretty face hid her hatred well, as did her easy-going demeanor. Beneath those guises, Khan knew, lurked a wildcat, a wild woman who would willingly trade her life for a chance to strike out at anyone she deemed to be an enemy.

Dressed now in jeans and a white shirt, she looked innocent enough, even friendly. But her wide smile served only to hide the deep, simmering anger toward authority that resided in the very core of her being. Her special gifts were with locks and electronics, and again, Khan had complete faith in her commitment to their cause. With short brown hair and soft brown eyes to match, Miss Gray posed a very deceptive figure indeed.

That left only one more in the crew, *Mister Brown*. Ivan Sempovic was their forty-year-old driver and pilot, among other practical talents he possessed. He sported dyed hair, bleached so pale and cut short so that it caught most people by surprise, and certainly took their attention. Moreover, it managed almost invariably to take people's concentration off his otherwise ordinary face, meaning that few could miss seeing him, but that most could never recall what he looked like.

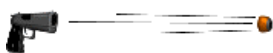
It was a simple strategy, and one he was pleased with. Moreover, it fitted in well with his fast and somewhat extraverted nature. His skin was pale, his eyes blue-green, and his speech not remarkable. Everything about him, other than his stark, pale short hair was forgettable, just as he intended. He didn't care if people remembered him, only that they remembered how skillfully he handled a car or flew a helicopter or a plane. But like the others in the group, he was unquestionably committed to their cause.

Sirhan Khan ran his gaze back and forth upon the members of his chosen group once more, then allowed himself to smile just briefly. When he spoke, his tone was masculine and firm, and yet strangely soft. Without exception each of his followers sat up, as though he had barked an order, though he never raised his voice. Such was their commitment to their cause, and to the man who could lead them to victory.

"It is time," Khan said simply and softly.

"You are going to make the call, Mister Black?" asked Miss White.

Khan nodded, then smiled some more. "I am," he answered.



Suzie Anderson leaned back in her seat, wishing that she could escape the room, the agents and the noise.

Something inside told her that she should try to make the most of the experience – a reporter’s inside scoop, or something like that. But she was not enjoying it. She had seen horror like never before that day, and she had suffered the loss of personal friends in the studio building. Moreover, the crazed individual orchestrating the massacres had, for some unknown reason, chosen her as some kind of implement of contact with the world. She was apparently to be his chosen vessel through which he could contact the FBI, and worse, she was his means to show the world the horror of his handiwork.

She leaned forward and pinched her eyelids shut over tired eyes, wishing she could escape and start the day over. But she could not escape. Now, not only were the FBI particularly interested in her, so too was a callous mass-murderer. She wanted to cry, but even tears would no longer come.

Close by, Shelley Peterson and Eddie Winter were also seated, Eddie making the most of a cup of coffee. For her part Shelley was enjoying the entire episode, relishing the action, though sad for the deaths of so many people. Her eyes scanned the large, open office, taking in the vast array of computers and technical equipment as well as the many automatic weapons strapped to passing agents. She longed to take one of those weapons and examine it, but knew better than to ask. To Shelley it was all a strange mix of upset and excitement.

“It’s like I already told you, Agent Kelly,” Suzie repeated. “We didn’t know why we were being led uptown. I swear it. It was just a hunch I had that this guy was the real deal. Reporter’s nous, you know. I never dreamed he was going to do what he did. I thought he was just going to give me the heads-up on some police bust or something like that. I’m sorry. But I’m a reporter; we take calls like that all the time.” She thought for a moment, somewhat in a daze. “Well, not *all the time*. But sometimes, you know...”

Roy Kelly nodded, accepting her version of events. Her startled reaction, which had been caught on camera for all the world to see when the first bomb exploded, was proof enough of that. On the desk before them stood Suzie’s cellphone, now resting in a charger and connected to a vast array of technical equipment.

“You really think he’s going to call you on *my* phone?” Suzie asked.

Roy Kelly nodded. “Yeah, maybe. Why wouldn’t he? Terrorists invariably have an agenda, and they usually like to make their demands known to the world. He’ll call. Your friend...”

“He’s no friend of mine,” the tired reporter corrected, a hint of bitterness in her voice.

“This Mirage character,” Kelly continued. “He told you he was happy for you to talk to us, and that he would talk to you again. Based on that alone, I would think there is a pretty good

chance he'll either contact us direct, or through you."

"I can hardly wait," she said, tired and upset.

She shook her head, trying to pull her frayed nerves together. She was a reporter – there was no time for remorse or shock or whatever it was that had dulled her hunger for the story. In her mind she knew she was on the inside now, for once, *on the inside track*. She shook her head again, determined to make the most of it.

"I'll help you all I can," she conceded, grieving over the attack on her news building, and yet unwilling to let go of any chance of keeping her edge. "All I ask is that you don't shut us out. We have a job to do too. Agreed?"

Kelly's eyebrows rose.

"Miss Anderson, you've been through a lot today, and we appreciate you coming in of your own accord the way you have – even though you made sure you sent off a copy of your tape before you gave it to us..." The level of sarcasm rose as he spoke the words, then fell again as he continued. "But I really don't think you appreciate the danger you and your team are in. This man is clearly bent on destruction, and he doesn't care who he kills along the way. This city lost twenty good police officers in that bus alone. Not to mention a lot of innocent people. Now, I know you want your story, and I'll do what I can to see you are... rewarded for your cooperation, but I really think you should take the time to consider the dangers here."

Suzie nodded. Shelley gave an excited grunt, making light of the possibilities. Eddie closed his eyes, afraid of where the situation might lead.

"He's right, Suzie," Eddie warned, shaking his head in disbelief. He had seen war, filmed it, and eventually lost his nerve. Still shaking from all that he had witnessed that morning, he was convinced he had seen enough horror now to last a lifetime. "We need to be careful here, Suz."

Suzie Anderson nodded her agreement, then faced Roy Kelly squarely.

"I'm not suggesting that we won't be careful," she agreed. "And we'll cooperate with you all we can, Agent Kelly. But if you want *full* cooperation from me, I want the *full* story. You want help doing your job, and I want some help to do mine. That's all I ask. Just don't leave me out of the story."

Shelley's eyes lit up with delight at her colleague's daring style, a small grin dawning on her mischievous face. She had seen her boss clearly stunned by the events of the day, and she could not blame her – the sight of such death and destruction had left them all dazed. For a while it had seemed that the Suzie she knew, the real Suzie, had left them.

But now, recovering and regrouping amid the bustle of the FBI office, Suzie Anderson was clearly back.



Roy Kelly's lips drew into a tight, thin line as he listened to the quiet, calm voice on the speakerphone.

A silent wave of a hand by the agent brought a similar gesture from a colleague who manned a nearby computer, proof of his effort to trace the call. But it would be a futile effort. Sirhan Khan had already seen to that with the aid of a complex rerouting program. Donna Marshal drew close to the desk along with other agents, all keen to hear the voice of the man who had suddenly become their number one priority to capture or kill.

"This is Suzie Anderson," Suzie answered. Her nerves were now slightly more settled, having regrouped and rested, and somehow she managed to contain her anger and fear as she spoke. "Who is this?" she asked.

"Hello, Suzie," the warm voice announced. "This is Mirage. I trust you are okay after your... demanding morning. I'm sorry about that – but it had to be someone. I thought it might as well be you. I hope you're okay."

"I'm fine," she answered flatly. She felt a knot begin to twist in her gut, and forced out the only words that seemed to come naturally. "But I lost friends today. You killed them."

"I *am* sorry, Suzie," he replied. What shocked her most was that he sounded as though he meant it. He was an unnerving contradiction of brutal violence and soft, warm friendliness. "But it was necessary. Do you think I might speak with the FBI agent in charge there, Suzie?"

She glanced hurriedly at Roy Kelly, who nodded his permission.

"They're listening," she said simply. "Go ahead."

Shelley Peterson held her breath, amazed at Suzie's composure. So, her boss *really was* good under pressure. Shelley wondered what it would be like to speak with a man who could kill so easily. She suddenly wanted to swap places with Suzie.

"Hello there," the voice said softly. "May I ask to whom I am speaking?" Someone pushed a button to enable a speakerphone.

"This is Special Agent in Charge, Roy Kelly," came the somber reply. "And who am I speaking with?"

"You may call me... *Mirage*," came the soft response.

There was no demand in the voice, and no apparent malice. Still, Kelly knew from bitter experience that such pleasantries often accompanied lunatics with psychopathic tendencies. A soft voice and friendly manner were often no more than a thin veil to cover deep malice and cold-blooded madness, and was certainly the case here. The real threat would not be long in coming.

“Did you see my demonstration, Agent Kelly?”

Kelly kept a cool head, not replying how he would have liked. “I did,” he said.

“Would you like to say anything?”

Kelly exhaled quietly as he glanced at his partner, Donna Marshal.

“Plenty,” he answered honestly. “But for now I’d just like to know why you are doing this.”

“Very clever, Agent Kelly,” the voice replied softly. “I see you are not rushing in – not asking me what my demands are. Your voice puts me completely at ease. You must have done this before.”

Rather than react, Kelly decided to give the man what he wanted.

“Okay then, Mirage, you have our attention. Why don’t you tell me who you represent and why you’re doing this, and what it is you want?”

“What?” Mirage answered. “No time for small talk, Agent Kelly? Not going to make conversation while your people try to trace the call? Oh, very well then, if you insist. I’ll tell you what you need to know so that you and your fellow agents can hang up the phone and go back to chasing me. I represent a movement called the VFAA – the Vengeance Fighters Against America. At least that’s what it is in *your* language. And my demands are simple.

“My organization will continue to kill your civilian population and your police officers until the corrupt United States removes its troops and its advisers from the rest of the world – without exception. What you saw today was just a hint – a *taste* of what is to come. Your streets will run with your people’s blood unless the United States withdraws *all* its military influence from *all* other borders.

“We represent *all* oppressed nations, Agent Kelly, and we will permit no exceptions! The infidel United States will suffer many dead until your government complies. This time it is we who are on *your* soil, killing *your* civilians, Agent Kelly. How does *that* feel? Rest assured, blood will run in your streets until you comply, and we will not cease until our demands are met. There will be *no* discussion and *no* negotiation. The United States *will* withdraw or its citizens will bleed to death on your own streets.”

Roy Kelly covered his eyes with a hand as he considered the surprising breadth of the demand. Even for a terrorist group, it seemed extravagant.

“Your demands seem a little broad, Mirage,” he replied. “Can you... tell me which borders we’re talking about here?”

“All borders, Agent Kelly,” came the soft reply.

“All borders...” Kelly barely knew where to go next, never having heard such a sweeping

demand. “Will you give us time to talk with our superiors?”

“No time, Agent Kelly. Besides, you call yourself *Special Agent in Charge*. Are you in charge or not?” came the cold, yet bland response. There was no apparent anger, and no overt hatred in the voice, just cold, threatening determination. Still, the threat was loud and clear.

“We will strike again, and your citizens will die – again and again until your government complies with our demands. We will show you the same mercy your planes show when they bomb our people – our women and children.”

Mirage paused, then added, “In the end your country *will* accede to our demands.”

The voice was so confident and so factual that Kelly felt deeply troubled.

“The only question will be *how many* innocent people must die before you listen. Today we revealed ourselves to you, Agent Kelly. Tomorrow we will continue to hurt you until your country surrenders and gives us back our lands.”

“Which lands?” replied Kelly, leaning close to the speakerphone, sure to make himself heard. “Please listen to me. We’re listening, and we’ll work with you – but you have to give us time.” To his distaste, Mirage had clearly terminated that line of reasoning. He made no effort to reply to the agent, but instead spoke softly again to Suzie Anderson.

“I’ll speak to you again soon, Suzie,” he assured her. “Thank you for putting your faith in me this morning. I will remember that. Please, work with me Suzie. I want only good things for you.”

To Kelly’s annoyance, the line crackled and went ominously silent. A quick glance and a negative nod from the technician who had been trying to trace the call told Kelly all he needed to know.

“Never got a fix, Sir,” came the predictable summation. “He jumped all over the world to make that call. No chance at all of tracking him. Could have been next door or in India for all I know.”

Suzie Anderson slumped forward in her seat again, shaking her head. “A terrorist likes me,” she groaned aloud. “Am I supposed to be *happy* about this – or worried? Because all I am, is terrified.”

Roy Kelly did not answer. The room became filled with quiet mumbling as Kelly spoke out loud, a mix of spoken thoughts and loud commands.

“*Accede to our demands!*” he mimicked. “What the hell kind of word is *accede* for a terrorist?” It was a rhetorical question, but Kelly explained anyway. “This guy is educated – and he’s very cool. He’s not your low-class disgruntled Iraqi. I want a voice examination, and anything you can give me on the trace. Find out who he is. He’s very cool and he knows what

he's doing – *some one* must have heard of him. Try the *Mirage* – *desert* thing. Maybe he comes from a country with lots of deserts. So make sure you include anyone of Middle-Eastern origin who has studied English. Add that to the list.”

Kelly was met by a flurry of suggestions and questions. Amid the din he shot a long look at his partner, Donna Marshal, then quietly confided in her.

“This guy makes my blood run cold,” he said. “There's just no... emotion in his voice. I mean, he's just killed a hundred people and it's like he... was J-walking or something.” He drew a long breath. “I think we're really in for it this time.”

“We'll get him Roy,” she said confidently.

Kelly nodded, but knew in his heart that many more people would die before they could hope to stop Mirage.



As he hung up the phone, satisfied that he had portrayed his demands exactly how he intended, Sirhan Khan felt almost elated. So did his team. Loud bursts of laughter and spontaneous congratulations erupted from the group of hardened individuals. They had killed, each one having played their role, and no one felt remorse. On the contrary – death and panic were all part of their plan.

Mirage grinned. His dream – his ultimate goal – was in progress.

## **CHAPTER 5**

Early mornings were Dean Fawcett's favorite times.

Rising before dawn gave him time to prepare for the day, something he needed to help him cope with the constant pressures of managing the Eastern Bank And Loan Company. Dressed neatly in a dark suit, white shirt and pale blue tie he then walked briskly to work, a distance of four blocks, and part of a feeble keep-fit plan.

In the absence of any real effort, Fawcett thought the walk was better than nothing, and he was happy in his delusion. He was overweight and under-fit, a state he attributed to being close to fifty. Once at the bank the air-conditioning would kick in, and any discomfort he felt from the exertion would soon be forgotten, he knew.

He arrived outside the restored sandstone structure, which fitted in with town planners' attempts to maintain historic styles. The two-storey building was neat and freshly painted, and



did its part in keeping with a tasteful image in its street. Inside, it had been refurbished too, fitted out with the necessary alarms and computer network that were part of modern banking.

Fawcett greeted two of his staff, who waited patiently at the bank's side entrance, and he was quietly pleased that they showed sufficient enthusiasm in their work to arrive early. Sabrina Duncan and Joel Pinkerton had worked at the bank longer than Fawcett, each working their way up through the ranks as far as they could. Both were in their thirties, smartly dressed, and both were keen and talented enough to pursue management roles, but everyone in the bank knew that neither would be gaining promotions within their small banking institution anytime soon.

Those on the inside quickly learned that such promotions only came when existing managers either retired or passed away, and it was difficult to see any such scenarios eventuating in the near future.

Sabrina looked smart in her dress pants and jacket, with a sleek, black case in one hand. She wore her dark hair strategically short so as to always appear neatly groomed. Joel too, wore a tasteful suit and carried a matching case, his fair hair encased in a liberal coating of mousse to guarantee his slick appearance.

Whatever their strategies, Dean Fawcett valued his two subordinates; they were punctual, neat and had always been loyal. He could ask nothing more. Only one negative thought scurried through his mind as his two conscientious employees slipped aside from the heavy door to make way for their boss. What a pity it was that the other two junior staff, not yet present at that time, did not adapt such productive attitudes.

Fawcett glanced about before inserting his master key in the main lock. It hung from a short chain hidden within a pocket inside his suit jacket, and the manager allowed the key to hang just briefly as he eyed a young blonde woman approach along the side-street. She was pushing a pram, looking down into the stroller and whispering quietly to her baby as they neared.

