

Damage Control

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September 1, 2002
Lansdale, Pennsylvania
8:15 a.m.

Joe Costa stepped out of his cruiser and onto Willow Lane. He was a lead detective in the Chester County sheriff's office which serviced Lansdale, a bedroom community of the greater Philadelphia area.

Joe tried not to think about the stomach problems he'd been having that Monday morning.

The detective looked up at the Linder house. The nice looking brick structure highlighted a two columned front entrance partly obscured by three large oak trees filling the front yard. A grey SUV sat parked up onto the curb in the back of the driveway, and sticking halfway out of the open garage was a dark red sedan suffering from a beat up back end - all of which gave Joe the feeling that his hopes for a blissful morning on the can were about to be dashed.

"Okay, gentleman, what do we have this morning?" Joe asked two policemen waiting for him on the front step of the home.

"Come on in. I hope you had a light breakfast," remarked Officer Tom Lightman.

Joe stepped into the house, observing that the front door and lock were intact. There was no smell of blood to knock him over, but Joe definitely smelled gasoline.

"The victims are in the kitchen," Officer Rudy Jenkins informed Joe.

The spacious front foyer to the home featured a winding staircase with an oriental runner lining the middle of the wood stairs. Joe glanced at the living room on his left and dining room on his right, both holding furniture that pointed to an annual income light years away from Joe's detective pay grade. The morning sun landed softly on the grand piano in the living room.

The gasoline smell came alive as Joe walked closer to the kitchen, which was positioned behind the front staircase, so he took a few seconds to reset his concentration. The doorframe to the kitchen entrance and the surrounding wall space had been torn to shreds, drawing Joe to run his fingers across the bullet entries. No small gun could have produced that kind of damage.

Mr. and Mrs. Harold Linder were each tied to a chair on the backside of the kitchen island. Their throats had been slit, while Harold's left pinky laid on the floor. The gasoline source blanketed Mrs. Linder, soaking her neck down and pooling at her feet. The Linders looked to be in their 50's.

Joe leaned in for a closer look: the large patch of hair missing in Mrs. Linder's head was just a few inches above her broken right eye socket, and her right hand fingernails had bloody skin on them, indicating severe scratching of the attacker.

"She must've put up a hell of a fight," Joe said calmly, running his fingers lightly through Mrs. Linder's hair and finding a sizeable lump on the side of her head. Tiny glass pieces covered the Linders' clothing.

“We found another guy in this hallway.” Officer Tom pointed to the back hallway leading to the garage. “You should see the garage.”

Joe looked at Officer Tom in disbelief. “More bodies in the garage?”

“No, but the sedan is a quarter way out of the garage...its front doors are open, the keys are in the ignition and its rear end is smashed in,” Officer Tom stated flatly.

It had to have been awfully loud when all of this went down. Maybe a neighbor heard, or, even better, saw something.

The ID on the body in the back hallway belonged to a Bill Walters of Cherry Hill, New Jersey. The bullet to the back of Bill’s head probably killed him instantly. Joe and Officer Tom walked into the garage to look at the sedan that clearly was involved in some way during the struggle. Shattered driver side window and foreign paint chips attached to the crushed bumper.

“Well, forensics is on their way...what did the Linders do for a living?” Joe asked.

“The cleaning lady that called it in this morning told us that Mr. Linder was a leading cardiologist in the area.”

Joe finished examining the sedan before stretching out his arms and letting out a long breath. “Why the hell does this couple need a friggin’ body guard?”

The two officers and Joe convened in the kitchen.

“Okay...so this muscle guy tries to fend off the home invaders while the Linders try to get away in their sedan?” Officer Rudy asked.

Joe nodded his head. “Right, so, at some point, probably before they get dragged out of the sedan, the bodyguard is iced with a single gunshot to the back of the head...Does that make sense? This guy is firing away, tearing up the kitchen, so how do our intruders take him out with a bullet to the back of the head?”