*Nothing unusual in that*, Fawcett knew, as many people used the laneway early in the morning. What struck the vigilant manager most, to his own embarrassment, was how attractive the young mother was. Even though she kept her head down as she murmured to her baby, obscuring her face, he could not help but notice how shapely she was, dressed in blue jeans and a matching denim coat.

The sight of her made him sigh.

In the mundane routine of his job, Fawcett knew, he had forgotten what it was like to enjoy life. Without a word, and in an instant this young mother made him realize just how sheltered and boring his life had become. He had no wife, and no prospects of ever finding one. Worse still, he could see no way to ever break out of the life he had chosen.

He dismissed such mental wanderings and inserted the master key into the lock. Glancing once more to check that the lane was safe, he then pushed open the door and moved quickly inside, issuing an unnecessary order over his shoulder for Joel to close it behind them. After all, customers were not due to enter the bank for another half hour.

Fawcett slipped quickly across the polished vinyl flooring, his black shoes tapping pleasantly as he moved toward a security panel fitted at one end of the bank's long service counter. With an index finger he hastily punched in a code, anxious not to risk a false alarm. He had never yet failed to enter the correct code in his time with the bank, but he had always imagined how the chatter would echo about within those old walls on the day he actually did err.

Such a failure would automatically bring police hurrying to the bank, and would be sure to cause a murmur in the town. It was a silly fear, he knew, but a reality he did not want to test. A small sigh of relief passed his lips as a red light on the panel became constant green, telling him that the security system had been successfully deactivated. He was always glad when that simple task was done.

To the nervous bank manager's horror, he turned to see the young mother, still pushing her pram before her, ushering Sabrina Duncan and Joel Pinkerton before her. Fawcett's life-long, most awful fear descended upon him like a black phantom as he realized that it was not in fact a baby the young woman had in her pram, but rather a dark, automatic machine gun, complete with a large silencer.

Dean Fawcett thought he would vomit on the spot, but just barely managed to hold his breakfast down. He also managed to remain quite still, just as the young blonde demanded.



Special Agent Roy Kelly stood at one side of the large office while a small sea of agents gathered close to him for the morning's briefing.

Kelly looked tough, the lines on his face etched more deeply than normal – if that was possible. Donna Marshal moved close to Kelly, noting the various scientific officers and specialists who also joined the murmuring throng. Almost without exception there was a heaviness that hung over those present. Kelly wasted no time in calling the meeting to order.

“Let's start with what we've got,” he demanded.

He shot a glance to Maria Donavan, their thirty-year-old Italian-born liaison officer who had spent most of the night in discussion with foreign agencies. Maria pursed her thick lips and squinted through heavy, black eyebrows. She seemed unusually coy.

“Nothing, Boss,” Maria admitted reluctantly.

She nodded to Jeremy Craig, a young technician close by her. Jeremy was so young that he had not yet managed to grow a full beard, though not for want of trying. He remained tight-lipped, allowing Maria to take what he perceived as ‘the heat’ for him.

“We’ve been on it all night. The voiceprint is unknown. He’s not on any of our systems. We went through all the channels – Interpol, CIA, NSA, MI6... all the foreign agencies.” She trailed off to make her point. “No one’s got the voice print and no one’s ever heard of this *Mirage* character. He’s either kept his head awfully low or... Or he’s just a schmuck who picked his name off a cereal box. *Nobody* knows him.”

“Keep on it,” insisted Kelly. “Trust me – *somebody* knows him. We’ve got to know who we’re dealing with if we’re going to stop him striking again – and Kenny tells us that he will strike again.” He nodded in the direction of their resident psychoanalyst, Kenny Belcher.

“Oh, he’ll definitely strike again,” assured Kenny. “And more likely sooner than later.” At almost sixty, with a balding head and a reddish face, Kenny was the oldest on the team, and unlike the young technician, he held no fears about adding to the discussion.

“I can’t tell you much yet, Roy, and I don’t want to insult you at this time by telling you you’re dealing with a serious individual who will definitely carry through with his threats. He’s not insane, not delusional. He’s probably driven by hate, and nothing more. Oh, and he won’t be working alone. That may be the only thing about *Mirage* we actually *do* know at this time.”

Kelly’s eyes skipped across the crowd.

“So we don’t know who he is yet,” he prodded. “Let’s talk about what we *do* know then. For those of you who don’t know him, Ted Muldoon has been called in to head our scientific detail.” He pointed with a finger to indicate a well-groomed, dark haired man of forty years standing some distance to his left. “Tell us what you got, Ted?”

Ted Muldoon launched into his report without hesitation.

“They’re using a C4 variant,” he explained. “Chemical analysis indicates the presence of certain chemicals that are designed to throw us off being able to trace the C4’s origin. To spare you the science lesson, we suspect that the batch came from the Middle East rather than homegrown. And they had plenty of it. The worst of the bus damage was done by wrapping the bomb in nails, and placing the whole package inside a steel canister.

“The palace was brought down with two smaller packages, but without the shrapnel. Now, as much as I know that flying glass killed a lot of people, we can count our lucky stars there was very little *steel* shrapnel. Maybe they figured the glass and plastic would do the trick for them.”

“Maybe,” countered Donna. “Parking a van full of explosives beside a road is easy stuff,

but getting a heavy payload into the palace would have been a whole lot harder – and more difficult to hide. Could it be they didn't have shrapnel on that bomb because it was just too hard to hide – or carry."

"*Bombs*, actually," corrected Ted. "There were two in the palace. And in answer to your question – maybe. Both bombs were smaller than the van bomb, but in such a... unique structure, it wouldn't have taken near as much. Child's play really."

"Well it certainly made its mark," noted Roy, his tone serious and impatient. "What about the TV station, Ted?"

"Same variant of C4," the scientist explained, rubbing his jaw thoughtfully. "The explosive was detonated by cellphone or small radio-control. We haven't been able to find enough pieces of the devices to say for sure yet. There was too much damage in each case to give you clear answers, but we've got every available agent on it."

"So we're not dealing with suicide bombers then?" posed Roy.

"So far, it doesn't look that way," replied Ted. "But they *are* serious. Each of the devices was more than capable of accomplishing its task. Just the fact that there seems to be a bit of overkill might indicate an amateur, maybe."

"Or a zealot?" offered Ingrid Short. "I can tell you from my own detail that whoever did this was intent on making sure of maximum destruction. We've got a lot of dead people."

"What about the targets?" asked Roy, intent on moving on. "What's the relationship there?"

"No obvious links between the targets," replied Ingrid. "Not yet."

"Well," Donna broke in, "the most obvious is the reporter, Suzie Anderson. Mirage contacted her early in the morning, around eight, and managed to talk her into covering the riot bus explosion. Set her up and had her cameraman filming without ever telling them why they were there. So, if nothing else we've got footage of the blast."

"So does half the world, thanks to the fact that they copied the tape before they gave it to us," noted Roy distastefully. "Were you able to get anything off it, Jeremy?"

Though nervous, the young technician was quite brilliant, with an eye for detail and a flair for inventiveness. He quickly turned on a data projector and began showing some stills he had taken from the news footage.

"Not much, Boss," he admitted. "The van was stolen late the previous night. We've been through the footage over and over. There's no one using a phone, so our man appears to have kept himself out of the shot – as he would. From his call to Suzie Anderson, he was able to see *exactly* what she was doing, as well as the bus, so it's likely he was behind her, and on the same

side of the street. I've made some recommendations as to likely positions. They're here on the map." He hastily moved forward through his presentation to display an aerial view of the scene, complete with buildings marked where Mirage might have positioned himself.

Jeremy then handed Roy Kelly a fistful of large photographs he had taken from the news footage. Roy flipped through the enlargements of the pale gray van from which so much carnage had been launched.

"What about surveillance footage from any of the scenes?" he demanded gruffly.

"Not a thing," admitted Jeremy nervously. "But we're on it, Boss."

"Stay on it," snapped Roy. "Security footage would help. Maria, I want you and your team to stay on the voiceprint. Surely *someone* has heard of this creep. This thug can't have just come into town and blown the place up without *someone* knowing who he is. Also, find out if he's working alone. Someone may have seen who planted one of the bombs. In the meantime we've got some paperwork and some photos for each of you to take.

"I want teams out there – check for more surveillance footage, knock on doors. Do whatever it takes. I don't care. I want results. It's only a matter of time before this maniac blows up some more innocent people. We've got unfettered cooperation from local, state and federal law-enforcement. *Everyone* wants this lunatic caught. Now, go to it."

"Only a matter of time," Kenny Belcher echoed eerily, the aging psychoanalyst rubbing imaginary hair back on his balding head as the crowd dispersed. Then, like a voice of doom he added, "You can bank on it."



*"Move to the wall!"*

Andrea Anger's voice snapped with such sharp volatility that the surprised and shaken bank employees had no choice but to obey. The fact that she kept the business-end of her silenced Uzi trained on them helped give teeth to her shrill command.

Dean Fawcett felt his stomach churn wildly as he watched four more armed individuals make their way quickly into the bank behind the first young blonde woman. His mind began to play games with him as he was tempted to doubt the seriousness of the situation, for while the man who entered the bank behind the young blonde looked dangerous enough, it was difficult for the bank manager to believe that the other two females could be potential killers.

After them came a tall, thin man carrying an overnight bag, and apparently no weapon at all. Fawcett's mind raced, at first terrified, and then surprised that not one of the armed thieves had bothered to wear a mask. Instead, each wore sports caps, with the brims facing forward to

cover the top portions of their faces from the downward-pointing security cameras.

“*Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!*” was all Fawcett could manage at first, as their captors hurriedly forced them to line up against one wall of the bank.

Sirhan Khan remained quietly satisfied as a series of shrill, feminine shouts from his capable accomplices forced their captives into submission.

Sylvia Gunter, her long blonde hair dancing about beneath the cover of her cap, moved quickly throughout the offices and tea-room at the rear of the bank, then the restrooms to ensure that all staff were accounted for. It was an unnecessary move, since the group had had the bank under surveillance all morning, and the previous afternoon. They had taken the time to familiarize themselves with the routine, the number of staff and what each looked like.

“Mister Fawcett,” announced Khan. “Your bank is under new management as of now, but if you simply obey, *no one* will need to be harmed. I hope that is clear to you.”

Fawcett’s eyes widened at the use of his name, but he said nothing as he was forced to sit on the floor with Sabrina Duncan and Joel Pinkerton. Sirhan Khan waved a silenced Uzi down upon the helpless bank manager, and Fawcett felt just a hint of hope at his captor’s next words.

“My name is Mister Black,” explained Khan. “And you and your staff can all go home today with a wonderful story to tell, as long as you all do *exactly* what you are told. But if any of you tries any heroics, you will die. Are we clear?”

With guns waving in their direction, none of the staff were in a mood to argue.



Dean Fawcett’s stomach twisted once more at the obvious deceit of what he was doing.

He knew very well that the tinted windows of the bank would have prevented outsiders from seeing in, though he and his captors had a very clear view of the quiet, morning world outside. He felt weak and without courage, and had no idea of what to do. No amount of training could ever have prepared him for the harsh reality of a genuine armed robbery. The sight of Khan’s Uzi made the aging bank manager want to vomit.

And while Fawcett could not see what was happening outside the side-door of the bank, he knew that the remainder of his staff would be gathering, standing about and waiting for entry. One had already pressed the entrance buzzer. His heart sank as Sirhan Khan glanced through the peephole in the center of the door, then announced the presence of all four junior staff outside. Khan knew from the time he and his team had spent preparing that this was the full compliment.

Just for a moment Fawcett considered crying out a warning to his remaining juniors, but he had no misconceptions of heroism, and the menace of so many automatic weapons pushed

down the temporary and rather futile thought. By now he had seen the tense faces of his captors, and while he had never actually seen a silencer, he knew from movies exactly what one was.

Any mislaid heroic efforts could only result in the silent demise of both he and his staff. Surely it would be better to let these crazed individuals play out their game, he reasoned. Just do that, he told himself, and they could all go home healthy and whole at the end of the day. No amount of money was worth dying for.

Still, he felt nauseous as he pulled the thick door wide open to let the four remaining staff in, each young face nodding to him without ever realizing that several automatic weapons were trained on them. Only when the door swung shut did Khan and his team announce themselves, and by then it was too late to escape.

Kyle Zelman, Sheila Pride, Aaron Man wearing and Emily Western paraded toward where their other colleagues waited, all hands raised in fear as they were ushered along. Dean Fawcett followed at the rear of his four underlings, unable to face them for having led them so willingly into such a trap.

Shaking and afraid, each did as they were told, but none was able to avoid hastily glancing about them to view both their unmasked captors, their silenced weapons, or the sight of a tall, thin man scurrying about with small parcels that he was hurriedly taping to pillars within the bank.



Each of the hostages grunted in protest as Andrea Anger and Jessica Leah bound their wrists and mouths with silver tape. The procedure was quickly repeated for all captives with the exception of the particularly pale and frightened Dean Fawcett. Then all the prisoners sat, leaning against the wall and facing the large rectangular door of the bank's safe just meters away as their boss was dragged to his feet, then pushed close to the enormous steel barrier.

"Fifteen minutes until opening time!" snapped Sylvia Gunter, her strong German accent adding impetus to her sharp tone. Sirhan Khan glanced at his wristwatch to check the time, then spoke an order to the bank manager.

"Open the safe door," he said.

Dean Fawcett was surprised at first by the softness of Mister Black's voice, and was momentarily taken back by it, just as he had been earlier at the sight of so many young females waving guns.

"I can't!" he responded automatically, not thinking before answering.

Calm, as was his trademark, Mister Black blinked slowly, smiled just barely, then sighed.

He then allowed his Uzi to hang loosely from his shoulder and took yet another weapon from inside his jacket.

The bank manager recognized it immediately as an automatic pistol, like the ones he had seen on television, and like all the other weapons toted by the thieves in his bank, it was equipped with a long, black silencer. Khan leveled the automatic pistol in Fawcett's direction, and the banker staggered back a pace at the gesture, quite terrified.

"Mister Fawcett, do I really have to kill to achieve a simple request?" Khan asked.

Fawcett held up his hands in a gesture for restraint.

"No... please," he stuttered. "It's on a timer. I can't just open it like..." He never completed his sentence.

"*Enough!*" announced Khan, unruffled and yet quietly committed. "Miss Green, would you come here please?"

His words were spoken without haste or bitterness, but the young blonde who had originally been posing as a mother pushing a pram did not hesitate. She sprang to Mister Black's side. When Khan spoke again, he directed his words to the shaking bank manager.

"Mister Fawcett," he explained. "You manage a bank. You have all these people in your employ, so you must be familiar with the principle of, shall we say, learning whether or not you can trust them. After all, they are dealing with... *your* money, aren't they?"

"The bank's money," Fawcett corrected without thinking. He smiled weakly, genuinely hoping that the soft voice of his tormentor might mean that he would see reason. It did not.

"You see," Khan continued, "Miss Green, here, is a new member to my team, and while she comes highly recommended to me, I have not yet had the opportunity to... shall we say, *test* her. You must surely understand this principle – as a fellow manager, I mean."

Fawcett nodded hopefully, deathly afraid.

"Miss Green," Khan continued, handing her his silenced automatic. "Would you please shoot... *that one* for me?"

He pointed with a finger to Kyle Zelman, one of the juniors who had arrived late. Still in his early twenties and bearing the scars of uncontrollable acne, Kyle looked up, sucking in air and hurriedly mumbling something unintelligible through his nose as the silver tape held securely to his struggling lips.

"In the head, Miss Green, if you would," Khan stipulated, his voice as soft as ever.

"My pleasure, Mister Black," she replied with a small smile.

Even as Dean Fawcett's face was registering the shock and horror of the threat, his shaking hands rising again in a gesture for peace, Jessica Anger lowered the dark weapon at the



wide-eyed young man seated against the floor before her.

She sighted along the cold, heavy automatic, shivered with obvious glee, and began to squeeze the trigger.

## **CHAPTER 6**

Kyle Zelman's head thumped hard against the wall as Jessica's bullet punched a small hole neatly in the center of his forehead, then exploded from the rear. Blood and brain showered forth behind him, leaving several small chunks of flesh and short, dark hair stuck to the wall. The young man grunted with the impact, cutting off his muffled protests instantly.

The shot itself emanated little more than a sharp sniff, and was immediately overshadowed amid a myriad of terrified and shocked complaints and cries of terror from either side of the doomed victim, albeit muffled ones. Those closest to the young teller leaned away, as though to remain close to him might somehow result in suffering the same quick, cruel fate he had.

The young man slumped slowly forward, then to his right and on to the legs of Sabrina Duncan, staining her neat black dress pants with stark, glossy blood. She tried to scurry away, as did her fellow prisoners, but found the task impossible and unadvisable as she came to her senses and realized that many weapons were trained on her. While Kyle's punctured head continued to spit blood on her pant-legs, she shivered and tried to remain calm.

As the natural and unavoidable hubbub died down behind the restraining barriers of silver tape, becoming a series of shrill whimpers, muffled grunts and heavy breathing, Sirhan Khan again addressed the ailing banker, who had by now dropped in defeat to his knees. Fawcett's head was shaking from side to side, his face twisting and his mouth sagging open in dread.

"Now," continued Khan, calm as ever. "If you would be *so kind* as to open the safe door for me. Do that and we'll be on our way. I promise."

"*I'm sorry! I'm sorry!*" blurted Fawcett, almost completely enveloped in shock, speaking to Kyle Zelman's slumping form as though the young man might hear and forgive him. "I didn't know they would do it, Kyle. It's the *bank*... It's *their fault*... *They* tell us to say that..."

He was blubbing, barely coherent.

Sirhan Khan retrieved his smoking automatic from Jessica Anger.

"Well done, Miss Green," he said. "You realize of course that you had to be tested." It was as though he was totally oblivious to the sniffing, mumbling bank manager, and to time.

"No trouble," Jessica replied. "Anytime." She too, acted as though it was as simple as

passing the salt.

“Running out of time here!” called Sylvia Gunter, not nearly so placid. In line with her volatile nature, Sylvia needed action, and she needed it quickly.

“Quite, quite,” noted Khan calmly. “Mister Fawcett, would you be so kind as to spare another of your valued employee’s lives and to open the safe door for us – that would be *very helpful*.”

On the floor Sabrina Duncan began to almost scream from behind the veil of silver tape over her mouth.

“You want me to kill her too?” asked Jessica, keen enough.

“No,” replied Khan simply. “No indeed. I think our young banker has something to say. He leaned down and pulled the tape from the woman’s struggling mouth, but not before giving her a solemn warning. “If you scream, of course I’ll kill you – you understand that?”

Sabrina did not bother to answer. Instead, she directed pure bile toward her boss, her words spitting between exposed, well cared-for teeth.

“You filthy *animal!*” she sprouted. “How *could* you? You killed him! *Damn you!* It’s only *money!*” She turned her attention suddenly to Khan, cautiously lowering her voice, and her bitter tone.

“*Of course* he can open it! It only takes two of us to use our keys and a combination and he can open it.” Then she was spitting bile at her boss once more. “You *animal!* I’ll see you buried for this, you filthy...”

“Enough!” Khan cautioned. Sabrina fell silent, breathing huge gulps through saliva and teeth. “Quickly now,” he demanded of his new ally. “Who will it need?”

“Him and me, or him and Joel can do it,” she volunteered, motioning with her head towards Pinkerton, who shook his head and tried to remain removed from the negotiations. “It just takes two of us, that’s all...” She trailed off, unable to take her eyes off the bleeding head of Kyle Zelman, now forming a puddle of blood that threatened to stain Sabrina’s stylish shoes.

“Come then,” replied Khan politely. “Let’s get you up out of that.”

He replaced his automatic in its holster and bent to lift her, taking care to help her avoid any more blood. Sabrina did not pull away, but went willingly with him, both because of the softness in his voice and to escape the ever-growing puddle of Kyle’s blood. Khan removed the tape from her wrists.

The remainder of the bound staff watched fearfully as Sabrina Duncan hurriedly unlocked a smaller safe close by, then took two keys from it and gave one to her boss. The pair then moved nervously back to opposite sides of the large rectangular vault door.

“You couldn’t do this in a bigger bank,” explained Sabrina, nervously chatty. “This only works because we’re so small.”

“Imagine that,” replied Khan. His casual tone told her that he already knew.

Each banker inserted their key with trembling fingers while armed captors stood close by, encouraging them not to be foolish. Seeing how her boss was failing under the strain, Sabrina took the initiative and called clearly to him.

“Three, two, one, *turn!*” she said.

If the keys had not been turned within less than a quarter of a second of each other, a fail-safe system would have closed off any chance of opening the door. However, driven to perform by nothing less than an almost-paralyzing fear, both rose to the occasion, and the security system was never activated. Sabrina released her key and stood back, her face showing the same anger with which she had been accusing her boss a minute earlier.

“Now, *open it, damn you! Open it, Dean!*” She made no effort to hide the fact that she blamed him fully for their young colleague’s death, forgetting entirely that it had been Miss Green who had pulled the trigger.

Dean Fawcett reluctantly submitted, staring at the various silenced Uzis about him and knowing that he had no choice. He stood silently before the safe, and with shaking fingers began to work the tumbler. The first time he failed, and was forced to begin the process once more. But on the second attempt he gave an awkward snort, then pulled down on a short handle close by the tumbler. A satisfying and very audible click told the waiting group what they needed to know.

Sylvia Gunter rushed to retrieve three empty overnight bags that Anthony De Salve had carried into the bank. Then, with the exception of Sirhan Khan and Anthony De Salve, who remained busily rigging the explosives that had been hidden in the pram, the remainder of the group pushed past the shaking bankers and into the vault. Once inside, they set about filling the bags with cash.

Khan ushered with his Uzi. “Sit down Mister Fawcett. You too, miss. You’re quite brave. Please don’t make me shoot you.”

Fawcett obeyed in an instant, but Sabrina stood her ground, staring the gunman directly in the eye.

“Promise me you won’t shoot us if we do as you say,” she demanded.

“I can’t do that,” Khan replied honestly. “I *can’t* promise that. If anyone moves, I *will* shoot them. You should know that by now. Now, please sit. If it helps, then you should know that I don’t *want* to shoot you. Okay?”

“Then promise me you won’t shoot *me* if I behave,” she insisted.

“You really *are* brave,” Khan noted, somewhat surprised, and clearly pleased with her. “And businesslike too. Very well then. If nothing else in this world, I respect bravery. You have my word. No one will shoot *you* if you do as you are told. Now, please sit.”

She did.

Sylvia Gunter returned shortly after, then paced impatiently behind the bank’s main counter, watching the world beyond through the tinted windows of the bank. It was still relatively quiet outside, but she could already see a small group of customers gathering by the wide, sliding glass main doors, anxiously awaiting the start of trade. She glanced at her watch once more.

“They’re supposed to be opening,” she snapped. “Less than one minute. *Move it! Move it!*”

“Calm, my dear Miss White,” coaxed Khan. “Be calm. It will be alright.” And for a moment it seemed that his warm voice might even have managed to appease the torrent of wild, bitter rage that drove the blonde German war-maiden so relentlessly toward her goal.

Sylvia nodded, apparently placated, but it was like the eye of the storm, and the serenity quickly passed to reveal the tense, demanding and brutal side of her nature once more. Sylvia slipped back to the open door of the vault once more, her voice snapping orders like a sergeant major.

“Move it! Fifteen seconds and you’re out of there! *Now move!*”

Then she was back, hurriedly ordering the bank employees to stand. It was an effort made more difficult by the fact that their hands were taped behind their backs, and Sabrina Duncan found herself helping most to their feet.

“*Time!*” Sylvia announced, glancing once again at her watch.

The team trotted forth, obedient to her command. No sooner were the thieves all out of the vault than the blonde German was ordering the staff inside, snapping her sharp voice at them.

“Move! Move! Move or die, *Swine!*” They moved as directed, each then forced to sit down, with the exception of the two unbound prisoners, Dean Fawcett and Sabrina Duncan.

With his team standing free of the vault, its heavy rectangular door hanging ajar, and the banking staff all safely inside, each team member paused momentarily, noticing that their trusted leader, Khan, was not hurrying to escape. Sylvia looked suddenly even wilder than before, almost mischievous, but forced down her natural desires in obedience to her leader.

“Do you want me to...?” she began.

He cut her off.

“Miss White, I promised the young woman...” He glanced and nodded at the woman who had helped to open the safe. “What is your name?” he asked.

“Sabrina,” she answered nervously, but glad she had secured her safety in light of the hesitation to leave. “Sabrina Duncan.”

Khan’s face was placid and composed as always, his voice soft and calming when he spoke to his blonde, German assistant.

“I promised... *Sabrina*... that she would not be shot.” He tilted his head to make his point to his over-anxious partner in crime. “I gave her my word, Miss White – she will *not* be shot.”

Sylvia nodded obediently. “I understand, Mister Black.”

“Please don’t lock us in here,” called Sabrina from within the vault. “I suffer from claustrophobia. Please leave the door open. *Please*.”

“As you wish,” agreed Khan. “But we will have to push it shut a little – just to protect you, Miss Sabrina. You see, there’s going to be a little fireworks out here, and I don’t really think you and your fellow employees will fare very well if the door is open when it happens. Fair?”

“Fair,” she nodded, thankful for his apparent kindness.

“Thank you for your help,” added Khan. “It was a pleasure meeting you. I will remember you fondly.” It was true – he would.

With that he motioned with a hand, and most of the team moved quickly to the side door. Only Khan, Sylvia and Anthony De Salve remained.

“Is your little party-trick all ready, Mister Silver?” Khan asked.

“All ready,” De Salve answered, a look of satisfaction dawning on his lean face, and causing his green eyes to flash brightly.

“Good,” replied Khan. Then he motioned to Sylvia. “Remember my promise, Miss White.”

Sylvia Gunter nodded respectfully, then slipped inside the vault, her silenced Uzi hanging loosely at her side. She moved quickly, like a cat, smooth and measured and perfect. Khan loved her for her wonderful, graceful skill.

Still quietly thankful for the knowledge that she had been spared the bullet of a violent thief, Sabrina Duncan stood calmly at the far end of the line of bound, seated prisoners. Other than her, only Dean Fawcett remained unbound. Feeling horrible guilt for the death of Kyle Zelman, and still smarting from Sabrina’s stinging damnation of him, Fawcett remained standing at the far end of the line of bound, seated employees. The prisoners all watched fearfully as Miss White almost seemed to dance her way into the vault, her shoes kicking up loose cash that had

been dropped in the robbers' haste.

Sabrina's eyes flashed surprise as Miss White moved close, then flicked her arms, quick and casual, smooth, yet firm. The female banker heard only a faint clicking sound as Sylvia's weapon of choice snapped into readiness, a slender, hidden flick-knife springing forth at the deft touch of a well-practiced finger on the German's right hand. So swift and without warning was Sylvia's blow that it almost went unnoticed by her victim, who only blinked as the hand danced by.

And that was all it took. Sabrina saw nothing of the blade's strike, and she felt little pain.

She clutched her right hand automatically to the warm, throbbing sensation on the right side of her bare neck, suddenly surprised at so much wetness there. Then, unable to contain the pressure, her trembling fingers opened just enough to allow the escape of long, spurting plumes of blood that jetted from her throat in the dim light of the metal room. Sabrina's hand became immediately glossy red as her eyes followed her jubilant female assailant.

Sylvia pirouetted, retracted the unforeseen blade into the handle and slipped the weapon back inside her jacket just as quickly as she had removed it.

Sabrina felt her head suddenly pound as she struggled for clarity and understanding, while blood spurted from between the fingers she pressed so hard against the right side of her throat. The wound was not deep, but it was deadly nonetheless. Just a shallow cut across the carotid artery, and yet optimum in its effect – for Sylvia had never intended to kill her victim outright. Her intention, her deep desire, was to watch and relish the look of shock on the young woman's face as she realized that she would surely die.

And so Sylvia was amply rewarded.

Miss White grinned widely as shock of the event dawned upon Sabrina Duncan's face, blood still spitting forth as her eyes grew wide with disbelief. There was little evidence of pain, but an enormous display of surprise and deep fear as her face turned deathly pale.

Sylvia could not have hoped for a more wonderful outcome. She shivered noticeably, gasping repeatedly with excitement. Her deep blue eyes flashed insanely with unspeakable satisfaction as the dark-haired banker first staggered, then dropped weakly to her knees, thudding heavily on the cold concrete floor into a pool of her own blood.

Blood rushed down Sabrina's arm and chest, causing a dark, stark stain to glisten on her white blouse in the dim light. She gasped, but did not speak, though her eyes remained fixed on her graceful, pitiless killer for some time.

After several seconds, during which Sylvia did not cease to pant excitedly, Sabrina finally released her grip on her small throat wound, her bloody hand falling and hanging loosely as her

mind dimmed and she forgot to try to hold on to her life. Blood spat forth with renewed vigor as though to emphasize her futile state, until a few more seconds later consciousness passed mercifully from the young woman's eyes. Then the young banker fell heavily forward, not attempting to break her fall at all, her face smashing hard on the floor.

Sylvia cried aloud with insane laughter, a wild shriek that filled and echoed within the heavy walls of the vault, while those she held prisoner gave shrill, helpless cries of terror. Dean Fawcett watched in horror and disbelief, convinced that he was to blame for the tragedy he was witnessing. His heart broken, and his mind too fearful and dazed to act with any real effect, he simply stood silent while his underlings, bound and gagged made terrified, muffled sounds from behind their tapes.

Overjoyed with her work, Sylvia Gunter then returned to the open doorway of the vault and grinned widely at the waiting Anthony De Salve and Sirhan Khan. Then all three raised their Uzis and cut the prisoners down in a hail of shredding lead. Blood sprayed the walls behind the five remaining bank employees as the nine-millimeter projectiles tore through their bodies. Both De Salve and Khan ceased their firing, happy in the knowledge that all victims were dead.

Sylvia, however, continued to fire in short bursts, pumping projectiles into each victim in turn, shredding them with devastating effect until her weapon clicked noisily home upon an empty chamber. Smoke hung in the air, along with the strong smell of burned cordite, and the small gurgling sounds of ruptured chests. Only Sylvia's own noisy and excited breaths gave any sense of life in the vault, which had now become a concrete and steel tomb spattered with blood.

Sirhan Khan stared into the smoky room, watching his wild, blonde assassin with immense enjoyment and pride. She pleased him, possibly more than anything else he could think of, and it irked him to have to take her away from what she loved doing most.

"Come, my love," he called softly.

And like the wild animal that she was when killing, she responded to the soft call of his voice. Sylvia stared down at the tangle of bleeding, ruptured corpses amid the smoke for just a few more seconds, struggling to tear herself away from what to her was pure bliss. Then she turned to face *him*, the man she would trust and follow forever, *anywhere* – and she grinned widely once more.

"I did what you asked," she boasted happily, knowing that she had fulfilled his unspoken will perfectly. "I didn't shoot her."

"I know," he encouraged. "You're the best." And he felt quite sure that she was.

Calmly and casually, the three killers joined their fellow thieves, who were still waiting patiently at the side door of the bank. Then without a word, the entire group slipped into the

street beyond.



As Ivan Sempovic weaved the stolen van steadily down the block amid light, morning traffic, a fit of laughter and congratulations rang out inside.

With the exception of Leonard Tan, they were all present, and were now all remarkably jubilant. Sitting on the passenger-side of the vehicle, Sirhan Khan glanced again at his wristwatch, still grinning with his friends as he noted that it was now over five minutes past opening time for the bank. In the side mirror he could still make out the figures of people waiting outside the tinted glass doors for the bank to open.

When the van was a full block away, with the bank still clearly visible in the side mirrors, Khan turned to face the thin face of Anthony De Salve.

“Why don’t you show us your light-and-sound show now, Anthony?” he asked, still smiling.

De Salve nodded and made a satisfied face.

“With pleasure, Sirhan,” he replied.

He dialed a number into his cellphone, then pressed the send button. Half a second later there came a deep, heavy explosion from behind them as the sound of the destructive blast reached the van.