Joe pulled out his notepad to start writing down a list of things he would need to cover. The clue he needed to make sense of it all was in this house, somewhere.

Talk with neighbors – anybody hear anything?

Talk with medical peers

DNA underneath Mrs. Linder’s fingernails.

Who is Bill Walters?

Why wasn’t Mrs. Linder set ablaze?

Talk with relatives.

Dig into Dr. Linder’s financial history, phone records, email.

Officer Tom walked back into the kitchen, announcing that he had figured out how the intruders got into the house: a long panel window in the family room had its entire glass cut from the frame and placed intact on the lawn outside.

September 1, 2002
Morristown, NJ
Peter Hansen

“Peter Hansen,” he stated firmly into the receiver while glancing at his watch: 9:30 a.m. Peter had a 10:30 a.m. appointment with Steven Angle, the lead singer for World Wind who just hit the 100 million albums sold mark last month.

“Peter, it’s Martin...we’re all set. The committee is announcing its recommendation for Lycor this Friday...They’re going to kill the drug,” Martin asserted into the phone. “I think Oleg and his partner made a fine example out of the good doctor and his wife.”

“Well, I’m sure they scared the hell out of them,” Peter said. “Does the doctor still have his kneecaps?” He let out a mild laugh, while leaning back into his chair.

Martin cleared his throat. “Uh...they had to kill them both, actually.”

The just poured coffee hit Peter’s thighs and he sprang out of his chair, thighs stinging and his frontal lobe under assault.

“What?” he yelled back at Martin. “That wasn’t part of the deal!”

Peter started to get dizzy, so he braced himself against the desk.

“Come on now, Peter,” Martin said in a less cheerful tone. “You’re not exactly holding the cards here, but you know that. We’ve been over and over this. The Violas own you, don’t forget that.”

Collapsed back into the chair with his scalded thighs, Peter put his pounding head into his lap.

The Violas.

What had started as a simple money laundering deal had now morphed into a murdering criminal network funded by Peter’s firm. Things were spinning out of control - he needed to find his composure, somehow.

“Got it, loud and clear,” he told Martin. “I’ll fall in line.”

That day, five off shore accounts funded a total of \$110 million into the Swiss Bank brokerage account of PLH, Inc. On Thursday of that week, PLH shorted the stock of Lycor Pharmaceuticals at \$84.

On Friday, Lycor Pharmaceuticals announced that its proposed cholesterol reduction drug, Zintar, was causing too many kidney failures in the clinical studies. This announcement sent Lycor stock plummeting because Lycor had been counting on Zintar’s revenue to make up for the wave of Lycor drugs opening up to generic competition over the next five years.

By Friday afternoon’s market close, Lycor Pharmaceuticals stock was trading at \$57.

PLH’s profit: \$25.39 million.

Not too shabby for a celebrity money manager used to dealing with the obnoxious world of whiny sports and Hollywood stars.

September 1, 2002
Morristown, NJ
Nick Johnson

Susan walked up behind Nick as he finished his bowl of Honey Grahams. It was 7:30 a.m. and it was time for a sweet hug from his wife who was back from her standard three mile run. He could feel her heart racing but, as usual, she was bone dry. For years, Nick had wondered how she never sweated because three miles always had him dripping.

“Hey, that was a great walk last night...good ears, my man.”

He looked up at her and gazed into her eyes.

“I know, Tom has grown up so, so fast...but you can still talk to him...Tom’s a lot like you are...teens need to feel heard, like their emotions and ideas count for something.”

“That’s good stuff...I’ll see if I can take him out to dinner after practice.”

Susan and Nick had been walking every night since late April; their conversations were helping them deal with things of the day - patient illnesses, her problems with her brother Stanley, their son Tom - anything was fair game to discuss during these walks. They tried to push it for two miles.