Staring into the side-mirror, Sirhan Khan was quite satisfied. A block behind him the entire front of the bank blasted out into the street, carrying along numerous waiting and unsuspecting bank customers in a sea of glass fragments and yellow flames.

## ***CHAPTER 7***

Special Agent Roy Kelly stooped down to inspect a small fragment amid the tangled, shattered debris that remained to show where the bank’s front windows had once been.

With the dead and injured removed from outside the scene, a team of FBI investigators had begun the painstaking task of sifting through the mess. The bank had exploded both inward and outward, destroying all fittings within the building and spewing forth glass, metal and sandstone like ash from a volcano. Kelly stared in dismay and anger, his determination to capture those responsible growing by the minute.

As he stood again and moved close to Agent Donna Marshal, another pair of agents



carried out a stretcher between them, upon which was a black body-bag, zipped up with its grim cargo inside. Kelly watched the men pass by, then waited as the FBI Medical Examiner, a small, bald man named Ed Monargio drew close. Having already inspected the scene both inside and out, Kelly had been waiting for the man's preliminary findings.

"What can you tell me, Ed?" Kelly asked.

"People outside the bank – no surprises," the medical man began. "Most of those who died were waiting for the bank to open – copped the full blast of the glass. So far we have thirteen confirmed dead and five more critical."

His eyebrows almost knitted together as the lines on his fifty-year-old head formed an interesting maze on his brow.

"But inside the bank – that's another story. Much more interesting. We've got seven dead in there. All but one of the bodies was nicely preserved because someone thought to close the safe door before the bomb went off. Of those in the safe we've got one with a severed carotid artery, and the rest shot to death. Multiple gunshot wounds. Automatic weapons – nine millimeter – possibly Uzis or something similar. No shortage of bullets, that's for sure."

"Why are those inside the bank so interesting, Ed?" asked Donna.

"Well, because the female with the throat wound – that's the only wound she appears to have suffered. It's almost a surgical strike, rather than... the actions of the individual or individuals who mowed down the rest of your victims. Very clinical indeed. I mean – it's like an understatement compared to the others."

He rubbed his jaw, completely removed from the horror and cruelty of what he had seen, his mind instead drawn deep into the details. "Very accurate cut, that one. That, or just a lucky strike. I'll be able to tell you more later, of course."

"Anything on the body we found outside the safe?" asked Donna.

Ed Monargio shook his head and grunted.

"You're kiddin' me, right? I can barely tell if that body's male or female, Donna. I *think* he died from a gunshot wound to the head, but I won't know for sure until I investigate more."

"Make a priority of ID-ing the bodies for us, Ed." Roy Kelly's tone was curt. "Especially the John Doe outside the vault."

"The hamburger, you mean," corrected Ed.

"Yeah, well. He might be one of the bad guys for all we know, separated from the group like that," Roy explained.

"We couldn't get that lucky," countered Donna.

"I'll let you know as soon as I've got anything, Roy," Ed said. "I've got my people

divided between this and the bodies from the... other day. But we're on it, okay."

"Thanks," replied Roy. He turned to look at the devastation, both inside and outside the bank. He shook his head again as the medical examiner moved away, then posed a question to his partner. "Why blow up a bank after you've robbed it?"

"Destroy evidence," Donna replied. "But you know I don't really believe that for a minute. I think they blew it up for the same reason they murdered a whole heap of people who were already tied up – to make a point. Same reason they're happy to kill innocent people out here on the sidewalk. To get our attention, that's why."

Kelly nodded. "Make sure someone gets all the security footage."

"Already done," Donna noted. "Ted Muldoon says he thinks it's the work of the same crew who did the D.C. jobs. He says he'll be able to tell us for sure in a few hours."

Roy Kelly shook his head again, grappling with the pressures he knew were going to come.

"I don't doubt he's right," he said. "I think this is getting right out of hand, Donna."



Wendy Appleby parted with her cash and hurried back to her poker machine, almost toppling another woman as she went. Her face showed considerable stress as she scurried along, greatly afraid that she might lose her machine while she was away.

When she returned she dumped the heavy bucket of coins before her, then sighed heavily to show how relieved she was. To Wendy's left sat a woman of similar age with long, jet-black hair that reached down to her waist. It was quite a stunning crown to an already interesting and pretty face, and the young woman returned her smile politely.

"Oh," Wendy gushed, her face slightly red from the effort and stress she had felt, her color almost matching the mass of curly, red hair she sported. "I was just *so* afraid of losing my spot. It's not good luck to change machines half-way through, you know." She pushed several coins into the slot, then pulled the handle. "I just *know* I'm due to win." She was light-headed, due to exertion and her strong addiction to gambling. "Oh," she gushed again, "I'd just hate to have lost my machine."

The black-haired beauty beside her crossed her long legs, showing off her thighs as a natural consequence of the knee-length pale pink skirt she wore, then pushed in a coin of her own.

"You shouldn't have worried," she offered with a friendly tone and a wide smile. "If anyone came along I would have told them it was reserved for you."

Wendy was surprised.

“Well, thank you,” she blurted. She nodded her appreciation, but was then lost again to the world as she became totally enthralled by the result of the latest tug of the machine’s handle. “Oh!” she groaned, the smile running from her face. “I just *can’t* seem to crack it!” She pushed in another series of coins.

The black-haired one shook her head, barely perceptibly, then turned to face her own machine. She had no interest in what she was doing; only killing time until her friends arrived. *Such degradation*, she thought, gazing about at the various addicts about her. *Western society had so much wealth, and yet also so much to answer for.*

She tried to go back to playing the machine, a small pile of change before her, while the people all about her continued to empty their buckets. She glanced again at Wendy Appleby, noticing a large mole in the center of the woman’s forehead.

It was an ugly thing, and she could not help but wonder why, if this woman had money to waste on gambling, she had not given such a distracting accessory the medical attention it so sorely demanded.

*Oh well, never mind. Perhaps she might get to do some surgery on the woman’s forehead herself... A bullet in just the right place should removed all trace of the horrid little spot...*



In the casino carpark Sirhan Khan sat in the back of the latest stolen van, its owner lying still and covered with a blanket in one corner, his neck broken.

Seated facing Khan in respectful silence were Silvia Gunter, Anthony De Salve and Jessica Leah. As Khan played with the keys of his laptop computer, each of his companions caressed their weapons, waiting for their leader’s word. In the front of the van Ivan Sempovic sat behind the wheel, with Leonard Tan beside him. Ivan watched closely as vehicles came and went from the carpark, while patrons entered and exited the Casino in an endless stream.

Sempovic rubbed a hand from front to back through his short, stark-blond, dyed hair. He hated waiting. Driving and flying were his key talents, and he would always have been much happier to be plying one of those trades, rather than waiting. He came alive during the thrill of the chase, but could barely stand to sit idly by. He could feel the agitation rising within.

“You look quite stunning today, may I say, Miss White,” Khan noted, glancing at his beloved assassin across the top of his screen. “Quite... arresting.”

“Please, Darling,” she grinned, her breaths already excited by the prospect of what they were about to do. “When we’re not on the job, call me by my name.”

“We need always to be ready,” corrected Khan softly. “I’m simply practising.”

“Very well, Mister Black,” she cooed.

Anthony De Salve leaned back just slightly, unable to miss the deep affection between the two. Khan was right; Sylvia was stunning, in an Amazon kind of way. Wearing a clean, white dress that showed off her muscular legs, and with her long blonde hair neatly groomed and hanging about her shoulders, she would be impossible to miss, even in a crowd.

*Still*, De Salve mused, *only a fool would dare to make a pass at her, let alone come between her and Sirhan Khan*. He watched the contradiction between beauty and deadliness as Sylvia smiled at Khan while slipping her silenced Uzi into a somewhat oversized, though stylish black shoulder-bag.

For his part, Khan was dressed in a slightly oversized suit. Oversized, because of the bullet-proof vest worn beneath. De Salve wore a similar outfit, and while not comfortable, he knew that the custom-made Kevlar suit and conventional flack-jacket he wore beneath would become particularly valuable in the next little while. When the bullets were flying, he felt sure he would then be reminding himself to thank their weapons expert, Leonard Tan, for having procured them.

Jessica Leah pulled on her cap so that it almost covered her short, brown hair. Like Sylvia, Jessica’s soft brown eyes gave no indication of the wildcat lurking just beneath the surface. Dressed in a similar suit to those of the men, she looked both out of place and uncomfortable, as indeed she was. A jeans-and-t-shirt girl, Jessica was not at all comfortable in the suit, let alone one covering the thick vest beneath.

Still, like the others she knew she might have need of it in the next few minutes.



The black-haired beauty left her newfound addicted friend and paced casually toward one corner of the crowded Casino gaming area. Amid the hubbub of the crowds of gamblers, she cut a fine and provocative figure, accentuating her walk as her pink skirt rode slightly up on her thighs.

It was not so much that she was striking, but that she seemed to flaunt herself, posing like a model as she strutted, pulling back her shoulders and pushing out her chest. Few male eyes could resist taking a second glance as she paraded along. So confident was her style that no one even questioned her as she pushed open an exit-door near one corner of the large gaming room and followed a female security officer along the hallway beyond.

Officer Margaret Lonsdale pushed open the door to the women’s restroom and moved to

stand before a modern, clean sink. As she ran water over her hands she looked at herself in the enormous mirror, then had her attention drawn to the door as it was pushed open. The attractive, dark-haired woman in her early twenties stepped inside, patting down her pale pink skirt as she entered the bathroom.

The young woman toted a rather large white handbag draped over her left arm, and her face looked somewhat concerned, or possibly flustered. The visitor looked innocent enough, but despite this the security woman immediately confronted her.

“You shouldn’t be in here,” Margaret said directly. “This area is for staff only. Customer restrooms can be found in three locations within the main gaming complex.” She pointed in the direction of the hallway.

The young woman flicked her head so that her long, black hair danced about her shoulders. She raised her hands in a sign of surrender. Then, to Margaret Lonsdale’s considerable consternation, the young thing broke out into a fluent burst of German.

“Können sie mir helfen? Ich habe mich verirrt?” she said.

“I don’t care about your ferret,” shot back the bemused security woman. “I just know you aren’t supposed to be down here.”

“*Ich habe mich verirrt?*” the dark-haired beauty repeated. She shrugged and held up her hands as though she was asking for help, but her question was beyond Margaret Lonsdale’s understanding. Just as it was meant to be.

Lonsdale shook her head from side to side, trying to make her point.

“I don’t understand you,” she said clearly and slowly. “But you *cannot be in here.*” She pointed to the main floor again for her visitor. “You need to go back. Go back. You need to go back.”

Another burst of German caused the security guard to shake her head some more. She sighed, trying to convey her order without resorting to force. “You have to leave.” Another long pointing gesture from her right hand in the direction of the gaming floor, then, “You have to go back – *now.*”

Margaret’s request ended as the young woman reached into her white handbag and pulled out an automatic pistol fitted with a silencer. The guard gasped and took a step backward, and instinctively rested her right hand upon the butt of her own weapon.

“I’ll kill you before you even get it out!” her visitor’s voice suddenly snapped in clear and precise English. “Please, don’t make me kill you. Neither of us would like that very much. Besides, I know you’re only doing a job. Take the gun out with your left hand and put it on the counter. *Hurry!*”

There was a sharpness to Andrea Anger's voice that forced the guard to do as she was told, despite her natural fear. Even the apparent obscenity of the next order was not enough to prevent her from obeying.

"Take off your uniform," Andrea snapped quietly. "And give me your magnetic card. *Come on! Hurry! Don't make me hurt you!*"

The guard did as she was directed, first taking a small plastic card from a pocket and placing it on the counter. Then she reluctantly removed her uniform, and a few seconds later stood nervously before her captor, dressed in underwear and a white t-shirt she had been wearing beneath her pale green regulation shirt.

"Don't tell me you're going to try and rob the place," Margaret said, disbelieving. "You can't hope to get away with it. Please just..."

"Just be quiet and step in there," demanded Andrea. "Do what I ask and there won't be any need for you to get hurt." She motioned with the menacing silencer in the direction of a nearby cubicle.

The guard swallowed nervously and obeyed, stepping forward to go in.

As Margaret Lonsdale turned to enter the small cubicle, forced to look away from her captor for only a second to make sure of where she was going, Andrea Anger stepped silently up to her prey, bringing the tip of the silencer to the back of the guard's head until it mingled with her hair. A single popping sound emanated with the excited squeeze of a trigger-finger, and Andrea saw a bright red flower blossom instantly on the wall ahead of her victim.

Margaret's brow exploded as the bullet exited, then shattered a white tile on the wall at the center of the newly formed, bright red wallflower. The guard gave a small grunt of protest at being so callously dispensed, then toppled heavily on to the toilet bowl, smashing clumsily on and over it. She hung over it with her arms enveloping it as though she was hugging a loved one.

Andrea slipped her smoking weapon inside her pink jacket, her face twisting in annoyance as she noticed a small spray of the guard's blood on her white blouse.

"*Oh what! Look at this!* Good thing I've got your uniform," she said aloud, as if Margaret might hear. "Otherwise you'd *really* be in trouble."

She placed the guard's handgun in her handbag, where her own automatic had been, then bundled the dead woman fully inside the cubicle and wrestled her upright onto the toilet so that only her bare feet would show beneath the door.

Two minutes later she was standing before the mirror just as Margaret Lonsdale had been doing, adjusting the pale green uniform. She tried to put her silenced automatic into Margaret's holster, but it was too long, and not shaped right. So she replaced the guard's somewhat heavier

and more cumbersome automatic where it belonged, and had to be content with tucking her own silenced version just inside her shirt, and tucked into her newly acquired slacks. She left two of her shirt-buttons unfastened to aid its quick retrieval.

Sadly, while she was still looking into the mirror, two more female employees entered the restroom.



Sylvia Gunter took a single swig of scotch straight from a bottle, washed it around in her mouth, then spat it out of the open side-door of the van. Then she stepped out and walked confidently toward the main building, her black handbag slung over her right shoulder.

Upon reaching the main entrance she had to pass between two security men dressed neatly in suits. She purposely raised her arms just a little and giggled in a girlish way to give the impression of being slightly inebriated, then blew a long heavy breath close to the nearest one. Her dress rode up just slightly, allowing her to do exactly what her female accomplice had done inside the Casino – distracting the men from what they really should have been doing.

*Amateurs*, she thought. *They would pay dearly for that.*

She passed into the Casino without being questioned.



Andrea Anger continued studying herself in the mirror, making exaggerated motions as though she had something caught in one eye.

One of the two latest visitors to the women's bathroom was somewhat older than the guard she had killed for her uniform, perhaps in her forties, maybe fifty. The other was much younger, barely twenty and dressed in the white skirt-and-blouse uniform of a gaming-floor hostess. As Andrea stood before the mirror, secretly glancing at each in turn, she began to smile, two twisted thoughts giving her mixed reasons for pleasure.

It struck Andrea that Margaret Lonsdale had done a fine job of looking after herself, as the dead guard's uniform fitted quite well, though it was perhaps just a little loose-fitting around the waist. Andrea could not have asked for better, a genuine sense of thankfulness giving her pleasure as she took pains to keep the small bulge there facing away from these latest, tiresome intruders.

The only part of the guard's uniform that she found truly unacceptable was the woman's shoes, which were heavy and tight, and felt more like boots. She took a quick glance behind her, noticing that she could just see the tips of Margaret Lonsdale's bare toes beneath the door, and

she wondered if these latest two intruders would be astute enough to notice and question such a thing.

Moreover, as she pondered that question, Andrea found herself amused at the question of whether or not these two meddling intruders would get to be any older. Killing was messy, she thought, but it was fun.



Sylvia Gunter ceased her girlish, drunken ruse once inside the Casino, and began to stroll leisurely about the complex, spying out the various gaming areas and the number and position of security guards.

Having already hacked into the Casino's computers some weeks earlier, Khan had been able to determine the timing and route of the cash transfer, but there was nothing like a first-hand view of the situation. The uniformed guards were easy to see; she could count at least six of them – four burley men and two women. The Casino liked to maintain a visible security presence as it helped to maintain order and peace.

The *true* danger lay in discerning those security personnel in plain clothes.

Upon closer inspection Sylvia noticed various suited men wandering about the gaming-room floor, not gambling, but simply patrolling, and she felt sure that they were all part of a plain-clothes security detail. Several bore the telltale curled white wires leading from their suits and up their necks to their earplugs, a sure sign of trouble. Two more women were dressed very neatly in suits, and while Sylvia could not be certain, she felt reasonably sure that they were employed by the Casino too. One security man was even careless enough to reveal a glimpse of an automatic in a shoulder holster, just hidden within his open jacket.

*Careless*, Sylvia noted, very careless. *He would pay too*. She patted the tiny earpiece and microphone hidden within her long, flowing tresses of golden-blond hair, then spoke softly. "Count eight guards for certain, possibly more," she said.

"Four, maybe six men. At least two women."

On the other end, Sirhan Khan could hear the excitement in her whispering voice.

"Patience, my sweet," he replied, equally as softly. "They're almost ready to do the transfer." Then he spoke to Andrea Anger. "Miss Green, are you ready to visit the control room yet?"

His voice was met with silence. Rather than panic, though, he simply waited.

Inside the Casino Sylvia Gunter patted the handbag hanging from her shoulder. It was nearly time for the party to begin.



She simply *loved* to party.

## **CHAPTER 8**

Andrea Anger glanced nervously again at the young thing peering into the mirror beside her.

She heard the quiet voice of Sirhan Khan speaking to her, but could do nothing to answer him, so began to wonder if she should make small talk with the young hostess. Meanwhile, she was acutely aware of the older female guard in the stall next to the one containing the body of Margaret Lonsdale.

“Oh, I’ve got an eyelash in my eye and just *can’t* get it out,” Andrea pouted in a somewhat affected voice.

“Oh, don’t you just hate that?” replied the blonde beside her in an equally exaggerated voice. “It’s just the worst.”

Andrea had to hide her disgust. The girl spoke as if it really *was* the worst thing that could happen. Instantly Andrea felt a burning desire to teach her otherwise, but remembered that she was only ever intended to kill the one guard to gain a uniform. Killing more would be okay, but it meant more risk, something she would rather have avoided.

She turned to face the young gaming hostess, who was friendly, and had leaned close as if she might help. Andrea ignored her, and leaned close to the mirror to continue the ruse. All the while she used the mirror to view the cubicle doors behind her. There came a loud flushing of water. Andrea turned quickly to the girl, pulling the eyelid of her left eye down.

“Do you think you could take a look for me?” she asked. “I just can’t see it myself.” She turned side on to the stalls so that she could now see the doors out of the corner of her right eye.

The hostess did not hesitate to help. She leaned close to Andrea and pried the eye open gently as she searched for the imaginary hair. Andrea heard Sirhan’s voice softly calling again as the blonde threatened to obscure her view of the stalls.

“Almost time, Miss Green,” Khan crooned. “Move quickly, my dear.”

“Hey,” the blonde gushed. “You must be new here, are you? I mean, I’ve only been here a month myself, so I’m still learning all the faces. I just don’t remember seeing you. I’m Helena.”

Not waiting for a reply, she instinctively leaned away from her patient, glancing down at the nametag pinned to Andrea’s chest. Her young blonde head dropped as she looked for the small golden tag, just enough to reveal the door of the cubicle swinging open.

“*Margaret*,” gushed the blonde. “Nice to meet you, Margaret.”

“You too, Helena.”

Andrea replied with a faint smile, but on the inside she was tense and disgusted. What a pleasure it would be to put this *airhead* out of her misery, she thought.

“Do you like the job – security, I mean?” continued the blonde. “You’ve really got it made, I reckon. Must be nice to get a uniform like that. Must be a tough job at times, though, is it?”

As the young hostess went back to the pointless quest of searching for an eyelash that did not exist, Andrea hurriedly reached her right hand into the open space where her purloined shirt had been left unbuttoned.

Even as she did she could see the older guard emerging from the stall.



Ivan Sempovic watched from the driver’s seat of the van as an armored truck arrived at one side of the casino complex, right on schedule. He announced the truck’s presence to his allies, his eyes never ceasing to consider all avenues of escape in the ever-changing traffic conditions of the carpark. Behind him, Sirhan Khan spoke into his microphone.

“The target is here, girls. Time to get moving shortly,” he said. “You should see the guards bringing in the money bins any minute, Miss White.”

Sylvia watched from a distance as three uniformed security men entered the gaming room floor from a pair of opposed, hinged fire-doors. The two doors were clipped open to leave a wide doorway, through which the men pushed two large metal bins mounted on wheels. The men’s uniforms were different from those of the casino staff, clearly belonging to the security company that was handling the cash transfer. Each man sported a holstered pistol on his hip, and the one not pushing a trolley toted a pump-action shotgun.

“I see them,” Sylvia announced. “Three guards, one shotgun, all armed.”

Rather than respond to Sylvia, Khan spoke to Andrea Anger. “How are you, Miss Green?”

When she heard the question, Sylvia Gunter’s fears began to grow, and bitter anger began to envelop her, sure that their new addition to the team was about to betray them, or at best, go to pieces. The angry feeling lingered as the wild German tried to remain calm. Her mood was not helped by the flippant response that came clearly through her earpiece a moment later.

“I’m pretty new to all this,” Andrea said lightheartedly, as though simply making conversation. “But I’m doing my best.”



The young blonde hostess waited for an answer, still feeling a burden of loneliness in the large casino establishment, and trying desperately to make friends. She smiled, waiting, hoping for a response.

"I'm pretty new to all this," Andrea answered in a friendly voice, hoping to avoid suspicion. "But I'm doing my best."

Suspicion was not to be avoided though. The guard, having heard the hostess read Andrea's nametag, stepped purposefully from the stall.

"*Margaret?*" she demanded. "Margaret *what?* I only know *one* Margaret here."

While not as skilled in the art of killing as some of her associates, Miss Green nevertheless proved quite adequate to the task, and particularly willing. Having done her best to avoid unnecessary confrontation with security staff, she now felt that she had no choice. *This* threat was not about to go away any time soon.

With her left hand she pushed the prying, blonde hostess back just slightly, using the girl's body to hide the withdrawal of her silenced automatic from her open shirtfront. By the time the guard saw the weapon being leveled in her direction, it was too late for her to react. Her hand barely came to rest upon her own sidearm before Andrea fired.

The guard was knocked backwards as three holes were punched across her chest. She stumbled until she struck an upright between two cubicle doors, a shocked look upon her face. Her hand dropped away from the weapon she had been so busily trying to retrieve, almost as though she had forgotten all about her plan to withdraw it. She began immediately to slide downward, still leaning heavily against the upright. Even before she reached the floor, Andrea was reaching her left hand up in an effort to cover the younger woman's mouth.

She need barely have bothered.

Completely stunned by the sudden violence, Helena didn't even have the presence of mind to scream. She remained almost completely passive, her arms still raised from when she had been using her fingers to hold open Andrea's eye, while her would-be patient shot her.

Andrea pressed the silencer hard against the girl's left breast and squeezed the trigger. There came a dull thump along with the familiar sniffing of the weapon, and Helena jerked just slightly. Her mouth dropped open as her attacker repositioned the silencer just a little toward center and squeezed the trigger again. Helena stood shocked and gasping as the two latest spent bullet casings sang and danced upon the polished, tiled floor, then she fell back heavily.

Shaking with nervousness and excitement, Andrea faced the dying guard once more,

noticing immediately that one shaking hand was reaching for a radio. Miss Green aimed, and then remembered that up close the gun sights would be inaccurate. She sighted along the side of the weapon, adjusting her aim, then squeezed the trigger once more. The guard's shaking hand slipped silently away from her radio as a small neat hole appeared in the woman's forehead.

Andrea pushed the earpiece hidden within her black wig.

"Sorry," she gushed excitedly. "I'm in the bathroom, and it just keeps on getting crowded in here. I'm going to run out of stalls. Give me a minute."

She moved back to the young blonde, who now lay dazed and sprawled on the cold, tiled floor, dying as her eyes and face pleaded for mercy. Straddling her, Andrea looked down at the shocked face of her victim, considering the young blonde's helpless state. She smiled, then let the silenced automatic hang vertically from her shivering right hand and fired twice more, once to the girl's heart, then once to her forehead – just as Khan had always instructed.

Helena made a small grunting sound with the first shot, gurgled, blinked, and then lay quite still as the second removed all doubt about her demise.

*"I'm back,"* Andrea gushed, her voice almost shrill.

"Calm down," encouraged Khan, reading her nervousness. "Have you killed?"

*"Three of them!"* she replied excitedly, returning her automatic to its hidden place within the unbuttoned part of her stolen shirt. Hearing the radio message, Sylvia Gunter felt considerably better about the young actress. She decided not to kill her later after all.

"Well done, Miss Green. Well done," Sirhan congratulated warmly, and Andrea found his voice strangely calming. "Hide them as best you can and move on to the control room. Don't forget to pick up any casings. And don't panic. You're doing just fine."

She began dragging the latest victims into two more stalls as Khan continued to speak.

"And Miss Green," he cautioned. "Don't forget to reload. Change clips now."

Andrea Anger sighed nervously. In the heat of the moment she had lost count of how many bullets she had fired. Quite unsure, she suddenly realized that she had probably left herself with a weapon that was either empty or very close to it. She hurriedly retrieved the weapon and corrected the situation.

Andrea retrieved the second guard's automatic and magnetic card. Then, when the two new victims were safely concealed behind closed doors, she picked up the spent casings and wiped away two small pools of blood on the clean, white tiles of the restroom with the pink outfit she had worn earlier. That done, she tossed the ruined rags in with the hostess to hide her bloody face.

With shaking hands she checked her appearance once more in the mirror, then quickly

moved out into the corridor beyond.



Sirhan Khan continued to view the screen of his laptop computer with interest, and then with the tiniest hint of a smile.

“It is time,” he announced, pushing the screen down to close it. “The transfer is under way.”

Without hesitation he stepped out of the van, followed closely by Anthony De Salve and Jessica Leah, all dressed in suits that bulged slightly in places due to the body armor beneath. De Salve toted a stylish black overnight bag and stepped quickly between the other two, then all three paced quickly toward the main entrance of the casino.



Andrea Anger strode toward the control room, picking up the pace as she heard Sirhan’s words. Just as her leader had promised, she could see a white door further along the wide corridor, and above it an embossed sign marking it as the control room. On the door was another sign that stated only staff were permitted entrance.

*A little superfluous*, she thought, *considering that entry was barred by a card-reading lock*. She felt in her pocket for the two stolen magnetic-strip cards as she strode confidently to the door – or at least as confidently as her acting ability would allow. In the pit of her stomach, however, she was churning with a mix of cold fear and burning excitement.

Above the door she noticed a security camera trained directly at her. No doubt they had seen her, she thought. She took the final few steps to the door with confidence, her pace purposeful and yet not hurried. And all the while she knew she would be displayed on a monitor to the armed staff beyond the door.

*So far, so good*, she told herself. The only thing left to do was to neutralize the control room staff, and thus the casino’s main defenses. Andrea took a deep breath and reached into her unbuttoned shirt to grip the butt of her silenced automatic. With her left hand she withdrew Margaret Lonsdale’s magnetic security card.

“Miss Green,” came Sirhan’s voice. “We’re approaching the main entrance. It’s time for you to take control. Please answer me.”

“Doing it now,” she whispered, the tension evident in her voice.

She slipped the stolen card down through the lock’s mechanism. Every tissue in her body felt tense and electric with apprehension. Taking unsuspecting female guards out of the picture in

the restroom was one thing, but this was far more dangerous and difficult. Behind this door, Andrea knew, there would be an unknown number of armed guards, all watching the cash transfer taking place, and all with access to radios and weapons. She bit her lip as the card slipped silently through the vertical slot.

Her grip on the automatic tightened so much that she began to shake.

“What’s happening?” came Sirhan’s voice. “Miss Green?”

Andrea stared at the card-lock mechanism, waiting for the essential clicking sound that would herald the inevitable firefight. But then, to her absolute dread, not a thing happened.



Sylvia Gunter stood close to a roulette table, pretending to watch some rather zealous and excited shouting that had developed as a noisy man with a southern drawl obviously enjoyed a substantial win. Even those with him joined the fuss, his loud jubilation apparently quite contagious.

The tense German watched in the distance as the three guards returned, pushing their way through opposing, swinging doors from the corridor beyond. Two of the guards pushed the two metal trolleys with noticeably more effort now, while the one with the shotgun walked just ahead. The guards were accompanied by three uniformed casino guards and two other suited men, one of whom was speaking into a small hand-held radio.

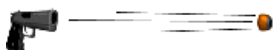
“They are here,” announced Sylvia. “They’ve just entered the main gaming room. Half a minute and they’ll be out of here. *Where the hell are you, Miss Green?*”



Sirhan Khan, Jessica Leah and Anthony De Salve approached the main entrance of the casino, their neat suits bulging from the body armor beneath as they walked. Anthony De Salve walked between his allies, and as they drew close to the two suits near the entrance, the Frenchman dropped his black overnight bag from shoulder into his right hand.

“Be calm, Miss White,” Khan cautioned softly, pretending to make a joke with his two colleagues as they walked.

Jessica and Anthony both laughed in unison, cementing the ruse. But without exception they were all tense, and all waiting and hoping desperately for a positive word from their newest recruit, Miss Green.



Andrea Anger stood close to the door, a cold shiver passing through her as she tried several times to gain entry to the control room. The voices in her ear reminded her of the urgency of the situation, adding to the tension she felt.

“Oh, come *on!*” she whispered tersely, unable to believe the failure of the card to grant her entry. And all the while she was constantly aware of the camera mounted above the door.

*Someone, she kept telling herself, would surely be inside watching her every move.*

With a calm façade that betrayed the turbulence inside her, she purposefully dropped the card, swooping down instantly upon it. Then, away from the prying gaze of the camera, she swapped it for the other guard’s card, hoping that perhaps that one might have a higher clearance level. Rising immediately from the floor, her allies’ words echoing about in her mind, she slipped the new card vertically down through the mechanism.

There came an ominous and immediate click.

Andrea seized the cold metal door handle with her left hand as her right went back to caressing the butt of her concealed automatic. She pushed down, and then forward. The door made another clicking sound, then opened easily before her.



Sylvia Gunter moved a little closer to the gaming table, smiling as though she was enjoying the success of the noisy southerner and his friends, but never allowing the progress of the guards out of her peripheral vision. She rested her right hand on the top of the handbag slung over her shoulder, silently cursing Andrea Anger.

Perhaps she might kill her after all.

“We’ve got less than twenty seconds or it’s got to be called off,” she whispered.

There was an ominous coldness in her voice that warned of the danger in denying her the pleasure of killing, now that she was so close.



Andrea maintained her professional acting ruse to the very last moment.

Inside the control room she could see at least six individuals at first glance. To her right, three were seated before a row of large monitors, two men and a woman, all in the usual casino guard uniforms. Two more suits stood close by, a few paces back from the desk-jockeys, and obviously all were monitoring the progress of the cash transfer. Another suit stood at the far side of the room, away from his colleagues, stirring a cup of coffee.

All three suits lifted their heads to view Andrea as she entered the room, each with

questioning looks. But that was as far as their doubting thoughts had time to wander. Andrea smiled broadly, disarming them for the vital second while she retrieved her silenced automatic. The suit with the coffee actually returned her smile before he noticed what she was doing.

She sighted along the top of the weapon, and then did exactly as she had been trained to do.

The weapon sniffed and jerked in her hands as she placed two bullets in the chest of the suit with coffee. He was knocked backward against the machine and the table upon which it sat, but remained upright for a time, shocked. Andrea continued to spin the automatic in a smooth arc, firing as she acquired each target. She shot the other two standing suits; two bullets each in the chest, just like the first.

The uniformed guards seated before the monitors were still reacting to her surprise attack, spinning in their swivel-chairs as their suited colleagues fell. The face of each seated guard showed instant panic, each having removed their weapons to take up their vigil of the screens. They were unarmed and sitting targets for a ruthless assassin. Andrea continued to fire, with amazing speed and accuracy. It was easy enough, having caught them unaware, and even easier since they could not shoot back.