There’s an old saying, “If Momma ain’t happy, ain’t no one happy”, and Susan hadn’t been happy lately with Tom’s silence. A sixteen year old young man does not need his parents much, so this had been sending Susan into a funk. This was the topic during their walk that last night. Really, Tom had been that way since puberty a few years back, except it never seemed to bother Susan much, or, if it did, she didn’t talk about it. Lately, however, she had wanted to discuss her feelings.

Washing his cereal bowl in the sink, Nick found a place for it in the dishwasher. Susan handed him a banana for a mid morning snack. He started to look for his work shoes, only to find their seven-year old black lab, Zeke, lying on them. Nick nudged with his foot causing Zeke to whine as he got up because Zeke always spent most of the day outside, and he adored his time inside their home.

“Nick, don’t forget to nail down a time with Will McRae. Tell him the tile people will finish on Friday and we’d like him to put the glass in soon after that.”

They were re-doing their whole master bathroom and the shower was the last thing to finish. Every couple, before they marry, should complete a re-modeling project; Nick could think of two couples that had nearly divorced over such a task in recent years.

Even though Susan had all the time in the world to make that phone call to Will McRae, she could not stand dealing with anybody servicing their home. Susan had Nick make all the cable appointments, call the plumber when needed and work with all contractors directly. Susan claimed that he was so particular in the way he wanted things done, that he had become a poor delegator. Much as Nick would have loved, he avoided discussion of this issue on their nightly walks.

The Johnsons lived in a white colonial at 57 Skyline Drive in Morristown, NJ. The house was built in 1931 and they were the third owners. Susan and Nick were pretty

sure when they moved in 12 years ago that the only update that had been done over the years was the upstairs carpet, and they were afraid to fire up the ancient stove that stood in the middle of the kitchen, so they chose to gut the entire kitchen. In hindsight, Nick thought they should have done that before moving in. It was a really long six weeks of eating takeout on the floor of their dining room, particularly since Tommy was only five at the time.

“Well, I’ll make sure Will has talked with the glass people. It had to be custom ordered and I don’t know if they’ve received it from the manufacturer,” Nick replied to Susan.

“That’s my honey...now run off and save somebody from some nasty disease.” Susan leaned in with a kiss.

Monday, September 1st

2:30 p.m.

Peter Hansen

The first phone call came just a few hours after learning of the Linder's fate. Aside from Peter's lunch meeting with Steven Angle two hours earlier, he had gotten nothing done that day, and there was no problem with that mainly because there hadn't been much done at all with his clients' investments since his horrible mistake with Julio Viola's money concerning the Trispar drug study. Nobody thought Drexel Pharmaceuticals would stop development of the Trispar heart drug over the study, but that's what they did and their stock got creamed for it. Peter had bought a large position in the Drexel stock with Julio's funds, betting that the Trispar heart drug study would fare positively. So, when the study's results were markedly negative, Peter's despair hit the roof.

How would Julio respond upon learning the news of Peter losing a big piece of the cartel's money? When Peter didn't hear from Julio or Martin for five days, he got really spooked. If they were going to whack him over his mistake, it surely would have happened within those five days. Two days into this torment, Peter started making plans to disappear, yet the hurdle of leaving his family was far too large. Julio could just as easily kill them in retribution, so if he were to disappear, it would have to involve his whole family. Then there was the planning time problem. Such a plan would need at least a few weeks to pull off and they only had a few days.

At the end of the fifth day, Peter was sitting in his office sipping on his sixth diet coke of the day when he decided to give Martin a call. Nobody knew about the heart drug bet except him, yet Martin had to have seen the \$45 million drop in funds - that's what Julio paid him to do.

"Peter, how have you been?" Martin asked. "We figured it would be good for our relationship if we let you stew for a few days."

"I don't understand, so you knew about it the whole time?"

Martin laughed weirdly. "Well, if you're asking me if I noticed \$45 million less on Monday than at the end of the prior Friday, then, yes, I did know all about it."

Peter leaned forward in his chair and didn't say anything to Martin for a few seconds. He had to come clean with them.