It struck her that the guards were even considerate enough to face her square-on as they reacted to her presence, swiveling in their chairs and bearing their chests to her. Her weapon popped six more times, each uniformed guard cut down without a fight. Only the last guard tried to rise and overpower Andrea, but was knocked back into his seat as she placed two bullets neatly into his chest. Then, even as he was falling back to his seat, she spun again, checking the room for more targets and threats.

“I’m in!” Andrea said in a clear, audible voice. *“Go! Go! Go! I’m in!”*

Andrea reached with her free hand for a second clip. In a well-practised, fluid motion she dropped the empty clip from the automatic and rammed home the new one. A quick pull on the slide to chamber the first round and the task was complete, in less than two seconds. She stepped further into the control room.

To her immense surprise, the first man she had shot – the one with the coffee – was still standing, or rather leaning against the table behind him, his coffee mug still held before him with barely a drop spilled. He made a grunted protest at the destruction inside his chest, then gurgled as he finally gave up trying to hold his mug steady. Its steaming contents spilled out, splashing his neat suit as he crumpled slowly to the floor.

Andrea’s eyes flicked wildly about.

At the far end of the room was a row of filing cabinets that formed a barrier with a



working space behind. She could not be sure if anyone was back there, but only that the space had been purposely set up that way to allow someone a small degree of privacy within the crowded office. She listened, but could hear only the groans of those she had already shot. Her eyes darted between the hidden space and the fallen guards. One thing at a time, she reasoned.

With a new clip in her automatic, she put a bullet into the forehead of coffee-man, causing him to finally surrender and slump fully to the floor, where he rested in the hot, steaming stain he had just created. Then it was a simple matter for her to repeat the procedure, which she did, arcing clockwise across the fallen array of bodies.

Each suit and guard slumped and lay still with the final insult Andrea gave them – a bullet in the head – something she saw as a personal gift. After that she dropped and began to creep forward to the hidden office space.

“Go! Go! Go!” she snapped again, desperate to make sure her friends knew she had taken the control room. “I have the control room! Go!”

She need not have fretted. Sirhan Khan had heard her the first time, and had trusted her. He was already making his move.

## **CHAPTER 9**

Ivan Sempovic leaned forward on the steering wheel as Leonard Tan sat in the rear of the van and rested his rifle barrel on the back of Ivan’s seat. Sitting in the rear as he was, it was a simple matter of training the rifle behind the driver to acquire his target. From there he had a perfect view of the front of the armored security truck.

Inside the truck, Walter Buchanan rested one foot up on the dashboard of the vehicle. He wanted sorely to read his newspaper, but knew that such a move was unwise during a cash transfer. Not that he hadn’t done so before, but out in such an open area one could never tell – perhaps a company representative might be watching.

Rumor was that the company had employed people just for that very purpose – to trap security officers who broke the company’s rules. The paper wasn’t worth getting fired over, so Walter did his best to ignore it. He folded it and lay it down on the seat beside him. Still, the thought of being caught reading provoked him, and he found himself scanning the carpark and surrounding areas for possible company spies.

Eight years on the job and never so much as a threat of robbery coupled with the knowledge that he was safely encased in heavy metal and bullet-proof glass gave him the confidence that a spy was probably the worst threat he might ever have to face.

It was a misconception.

“Coming down with the cash now, Wally,” came the trusted voice of a male colleague. Walter’s radio crackled as the caller released his talk-button.

“Yeah, got that,” he acknowledged.

He glanced in the truck’s large twin side mirrors, making sure the way was still clear. As per company policy he had remained in the truck with the doors locked until the final moment before the cash was due, but now it was time to move. Oh well, he decided, his paper would have to wait. He unlocked the door with one hand as he reached across and picked up his shotgun with the other.

Walter grunted and was knocked back into his seat by an invisible fist as the high-velocity armor-piercing bullet punched a small, jagged hole in the thick windshield in front of him. The bullet tore through his body, exploding his heart and shattering ribs both fore and aft. The ravenous projectile would have exited the rear of the cabin too, had it not been for the multiple layers of armor plating there. The aging guard never made a sound or a move beyond his initial involuntary grunt, his body falling instantly limp across the steering wheel.

“This is Mister Tan,” reported the sniper from the rear of the van. “Pleased to tell you that the truck is now unlocked and unmanned.”

Just in front of the concealed oriental, Ivan Sempovic ceased a fake bout of coughing that he had used to cover the sound of Tan’s silenced rifle. He pulled his fingers out of his ears and started the engine.



As the trio approached the main entrance of the casino, one of the two suits stepped forward and held up a restraining hand, albeit with a friendly face. In the age of terror, he was not about to allow Anthony De Salve carry in the overnight bag without inspecting it, such things now a matter of company policy. However, he never got the chance.

Without warning Jessica Leah slipped a silenced automatic from within her suit jacket and put a bullet neatly between the eyes of the muscular giant. He crumpled instantly, toppling away from her. She repeated the action for the second suit, dropping him before he had time to react. Even while the second guard was falling, Anthony De Salve was opening the offending bag, reaching for its contents.

The explosives expert quickly passed a silenced Uzi to each of his accomplices, then withdrew one of his own. Each of the trio had already tucked their own spare clips inside their suits, adding to the awkward appearance of their bullet-proof attire. Each took their weapons

with great delight, Jessica tucking her pistol back inside her jacket to allow her to handle the Uzi more skillfully.

De Salve reached into the bag once more and retrieved a cylindrical device. He pulled a small tab from one side of it, revealing a sticky substance, then reached up and stuck the thing to the head of the doorway, just inside the entrance.

And then they went to war.



Sylvia Gunter maintained her innocent ruse, even as the shooting started.

With the first short bursts of automatic gunfire came numerous loud male protests and countless shrill, female screams. At the entrance to the casino it was complete pandemonium, birthing a mental anguish that spread contagiously across the entire floor of the gaming complex, even before people could see the source of the danger.

Inside, amid the screams and thumps of diving individuals about her, the blonde German moved quickly to the side of the nearest gaming table. She reached into her bag and retrieved an exact copy of the device De Salve had just attached to the door head of the casino entrance. Pulling the tab, Sylvia stuck it to one of the table's ornate legs, then backed away. She moved another ten paces in a running dash, something not noticed amid the bustling, panicking crowd of terrified people. Once safely behind another antique gaming table, she repeated the procedure.

Then she ran to find cover behind a row of poker machines. To her great surprise, momentarily distracting her from her beloved mission, Sylvia saw a woman with curly red hair and a dark mole in the center of her forehead still perched at her one-armed bandit, mystified but unmoving while bodies dashed about her. Instead of running, the woman looked confused, and she made a grab for her bucket of coins.

Sylvia shook her head, barely able to believe, as the gambling addict then slipped another coin into her machine.



Andrea Anger stepped toward the row of filing cabinets, her automatic held aloft before her.

While trained to fight, she recognized she was not an expert, and so knew it was extremely important that she avoid any close encounters with the enemy. Having killed so many, she knew not to expect any mercy, so staying clear of such confrontations was imperative. Show no mercy and expect no mercy, she had always been told.

“Come out with your hands up or I’ll drop a grenade in there,” she threatened tersely.  
“*Come out now!*”

She gripped the automatic with both hands, certain of the gunfight to come, and sorry she didn’t actually have a grenade to lob. Then, to her amazement, she heard a sudden flurry of loud sobs, and a woman dressed in a dark blue dress stood up behind the metal cabinets.

“Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot! *Please!*” the woman spluttered, suddenly bursting into tears.

“Who’s back there with you?” demanded Andrea. “*Stand still!*”

“No one,” the woman bleated. “It’s just me. *Please!*” she insisted, her hands raised high in surrender. “I’m just a secretary here. That’s *all I am!* I’m not armed. I only work here. Please *don’t shoot! Please!*”

“Shut up and get out here!” spat Andrea. It crossed her mind to shoot, but something made her hesitate. “Now, get on the floor! *Kneel! Now!*”

The woman stepped forth from the alcove, trembling and crying, then hastily dropped to her knees.

“Alright,” demanded Andrea. “Whoever is still back there, come out or I’m going to shoot this woman. You’ve got three seconds! *Come out now!*” She maintained her aim on the alcove rather than the kneeling woman.

“I told you I was alone,” bleated the secretary. “There’s no one back there. Just me. Please don’t shoot me. Please...”

“*One!*”

“*Please!*”

“*Two!*”

“*Oh, please!*”

“*You’re killing her!*”

“*Nooooo!*” the one in blue cried, hugging her head in her arms and dropping down to the floor. “Please, I’m alone...”

Andrea waited as the woman’s blubbering grew quiet, due in part to shock. Then she realized that the woman had in fact, been telling the truth. She skipped quickly to one end of the row of cabinets and peered over, gun at the ready. But as promised, they were alone. She wandered back to her hostage, peering down as the secretary gazed up through red, teary eyes, then allowed the menacing silencer to hang in her direction.

“Please don’t shoot me,” pleaded the woman, raising her hands instinctively. “I only work here. I’m *just* a secretary. That’s all. I don’t have anything to do with the running of the place. All I do is write letters. Please, I promise I won’t make a single sound. *I swear!*”

Andrea gazed at the terrified, sniffling woman beyond her dark automatic. She was not unlike herself to look at, though perhaps five or ten years older. Well, she mused, *today* she looked like her. Unlike Andrea's hair, the secretary's flowing crown was natural, long and jet black, and fantastically well groomed.

*Perfect. Quite stunning really,* Andrea thought.

"Where do they keep the surveillance tapes?" she demanded gruffly, ignoring the woman's pleas.

"No tapes," explained the whimpering hostage, her hands still raised. She pointed with a raised index finger. "Over there – the server computer. Everything is on hard drive until it gets backed up at midnight. *Please...*"

"This one?" demanded Andrea, pointing with her weapon.

"*Yes. Yes!*" the kneeling one nodded.

She let out a series of terrified screams as Andrea fired several bullets into what was obviously a large computer tower. With the plastic shattered she could see several devices that she recognized to be individual hard drives in a row. While she did not understand the technology behind the RAID system, Andrea understood that total destruction of all the drives must surely prove fatal to the system.

She emptied her clip into the case, exploding each drive in turn, replaced her clip, then added a few extra bullets for good measure. When the task was over the dark-haired hostage had not moved, but simply remained kneeling with her head down, whimpering. Noticing that the shooting was over, the woman with the majestic hair looked up again, tears streaming down her face. She continued to plead.

"*Please! I promise!* I give you my word. Just leave me here and I won't make a sound. I won't contact anyone. I won't even move. Please, *trust me!* Tie me up if you like..."

"No need," Andrea interrupted. She sighed, and the two stared into each other's eyes for several long seconds. Then Andrea began to nod, and the woman's face showed relief as her armed tormentor gave her reply. "I believe you."

"Oh, thank y..."

The secretary's long, lovely jet-black hair danced at the back of her head as Andrea's bullet smashed through her skull, entering her forehead and exiting in a colorful flourish, spraying a considerable volume of blood and white matter on the wall behind the kneeling victim. The woman took on a look of shock, her pleading eyes turning up as if to gaze at the ugly hole that had just been punched through her brow, and then she slumped quietly away from her killer, her body jerking and shivering for a time.

Andrea watched with interest as the woman's blood quickly pooled beneath her head, her eyes still wide and staring at some imaginary thing on the floor beyond. In just seconds a glossy, red pillow began to form beneath the dead woman's head, matting her long, straight tresses into a rich red and black tapestry, and it struck Andrea that it was a terrible waste of such wonderful, natural hair.



Having killed the two entrance guards outright, the trio set about causing as much fear and confusion as they could, along with clearing their path of any potential obstacles.

In turn each one took the lead, shooting both patrons and casino staff without distinction. Sirhan Khan started the well-practised maneuver, stepping ahead of his two companions. He cut open the chests of a nearby husband and wife as they left the casino, for no other reason than the two were in his way. They fell immediately, sprawled and bloody, and each of the trio stepped over them in turn.

Upon seeing the carnage, another nearby woman screamed loudly, only to receive similar treatment shortly thereafter. Five meters beyond, a waitress clad in the familiar white skirt-and-blouse uniform of the casino stopped dead in her tracks, realizing that she was in the open, exposed and vulnerable. She had the presence of mind not to scream, this not being the first time she had seen a firearm being waved about at the casino.

However, her quick thinking was not sufficient to save her, and she too was cut down as a short burst from Khan's weapon ripped horizontally across her chest. Her clean, white uniform spat forth tiny clouds of torn cotton and flesh, and then the waitress toppled backwards to die on the floor.

Two young men to Khan's right watched with astonishment as the first victim's fell, and both spun and ran. Khan cut them down after only a few paces, several bullets apiece in their backs. At a row of poker machines he let go a somewhat longer burst, arcing his gunhand in a quick, smooth movement, killing and wounding several more patrons and shattering plastic on most of the machines. Then he gave a single, terse announcement, a signal to his allies.

*"Out!"* he called.

At that single word, Jessica Leah stepped ahead of him and continued to wreak havoc among the running, screaming patrons.

Jessica brought down three fleeing patrons with a single, short burst, shooting each in the back as they ran. She almost scalped another waitress with a quick burst to the head as the young brunette stared wide-eyed in terror, too terrified to know what to do. Jessica picked up the pace,

trotting through the casino quickly in a bid to close the distance between herself and their target.

As people ran and scattered, the large gaming floor became a sea of confusion, the air filled with the sounds of constant screaming and yelling, and of regular machine gun bursts. Jessica managed to kill and wound five more people before being confronted by the first of the casino's security staff.

At the sight of the armed guards all three assailants slipped down behind the many shattered poker machines and large, ornate gaming tables. Two guards fell almost immediately as Anthony De Salve slipped his Uzi out from cover and sprayed bullets in a quick arc. Neither man was shot fatally, but their wounds were sufficient to take them out of proceedings for some time. De Salve took the opportunity to stick another device to the poker machine behind which he hid.

From their position with the large cash bins, the three security guards whose task it was to transport the money safely from the complex could see the three killers approaching, firing amid the crowds of fleeing patrons. Each of the guards pushing a bin ceased doing so and hastily slipped behind their rolling cash coffers, aware of the heavy construction of the shining, metal bins. The guard who toted the shotgun moved toward the approaching shooters, dropping down behind a marble water-feature. He hid, waiting for a chance to return fire, well aware that his shotgun would have greater effect if he was close to his target.

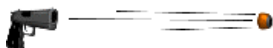
As people continued to duck for cover and run wildly about him, the uniformed guard knew he would not have long to wait.



Sylvia Gunter crawled forward, making sure she was not the recipient of one of her friends' bullets, or that of an overzealous guard. She kept her handbag before her, still maintaining the ruse of a frightened woman scurrying away from the crazed individuals killing people some distance to her left. And all the while she drew closer to her prize.

She screamed, feigning fear as glass was shattered by gunfire some distance to her right. Then, when her face was close to the carpet once more, she grinned wildly. Her hand shivered at the touch of the silenced automatic in her bag as she shuffled along. Then her whole body tingled.

This was the part Sylvia loved the best.



Andrea Anger checked her silenced automatic, then gathered up all of the guards'

weapons.

On a desk she found a briefcase filled with papers, which she emptied on the bloody floor, then began fitting the guards' automatics inside. She snapped the lid closed, stared about her at the dead bodies of her victims, then at the rush of action on the various monitors. People were running madly on every screen, like bad actors in black-and-white silent films. She watched with considerable satisfaction as her beloved leader, Sirhan Khan brought down two running, obviously screaming individuals.

As she studied the monitors, she noticed two uniformed cops approaching the main entrance of the casino, struggling against the flow of gamblers seeking to escape. The two cops continued to push against delirious escapees, their weapons drawn as they fought their way in.

"Sir..." she began, then stopped as she corrected herself. "*Mister Black. Mister Black*, be advised that you have two cops entering the building via the main doors. Two cops. They're coming in now. Do you hear me?"