"You know, no one on Wall Street thought that Drexel would stop development of its heart drug after the study results were released last Thursday evening."

"Well, we knew you wouldn't be so stupid as to steal the money from us," Martin said coldly.

"No, I suppose not."

Martin didn't really specify how their relationship would change - he didn't have to. Not that Peter had any leverage in his deal with Julio before the Drexel fiasco, but his grip felt much tighter afterwards and spawned the dastardly plan to shake down doctors for drug study inside information.

The Linders would still be alive if Peter hadn't showboated with Julio's money, and that thought had him frozen in a bad karma twister all morning following Martin's news about the Linders.

His firm had two employees, Judy Host, his receptionist, and Darryl Ludsten, who ran the administration side of things. Darryl was on vacation for the next two weeks.

Judy rang him at 1 p.m. to tell him to pick up line one.

"Peter, you gotta hear this...this guy is totally whacked!" she screamed into his intercom.

He picked up the handset and hit the button for line one.

"Liar, Liar, pants on fire, and your profits keep going higher, ha, ha, ha," the voice sang eerily, only to repeat the song over and over again. It was a real low and underwater-like voice, disturbing in its delivery, meaning and just about every other kind of way.

It sure sounded like a recording - Judy couldn't reset the line because the other end wouldn't hang up. That's when she called him.

"They'll hang up eventually," Peter told Judy firmly. "Is this the first time something like this has happened?"

"Well, yeah, Peter," Judy responded. "Should we be scared?"

After he heard her put the receiver down, she started running down the hallway, making a clickity clack with her flip flops. It seemed she wore those things nine month months out of the year, though she always told him it was six.

Judy had been with Peter for over thirteen years and was a former bartender at a Newark strip club, something that she never discussed. He didn't know if she thought he had some kind of judgment against that sort of thing, but whatever. For as long as Peter had known her, Judy wore an Annie Lennox red crew cut and a large gap between her front teeth. Judy and her husband Hank recently adopted a foster child that was living with them after being abandoned at a local shopping mall at the age of two.

When Judy took the job way back when, Peter's firm was in Manhattan, in an office building just off of Times Square, and he thought she would leave him when he decided to relocate his firm to the New Jersey suburb of Morristown. But she stayed and moved herself and Hank to Morristown as well. They had had been in Morristown for six years, all in the same building that he shared with the law firm, Dewey, Stange and Lewis. Stange was dead, and, since the day Judy and Peter moved in, both Lewis and Dewey had been trying to win some entertainment business from Peter, sometimes a little too aggressively. Peter's firm had two offices off of a long hallway, a conference room and a lobby where Judy sat. Darryl came aboard five years ago.

At this point of his career, he didn't need to visit clients in person, with only a few appointments a month from celebrities bored with their life and looking to him as sort of a reminder of just how much dough they had gathered over the years.

Judy sprinted into his office and started to blurt something out, but stopped and put her index finger to her lips.

"Judy, it's okay," Peter told her, squeezing out a chuckle. "I think it's a college buddy of mine."

This was definitely another swing trying to whack at Peter's nerves and he simply wanted this day to end. Talking with Judy, amazing calmness had to reign inside him to laugh it off as a prank call from a college buddy.

"Well, let's plan on using Line two for the rest of the day, and if you find out who it was, please kill them for me!" Judy exclaimed.

"Done."

She left his office and he let out a deep breath. Somebody was clearly trying to scare him, but, somehow, being in bed with a Mexican drug lord made Peter a little harder to scare – or so he liked to think.

Steven Angle didn't say anything strange during lunch other than to show a little too much enthusiasm for his investment performance in recent years. Steven came to visit Peter a few times a year - probably the most of his clients - and Peter wasn't sure why that was. His lunch invite was spur of the moment as he didn't mention it to Judy when he called to change the time that morning, not long after Peter got off the phone with Martin. Judy was such a huge Steven Angle fan that it had taken her a few years to be able to hold a normal conversation with the man.