She waited nervously, hearing in her earpiece only the dull ripping sounds of the Uzis and the constant screams of the people who were trying to flee the blazing weapons.



On the gaming room floor, Sirhan Khan and his allies were nearing the two cash bins, as the guards hiding behind them began to resist their attack.

Khan ducked as a volley of three bullets from the guard on the right blasted holes in a machine just over the leader's head. Khan raised his Uzi and sent a quick response, the bullets thudding into the bin to leave a neat row of telltale dents.

"Thank you, Miss Green," Khan said aloud, and a nearby patron, lying terrified on the floor could not help but wonder to whom he was speaking.

The large man scurried away across the carpet, too afraid to stand and run. Khan thought about shooting him, but realized that his attention was needed elsewhere. He raised his gunhand above the barrier of a large plant stand he had taken cover behind and returned fire once more.

"Mister Silver," Khan said calmly, enjoying the challenge before him. "Would you be good enough to give our guests at the front door a welcome, please?"

Anthony De Salve grinned, firing a short burst of his own at the guard behind the other cash bin. Then he answered in what could only be described as a happy tone.

"With pleasure, my friend," he said. With that, De Salve reached in a pocket in his jacket and retrieved a small device resembling a cellphone. He picked a button and pressed.

The two cops, having just entered through the main doors amid fleeing patrons, were



picked up by the blast of the plastic explosive mounted above the door, then thrown twenty meters before making contact with the carpet once more. Not only were they thrown by the explosion, but so too were numerous patrons, many knocked unconscious by the percussion. The entire entry section of the gaming floor erupted into a wall of flying bodies and debris, billowing dust and smoke, and temporarily cutting off the largest single escape route.

The resultant shockwave passed through the entire gaming room, knocking people to the floor, and momentarily silencing the worst of the fracas. Large pieces of shattered timber and plaster, along with machine parts were flung twice as far as the bodies they killed, raining down upon a sea of confused and terrified patrons. Then, with the main blast having past, a wall of dust and smoke ushered forth, swirling and circling about the dead and injured, then filling almost half the enormous room.

Anthony De Salve, knowing that the blast would momentarily disorient most of those present, saw his opportunity and stood upright, his Uzi held before him. He fired a prolonged burst at the guard who had slipped and fallen to the side of the leftmost cash bin. The guard grunted with the shock and impact of multiple bullets shredding his chest and face, then toppled backwards without further argument.

Mimicking her ally's action, and positioned a full five meters to De Salve's right, Jessica Leah also stood upright, taking the opportunity to shoot at the guard behind the rightmost cash bin. He had exposed himself just a little, shocked like his friend by the force of the entrance blast. Several of Leah's bullets caught him, tearing at his right arm and the ribs beneath it, and causing him to fall out of sight behind the metal case.

Unforeseen by Jessica Leah, however, was the third guard, who until then had kept himself out of sight, waiting for the best opportunity to use his shotgun. At just eight meters he guessed that she was as good a target as he might ever get, so he rose from behind a solid gaming table, aimed and fired. An enormous blast emanated from the shotgun, completely catching his female target off guard.

Jessica's feet actually left the floor for just a moment as the entire force of the twelve-bore caught her directly in the chest. She flew backwards, stunned by both the pain and suddenness of the attack, then struck the floor hard.

And then she lay still.

## ***CHAPTER 10***

Andrea Anger watched with concern until she saw the various monitors show the

destruction of the bomb blast. Three of the monitors actually ceased to function, their screens showing only snow as their cameras were destroyed. And then she heard the report of the explosion.

A few moments later and she saw her allies, Anthony De Salve and Jessica Leah clearly stand in the face of the enemy, their weapons silently spitting death in bursts of fiery anger. For just a moment Andrea was caught up in the marvel of the silent movie, and she gloried in the bravery of her fearless friends. Then, as quickly as the wonderful sense of basking in her team's bravery arose, she saw Jessica Leah cut down by a large, silent blow from a guard's shotgun.

Andrea grimaced, stunned and greatly disheartened. The entire scene was unfolding in just seconds before her, and amid the chaos and death she could not help but believe that fate had suddenly turned against them.

Whatever happened, she decided, it was definitely time to leave.

After another quick glance across the screens to ensure that there was nothing more she could tell her allies, she stepped back into the corridor. She held the case of guards' weapons firmly in her left hand, held in front of her belly to hide the silenced automatic she still toted in her other hand.

"I'm on my way, team," she announced firmly. "Be careful which guards you shoot. Understand?"

"Understood!"

There came only one reply, and even amid the noise she recognized it to be the voice of Anthony De Salve. Andrea found herself wondering what had become of her other friends.



From her position behind the solid gaming table, Sylvia Gunter saw the large dust cloud envelop the entire entrance area of the casino.

She grinned, pleased with the element of surprise, and at the knowledge of how so few of her allies were carving up the casino's security detail. Moreover, upon seeing how valiantly her friends stood upright in the face of gunfire, she felt elated, wild and desperate to join the fray.

Then, in the midst of her mental revelry, a deafening blast close by her stung her ears and left them ringing. Almost too quick for the human eye to discern, she then watched as the suited form of Jessica Leah was rewarded for her bravery by being tossed through the air and on to her back, the chest of her suit jacket peppered with marks.

With her ears ringing from the shotgun's report, Sylvia knew that it had been fired from very close by. When she glanced around the side of the solid gaming table behind which she lay,

she saw a guard pumping a shotgun to chamber another round. The man glanced back at her as he dropped out of the line of fire of the remaining Uzis.

“*Stay down!*” he bellowed, his voice barely discernable in the German’s ringing ears.

Sylvia held her white handbag ahead of her, her hand firmly gripping the silenced automatic inside.

“I don’t think so,” she replied.

The guard looked quizzically at her, surprised by her response, but far more concerned by the advancing Uzis than the ravings of some crazed, blonde woman snaking toward him. He squatted, preparing to rise and fire again.

And then the back of his uniform exploded in five places.



In the corridor Andrea Anger ran.

There was a slight downward slant to the path back to the gaming room, and she covered the distance quickly. To her surprise, when she was ten meters from the double-doors that would herald her into the war zone beyond, they suddenly burst open. Andrea slowed to a walk, giving herself time to evaluate this new situation.

Running frantically, her face red and her breaths heavy with fear, another waitress burst through the doors, followed closely behind by two equally terrified patrons. The waitress ran toward Andrea, slowing only when close, her face etched with deep terror.

“*Guard! Guard!*” the young woman blurted. “You’ve got to help! There’s gunmen in there! They’re killing *everyone!*”

The gasping brunette reached for Andrea’s left arm, desperate to convey the situation from which she had just escaped. Andrea watched as a couple in their fifties trotted up the gradual slope behind the frantic waif.

“It’s okay. It’s okay,” she replied firmly. “I know. Now, please hold this.”

She held up the case, and the stunned girl took it instinctively, rather than letting it drop. Andrea stepped around her just slightly, giving her a clear shot.

The waitress screamed as her would-be rescuer then quickly raised her silenced automatic and shot first the man, then the woman, two bullets in each of their chests. Having done that, Andrea then leveled her smoking weapon at the waitress. She could be no more than eighteen, Andrea decided, hired by the casino as a treat for its male clientele, no doubt. She had the body of a woman, but the face of a girl, complete with an acne problem that would not be contained.

“Put the case down!” she snapped.

The girl began to cry, but managed to maintain the presence of mind to obey, albeit with shaking hands. Andrea gestured with a wave of the silencer in the direction of the control room.

“The people you work for are disgusting. *Go on!*” she offered. “Get going, and don’t look back. *Go!*”

Still crying, the girl nodded profusely, then turned to run. And true to the offer she had been made, she never looked back. Andrea watched as the teen slipped away toward safety. Truly disgusted and yet not surprised, Andrea was unable to understand how such a young woman could be exploited so openly by such an evil organization.

As the girl continued to trot, stumbling with terror and battling with the slight uphill grade of the corridor, Andrea took aim and shot her just above the center of her back, and then in the back of the head.

The girl fell and sprawled without ever crying out, and apart from the dull roar of warfare in the gaming room beyond the double-doors, the corridor became quiet once more. Andrea held the tip of the silencer vertically before her mouth, then blew away a wisp of smoke.

“Just like the old west,” she said aloud, smiling and pleased with herself for the accuracy of her shooting. “This is *fun!*”



Anthony De Salve and Sirhan Khan negotiated their hasty plan by radio. Each man reloaded and waited for De Salve’s second explosive.

Behind them several gaming machines were toppled as shattered glass and plastic filled the air, sending a second shockwave through the complex. Then the two gunmen stood simultaneously, advancing while the entire room was still being showered with fine particles. With disarming speed they then ran toward their enemy, firing short bursts from their Uzis as they went. Three male suits were felled in the mêlée, their chests torn open with multiple holes.

The pair of marauders then dropped to the floor once more, each diving for cover as two more suits began firing again from their left, in the direction of the double-doors. The doors swung open to reveal another female guard, who ran quickly to take up a position just behind the remaining defenders. Each of the suits turned as they became aware of the newcomer’s presence, nodded thankfully, then looked back to face their enemy.

Andrea Anger pressed the earpiece hard into her ear, speaking firmly above the sound of the suits’ pistols. “They’re mine,” she called. “Don’t shoot over here – they’re mine!” To her surprise one of the suits turned to face her.

The suit was a woman, hard-faced and wiry, her hair disheveled from the action she had

already endured. Her partner was equally untidy, his suit torn on the back and very dusty. The female suit dropped a clip from her automatic, then rammed another home, a look of sudden surprise etched into her face.

“Go for it,” she called, misunderstanding to whom Andrea was speaking. “They’re all yours if you want ’em *that much!*”

Andrea grinned as she reached out her left hand to take hold of the guard’s gunhand. Simultaneously she raised her silenced automatic and shot the woman twice in the chest. Slowly the suit released her grip on her weapon, the heavy pistol dropping into Andrea’s hand as the woman groaned loudly. Her partner, still firing at the enemy, turned to see his female colleague fallen, his gaze dancing about as he searched for the new source of danger.

As he stared in grief at his fallen comrade, Andrea shot him through one eye.



Sylvia Gunter watched the guard fall, the back of his uniform shirt riddled with holes. No longer worried about hiding her true identity, she withdrew her silenced automatic from her handbag, ran forward and retrieved the shotgun.

*“Don’t shoot she called! I’m breaking cover!”*

Then it was a dash to the cash bins. She ran behind, her pistol aimed down in readiness to confront the two guards she knew had already been shot. The nearest one was already obviously dead, lying face down in a pool of blood. The second one was leaning against the cash bin for cover, his right arm bleeding and hanging loosely at his side. With his left hand he was fumbling with his automatic, trying to reload.

Sylvia left the shotgun on top of the first bin and moved low to the injured guard, her weapon trained and ready. When the bleeding man saw her coming, he pleaded through gritted teeth, struggling with pain.

“Don’t shoot! *I surrender!*” The pistol dropped out of his fumbling left hand, which he then held up and pressed his thumb against a wedding ring. “Please, I’m married.”

Sylvia nodded her understanding, then gave her cold reply.

“Not any more,” she said. She pumped three bullets into the groaning man’s chest, grinning with pleasure. “Why should Miss Green have all the fun?” she said.

“Yeah, well don’t forget I’m here now,” came Andrea Anger’s response in Sylvia’s earpiece. “So be careful which guards you shoot! *Okay?*”

“Of course, Darling,” came the reply, Sylvia exaggerating her German accent. She was having fun now. “Mister Black, would you like to take care of Miss Gray while I tend to matters

here for a moment?”

“Thank you, my dear,” came the casual response. He was happy too.

As her leader moved back to tend to the fallen Jessica Leah, Sylvia stood slowly up from behind the cash bin. A heavy blanket of dust had descended upon the entire gaming complex, and bodies and broken machines lay strewn about much of the floor. But most interesting, the German noticed, all the guards and suits seemed to have been taken care of.

“Guards here are neutralized,” she noted cautiously. “Miss Green?”

“Here too,” came the response. From somewhere in the dust they heard the voice of Anthony De Salve also agree with the assessment.

“Some help here, please, Miss Gray,” came Sirhan’s voice. “Mister Silver, you watch our backs.”

Sylvia saw a dark-haired female guard carrying a briefcase break into a run through the swirling dust, heading directly for where she knew the fallen Jessica to be lying. She followed the guard with her automatic until she was happy about the woman’s identity. Andrea Anger glanced back to see her blonde ally sighting along her dark weapon, and made a quiet joke through her microphone.

“Don’t shoot me,” she cautioned dryly. “I’ve got more guns.”

Sylvia grinned insanely.

“That’s okay,” she countered. “*I’ve got the money!*”

Happy that the immediate danger was over, and feeling somewhat irked at having been denied the opportunity to kill as many as most of her allies, Sylvia gazed about her, noticing several crouching and wounded patrons, mostly wealthy, well-dressed individuals wearing jewelry and fine clothes.

“My favorite kind of capitalistic swine,” she noted, then began to execute each in turn, laughing insanely as she squeezed off each round. “*Now I’m having fun!*” she roared. When eventually her automatic clicked home on an empty chamber, she changed clips and shot two more victims before the voice of Sirhan Khan calmed her.

“Miss White,” he called. “Get the cash to the truck. *Now!*”

“Oh, but I’m having so much fun!” she laughed.

Despite her joke with Khan, she ceased shooting and dutifully obeyed, running quickly to the second bin and beginning to push. It crashed into the leading bin, and the two began to move as one. Anthony De Salve was at her side in a moment. Fortunately, the path to the truck was slightly downhill, the armored vehicle having been reversed up to a concrete loading platform.

The loading bay had been designed to facilitate quick loading of the cash bins, and it was

a simple matter of allowing them to run at speed inside the rear of the truck where they smashed into other bins. Sylvia locked the heavy security-truck doors.

Jessica Leah stood to her feet, groaning in pain. Andrea Anger slipped under one of the injured woman's arms, and together the two trotted hastily toward the loading bay. Anthony De Salve and Sirhan Khan ran behind them, turning constantly to check for more guards.

When they were all safely out of the building, Khan opened the driver's door and pulled the dead guard out so that he fell roughly to the ground. Khan looked up to see the van with their remaining two allies waiting ahead of the truck.

"Go now," said Khan calmly.

He saw Ivan Sempovic nod his head and hastily leave the carpark. Meanwhile Khan's other three accomplices ran and entered through the other side of the vehicle. Seconds later Khan started the vehicle, and the armored truck took off at speed from the casino carpark.

Sitting next to Khan, Sylvia Gunter took a small device from her handbag, grinned and pressed a button. Behind them, to add a cruel epitaph to their murderous rampage, the remaining bombs stuck to the gaming tables exploded. The heavy timber tables were shattered and hoisted high into the air, pieces of the antiques turning to shrapnel and slicing through several of the remaining survivors within the gaming room. Then one of the huge chunks dropped again, smashing heavily and crushing the bodies of two already-dead patrons.

And then the storm was over.

Those who survived the attack slowly began to crawl and walk about in the dusty chaos, stupefied and stunned, many injured and bleeding. In the distance they could hear the wail of police sirens, a cavalry-charge that was several minutes too late.

Incredibly, from the moment the survivors first heard the sprouting of the Uzis to when the final bomb detonated, less than four minutes had elapsed.



Once on the road Sirhan Khan slowed the truck until it was just barely exceeding the speed limit, hoping to avoid unnecessary attention. In the confines of the front of the truck and surrounded by her friends, Jessica Leah clutched at her chest and bellowed in protest at the pain.

"Oh, that hurt!" she snorted. "It's just like being punched! Knocked the wind out of me."

"Just be glad you had on your vest," countered De Salve. He hugged her lovingly and laughed aloud. "You did well, Jessica! *Very* well!"

"So did you, Andrea," said Sylvia, her praise guarded but genuine. "I was worried about you when you went quiet there – and when it was taking you so long to get into the control room.

I thought I might have to kill you. But you did well, so now I don't."

She grinned, and Andrea Anger shot her a quizzical look. Then she began to laugh, but her smile ran away as she realized that the blonde was quite serious.

"Well, I *was* a bit busy, you know," Andrea began to explain, keen to distance herself from any potential misunderstanding. "Every time I turned around it seemed like someone else was going to come into that bathroom! And then the guard's card didn't work..." She laughed, doing her best to ignore Sylvia's threatening joke. "Oh, *what a rush!*"

"So you *do* enjoy the killing?" prodded Sylvia, elated that their new recruit had proven so lethal. "Now you know what it's like to be truly *alive!*"

Andrea nodded, still grinning. "It was fun," she admitted, "It was scary, but it was fun."

"Ah, you haven't lived until you've killed," explained the German proudly. "Ah, yes, that was *fun*. You have done well, this time, Andrea."

"*We all* did well," announced Khan, pleased with his team. "*You* all did well, my friends."

Inside, the truck erupted into a spontaneous roar of congratulations and elation.

## **CHAPTER 11**

"Mister Silver," called Khan, his voice exaggerated and almost humorous. "Do you think you could prepare something for our new friends, should the need arise?" He looked thoughtful for only a second or so, then added lightly, "Though I don't think that will happen."

"Be glad too," De Salve crowed.

He reached into his black overnight bag, steadying himself with a hand on the dash of the surging, swaying armored truck as Khan began to increase speed, throwing the lumbering vehicle along the city streets.

When the first police car approached from behind, Khan maintained a steady pace, hoping to give the authorities no reason to question them. But when he saw the cop in his mirror speak into his microphone, and then turn on his strobe lights, Khan was under no illusions – any hope of a peaceful retreat was gone.

Khan waited for the car to move closer, allowing the cop to pull alongside before making his move. With the front of the cruiser drawing level, Khan quickly wound his window down and leaned forward against his steering wheel while Sylvia Gunter borrowed De Salve's Uzi and directed the weapon behind her beloved driver. The cop barely had time to see the short barrel jutting out behind the driver's back before it began to blaze with a bright flame in his direction.



Sylvia maintained a prolonged burst, strafing the cruiser's nearside window and windshield, hammering the driver mercilessly until half the magazine was spent. Peering past Khan's back she could just see a light spattering of blood flick upon the shattered windshield, and the kaleidoscoped, dark figure of the cop shaking beneath the onslaught.

The blonde German laughed heartily as the cruiser suddenly veered, bumping against the truck before suddenly charging away from it. At speed the mortally wounded driver and machine crossed two more lanes of traffic before smashing hard against a guardrail. The vehicle's bid to leave the paved surface was arrested, brought under control with a crunching, tearing sound that continued until after the truck was gone.

The driver slumped, forgetting his avid quest and slipping into unconsciousness and death even before his cruiser finally came to rest, smashing into a parked, broken-down truck. Sylvia pulled the smoking Uzi back from behind her leader, still laughing about the encounter as the cruiser dropped back, scraping its way along the guardrail.

"Oh, yes!" she sprouted happily. "I just *love* this job!"

Khan and the others each shook their heads, enjoying the wild side of their friend and colleague. However, it was only a minute before Khan calmly announced the presence of yet more cruisers.



Officer Jane Drakmore leaned forward and picked up the mike, her eyes flicking between her driver and the speeding, lumbering armored truck ahead of them.

She would likely have trusted Tom Cradding's driving at any speed, let alone at the top speed of the armored truck, and yet she could feel her stomach tensing as they drew closer to the runaway monster. The sight of their fellow officer's smashed cruiser just a little way back was etched deeply into Jane's mind.

"Approach with extreme caution," came a forceful warning over the car's radio. "Suspects are armed and extremely dangerous. Use of lethal force *is* permitted."

Jane acknowledged the call and glanced at her male partner, his face intense as he studied the truck.

"Don't get too close, Tom," she advised, her words more of a request than a warning.

While she could not see her partner's eyes through the mirrored finish of his sunglasses, she knew he was studying their prey intently. Behind her she could hear the sounds of several more sirens; more fellow officers in pursuit of those who had already killed some of their own. Jane pulled her service automatic from its hip-holster, checking its condition. It was an

unnecessary move, she knew, yet somehow she could not resist knowing that the weapon would be ready to go.

She caressed it, quite sure that she was about to fire her first ever shots at something other than a lifeless target. A confrontation was inevitable, she knew. If the radio call had been correct in its speculation about these suspects having just killed two officers at the casino, there could be no doubt that they would fight to the death.

The tiny click of the clip being pushed home after checking went noticed amid the howl of the police car's siren. Jane caressed her weapon, holding it close to her chest like a small child. She placed a finger on the trigger, the cold touch of metal proving more comforting than she could ever have imagined.



Sirhan Khan watched in his side mirrors as the number of speeding cruisers grew.

He could count five, and maybe six. Ducking and weaving as they constantly were, it was difficult to tell. The only thing he could be sure of was that none was keen to come too close. Having learned from their earlier colleague's demise, these cops were staying back.

"Do you think you'll need my help, Mister Black?" asked De Salve, a sly smile on his face as he continued to cradle his precious overnight bag. Khan looked ahead to where an overpass spanned the busy multi-lane road, thick plots of trees surrounding the on and off ramps.

"No, for now I think we'll be okay," he smirked in return. "Still, you might like to keep your bag of tricks handy – just in case, Mister Silver."

The use of code names was unnecessary within the confines of the truck, and each of the men used them purely as part of what they saw as the humor of the moment, rather than to hide identities. An insane, ruthless air settled over those present, as they awaited more inevitable confrontation and death.

Behind them, the police were becoming more daring, with six cruisers now blocking all three lanes of the freeway. They moved closer, bridging the distance and whittling it back to a mere three car-lengths. The lead patrol car steadied, and Khan could now clearly see two cops eyeing him, one in each of his side-mirrors, their dark uniforms clean and neat in the morning sun, their buttons and badges reflecting sharp points of light.

"Well, this has been fun," remarked Khan lightheartedly. He glanced ahead, ready to make his move, and searching for what he knew would be hard to spot. Oh well, he decided, he would just have to trust that it was there.

"Well Officers," he added glibly, "be sure not to miss your exit."



Jane Drakmore blinked, barely aware of what had happened.

It was more of a reflex action really, since no glass entered her bare eyes, and in fact, she was not fully aware of the tiny, concentrated point of destruction to the cruiser's windshield for some time. To Jane's horror Tom Cradding seemed to suddenly lose concentration, forgetting what he was there for, if that was possible.

Jane felt their howling police car lose speed as Tom's foot eased off the pedal, and then he began to allow the car to veer away from their target. The whole, baffling condition took only a few seconds, but Jane's racing mind became deeply shocked during that time.

Then she realized what had happened.

Looking over to her partner, Jane saw a bright streak of blood ooze from beneath Tom's dark, mirrored sunglasses, snaking a path down his closest cheek until it began to drip and run from his chin. Jane raised her vision just slightly to see a small, neat hole in her driver's forehead, oozing ominously beneath the top edge of his glasses. A moment later it was spitting blood more vigorously, expelling beyond the mirrored barriers to drop directly on to the dead man's uniformed chest.

Jane panicked, lurching across to grab the wheel with her left hand while her right inadvertently drew back the hammer of her automatic. There was no legitimate reason for the small movement of her thumb other than the illogical need to react to an instant terror and shocking horror that surged through her entire body. She glanced forward again, and for the first time noticed a small hole in the windshield, complete with a telltale spider web of tiny cracks surrounding it.

Her partner, Jane knew, was already dead, having been plucked instantly from the battle. Only then did she realize just how desperately violent these criminals really were. But by then, it was far too late to help herself, or even to warn her colleagues.



From his position within the trees near the top of the overpass, Leonard Tan had an immaculate view of the freeway, and moreover, of each approaching vehicle. An elevated position offering excellent cover and several ways of escape, Tan knew from his army days, was most opportune. In fact, he had spent days prior to the casino heist selecting the position.

With the silencer removed from his rifle to aid accuracy, the rifle cracked noisily among the pines. Tan kept his head down, concentrating only on the task at hand, trusting all the while

in his friend, Ivan Sempovic to deal with any unwanted guests who might be attracted by the noise. No such people or passing vehicles bothered or dared to stop.

Tan moved his scope from one police car to the next, concentrating foremost on the drivers. He watched with enormous pleasure as the first face behind his crosshairs became obscured with a small web of cracks in the car's windshield. Then the second and third.

*Crack! Crack! Crack!* It was as simple as that – just like he had done so many times in training. Tan had always wondered how anyone could miss, what with all the advanced weaponry available in modern times. He simply raised his eyebrows with satisfaction as each speeding driver's brain was exploded within their heads.

The road immediately filled with swerving, out-of-control cruisers, as bewildered passengers leaned over and began fighting for control of the vehicles. The passenger of the lead car was too slow realizing what had happened, Tan guessed, as the car swerved sharply to the left, then overcorrected to the right. The ensuing swerve proved the undoing of the passenger's efforts, and the car skidded hard, howling sideways at speed until finally it overbalanced, tipped up, then rolled hard.

The second cruiser imitated the swerving actions of the first, except that somehow the passenger was able to regain control, allowing the vehicle to swerve and slow before bringing it back on to a straight path. But that action too was lost some seconds later, as Leonard Tan took aim once more, and punctured the passenger-cop's temple with a high-velocity bullet. A third cruiser veered sharply, then disappeared out of sight off the freeway, slipping at speed down a grassy embankment. That left Tan with three more pursuers.

The first of the remaining three sped into the trap, just as the others had done before it, bringing it easily within Tan's kill-range before the danger had become apparent to the beleaguered driver. The female driver's head was flung back with the impact of Tan's bullet, tearing out a section of her throat rather than her head. Tan, if nothing else, liked to be versatile. To him, a hit was a hit, and the outcome was the same.

The last two drivers, made abundantly aware of the danger by the sudden demise of their fellow officers, skidded to a halt, each stopping at an angle across the lanes in an effort to prevent any further unsuspecting victims from wandering into the invisible death-trap. Leonard Tan grinned, aware that by stopping, the drivers had only made his task easier. At that distance they were long shots, but at least they weren't moving. The oriental took aim and fired off a volley of rapid, accurate shots, killing the drivers and their passengers in rapid succession.

"You would call that a turkey shoot, I believe," announced Tan, still grinning as he scoured the scene of his handiwork through his glassy, enlarged world.

Ivan Sempovic stared down at the chaos of the freeway, now littered with dead cops and their wandering, howling cars. He shook his head, noticing that while all or most of the cops appeared to be dead, two of the cruisers were still speeding aimlessly toward the overpass.



Officer Jane Drakmore screamed wildly as the car in which she was passenger gripped at the road, bit, then flipped.

Unintentionally, her hand gripped harder at the automatic she had been holding, and the weapon suddenly jerked and bellowed noisily within the confines of the tossing car. It was followed immediately by a conglomeration of horrific screeching and crunching sounds, as her condemned car rolled and tore at the road.

The sealed surface raked at the metal of the cruiser, flipped it on to its roof, then gouged mercilessly as the car slid for what seemed like an eternity along the freeway. The road and the roof beneath her snarled at one another as the sound of shattering glass gave way to tearing metal. The cruiser continued to slide, taking some time to slow, and then finally the nightmare came to a growling stop, the car inverted and lying directly across the center of the three lanes.

Distraught and yet strangely coherent, from her position in the passenger's seat Jane had a bewildered, shocked view of an upside-down world, her mind spinning and yet dramatically recognizing that she had apparently, miraculously escaped death and destruction.

She gasped a series of deep, shrill breaths as she looked down, or was it up, to view blood gushing from just above her left hip. In one horrible instant she realized that she had shot herself, having been all too keen to cradle her automatic. In that surreal moment, suspended upside down and bleeding from a self-inflicted wound, she knew instinctively that it would not prove fatal.

*Surely, she had escaped death not just once, but twice, she reasoned. Maybe three times.*

And then she heard the gut-wrenching howl of a fast approaching cruiser.

Jane looked out her window to see what to her appeared as an inverted, driverless cruiser bearing down upon her at speed. She screamed, holding up her hands to her face in a vain attempt to preserve her life. *This time, she knew, she would die a horrible death, crushed and pulverized and probably burnt beyond recognition when the cars met.* Death's final attempt to take her would prove most effective, and she had several awful seconds to contemplate her cruel, impending demise.

But the miracles in Jane Drakmore's life were still not over.

The careering police car swerved at the last moment, its lifeless driver's slumping form applying just enough pressure to the steering wheel to divert the roaring metal coffin. The

wayward police car clipped the front corner of its fellow cruiser, causing the inverted vehicle to spin several full turns on its roof.

Jane screamed again after the crunching collision, but instead of a fiery, violent death, she was aware of her world spinning wildly for a time, and of another snarling growl as the road chewed away some more at the roof of her car. When she dared to open her eyes again, the wayward cruiser that would have claimed her life in a fiery collision was still heading at speed into a wooded area at the side of the road.

She watched, still horrified and yet wonderfully relieved, knowing that while two of her colleagues were surely dead within the wandering car, *she was still alive*. As her car continued to turn on its roof, slowing all the while, she briefly lost sight of her friends, only to have them reappear seconds later, their car twisted and destroyed among several tall trees.

For Jane Drakmore, at least, the day was one of miracles and a new beginning. Hanging inverted inside her cruiser, bleeding and battered, and having escaped death numerous times in just a single minute, she resolved without reserve to change both her career, and her life.



Two kilometers away the lumbering armored truck stopped beneath the cover of a bridge, part of a minor road that wound its way through a nature reserve close to the city.

With speed and precision, the truck was reversed up to a waiting furniture van, its rear hydraulic lifter facilitating quick and easy transfer of the money bins. Once inside, the stolen furniture truck moved off, Ivan Sempovic at the wheel. Anthony De Salve and Jessica Leah accompanied the bins, allowing Jessica time to work at the locks.

Khan and the remainder of his team then fled the scene in the van, still laughing about the extraordinary excitement of their morning's work...

*(Continued... with many more surprises to come...)*

Copyright © Ian Q Cameron, [www.killernovels.com](http://www.killernovels.com), 2006, 2018

**Want more ???**

*Killer Novels . com*

**Read the Conclusion!**

To see the end of this story, please go to my website at

<http://www.killernovels.com>

where, for a small fee, you can download the remaining chapters. If you enjoyed this free novel portion, please support me as a writer, and enjoy this most riveting and surprising conclusion by purchasing it on-line.

You'll never guess Mirage's motives, or the horrifying lengths he is prepared to go to, to reach those shocking goals... and you certainly won't believe the stunning conclusion!!!

I would like to remind you that as a writer, I try to present to you the very best quality novels I can, so I would **appreciate it if you would resist the urge to copy this novel and pass it to your friends**. While being illegal (violating copyright laws), it will also detract from my ability to maintain the service of delivering quality novels to you, the reader, since I rely on sales of novel conclusions to remain on-line.

As an author, I would like to sincerely thank you in advance for supporting me by reading my work. I very much hope you have enjoyed this novel. Please tell your friends about me. Also, please consider ['liking' or sharing my novels and/or website on Facebook®](#), since this helps me to continue writing novels for you to enjoy ☺, or simply email them my address. The address is

<<http://www.killernovels.com>>

I sincerely hope you enjoyed this story.

Thank you.

*I Q Cameron*

## Other Titles by I Q Cameron

[Read a synopsis and samples of any novel on my website!](#)

**(Christian, Thriller, Suspense, Murder / Detective)**

*Fair Game*

*Just Me* (Sequel to *Fair Game*)

*Graphic*

*Deadly Simulation* (Sequel to *Graphic*)

*The Pact*

*Juggernaut\** (Terror, Suspense)

**(Sci-Fi, Christian, Intrigue, Action)**

*Quicksand* (Time travel)

*Ripples* (Sequel to *Quicksand*, also time travel)

*Graphic*

*Deadly Simulation* (Sequel to *Graphic*)

*The Pact*

**(Christian, Romance and Adventure)**

*The Legacies We Leave Ourselves* (formerly titled 'Legacies')

**(Terror / Terrorism, Murder, Suspense)**

(These are old novels that I have not made available in Christian format.)

*The Penthouse* (Terror, Suspense)

*Island Company* (Murder, Thriller, Suspense)

\*Some titles may be due for release soon