Judy had thought Stephen would be in for a quick 20-30 minute meeting, but that went out the window with the lunch plans. How in the world was Peter supposed to stay focused for an entire lunch? For God's sake, the Linders' blood was on Peter's hands, and he was supposed to eat, drink and be merry?

And they weren't expecting his whole family to be with him, so, when the Angle clan walked into the front lobby, Judy and Peter were taken aback. The man had four children, all of them present at the lunch meeting along with Steven's wife, Cherise, who spent the entire lunch trying in vain to control her two year old boy. Spilling three glasses of water during the hour long meeting, this kid thought it hysterical to run around the table and smack each person in the back. Surreal as it was to see a rock star juggle four kids at a restaurant, he handled everything well. Peter was surprised, though, that nobody came up to Steven for his autograph.

Steven asked Peter question after question about the companies his firm had invested in for Steven's portfolio, something he did last year when he took Peter to dinner. That dinner was the first dinner that Peter had with a client in five years, and he'd like to say he thought of Steven as a friend – but who was he kidding? A friend doesn't rope his other friends into bed with a Mexican drug lord and tie their fortunes to a global money laundering scheme.

Looking at Steven's kids during lunch, part of Peter wanted to scream "I'm sorry" right there in the restaurant. The Angle family didn't deserve his lies, nor did any of his clients, but Julio had them all under his bind. Peter just needed to keep his smile on and wait for a miracle – risking losing all his clients' money by recklessly disturbing his relationship with the cartel was way too foolish - or for somebody to put a bullet through Julio Viola's head.

Peter had gotten Angle-esq enthusiasm over his investment performance from a few clients recently. Yet, after listening to that recorded phone message, maybe one of his clients or maybe even a competitor didn't believe the numbers. Peter hadn't received

any client liquidation requests in over two years, although that meant nothing after a phone call like that. Granted, this person had no proof without access to his bank records and even those would be difficult to transcribe. Still, if the authorities were made suspicious enough, it would be game over for Peter Hansen.

Whoever Peter was hiding from Judy, this certainly was no college friend. Someone out there knew his secret. How much time before the whole world knew? They had to be guessing, albeit correctly, that his investment performance was fictional, because it was highly doubtful that Julio or Martin would blab about his situation to others. Peter had hidden his tracks rather well and offered in-depth explanations for his 'stellar' performance in the annual reports that his firm sent to his clients the past few years. In the end, however, Peter was a liar and nothing more and now someone wanted him to pay.

The agent for Bruce Gilbert, a Broadway director that Judy never had heard of, was on Line Two.

"Peter Hansen."

"Did you get my message?"

The voice sounded deeper in person, and a lot clearer.

"Who is this?" Peter demanded, shooting up from his chair.

The dial tone rang and he was gone. Peter thought for a second about running out to Judy to see if this joker rang up on caller ID, but it was not worth alarming her any further and it wasn't likely this guy would make such a rookie mistake anyway.

Peter got back on the phone – it was time to call for some help.

"Martin, we got a problem here," he said firmly. "Someone has called here twice this afternoon, accusing me of lying to my clients about my investment performance."

"Who do you think it is?" Martin asked.

"I don't have a clue, but Judy is really scared."

"I can assign a guy to watch over you if you want, but he may get a little too close for comfort...your family might get suspicious..."

"Let me deal with them," Peter responded. "I really appreciate this Martin."

Peter cracked a smile, because this creepy caller guy didn't know who was playing on his team, and this guy might learn the hard way about messing with 'ole Peter Hansen.

"Hey, we look out for each other, Peter," Martin affirmed. "I can have a guy in your parking lot in one hour."

"Martin, thanks a lot."

"Don't mention it...just stay safe," Martin stated. "We need you alive and well."

Peter couldn't argue with the general statement about being alive and well. Maybe someday, Julio would cut him loose.

By the end of 2001, PLH Capital was down 51% for the prior two years thanks to a huge downturn in the stock market over that time. Peter's celebrity investors were told a different story, however, with the annual report going out to these clients in January 2002

showing a total loss of only 10% since the beginning of 2000. The dot com bubble burst in the spring of 2000, but thanks to the money laundering mercy of the Viola drug cartel deep from the heart of Mexico, Peter could afford to lie to his celebrity clients.

The Violas started laundering money through PLH capital in September, 2001. Everything went fine until Peter's firm lost a chunk of the cartel money in the Drexel stock. After that, things got much worse. Julio knew that Peter's firm had lost a lot of his money over a stock bet on the outcome of an important heart drug study, so that is how Julio came up with this crazy inside information plan for these drug studies. How he found Dr. Linder, Peter never knew, yet, asking too many questions was risky business. He should never have bet on that drug study; maybe he was trying to show off to Julio his excellent stock picking skills, except, everything was made so much worse, instead. While the world of money laundering was stressful at first, it became way less shocking and disturbing over time. Nobody got hurt or even threatened – it took very little of Peter's time. This drug study shakedown was a different story because it was 100% disturbing and nasty and people got killed over it.

Shortly after the Drexel stock loss, Peter learned how the cartel had asked Oleg to start forcing this Dr. Linder of Philadelphia to give up inside information about the pharmaceutical drug study he was leading. If the inside information pointed to good news for the drug company, Peter was told to buy the stock ahead of time, but if the information pointed to bad news, he was to short the stock. This part of the strategy, including how much money to spend and what off shore accounts to use, was just conveyed to him recently over the phone by Julio Viola.

Monday, September 1st

7:55 a.m.

Nick Johnson

“Top of the morning, ladies,” Nick declared upon entering his practice.

He was a single practicing Internal Medicine physician working out of a medical building that stood next to a huge family practice which filled a two story building in the office complex next door. Mary Higgins handled all of Nick’s scheduling and billing, while Melanie Jones was his nurse.

“You have an 8:15 and your day is filled except for one slot at 1:30, but I’ll bet that gets taken this morning,” Mary stated. “It looks like the lab might be busier than usual. How was your weekend?”

Mary was in front of the computer holding her customary mocha cream. She had a cast on her left forearm, a victim of a nasty spill on a friend’s boat down at the Jersey shore.

“The weekend was mighty fine, thank you,” Nick said a tad smugly though he didn’t mean to.

“Oh, you’re in a good mood, what’s up with you?” Mary asked.

Nick didn’t think he was in a particularly good mood and struggled to give her a satisfactory answer. But maybe he’d been trying to be more cheerful lately and it had thrown people off. Susan liked it, though he was not sure anybody else did.

“Do we have the lab figures back for Leon Blue?”

Leon came into the after-hours clinic over the weekend, complaining about having a head cold for seven months. No fever, no real pain, just congested as all get out.

“Yes, I’ll call him in a bit. Nothing popped up on the blood screen,” Melanie chimed in from down the hallway.

“Okay...tell him I’m prescribing Sifanext for allergies.”

Pulling out his prescription pad, Nick started writing it all out, trying to ignore Mary who stood up from the computer and let out a moan while she stretched.

It was clear Mary had something big to let him in on.

“So, get this,” she started. “I’m driving home on Friday night and I’m on my street. Six houses down from us, I see all the contents of the home out there on the lawn...all of the beds, entertainment centers...everything!”

Mary grabbed from Nick the prescription to fax over to Mr. Blue’s pharmacy.

“Big garage sale?” Nick asked.

She let out a loud chuckle and came up to him with crossed arms, which was her way of saying, ‘I want your full attention now.’

“Does this have anything to do with your brother’s situation?” Nick asked innocently.

Mary’s brother was arrested last weekend over charges of serving alcohol to minors, after her brother and sister-in-law hosted a keg party for their high school senior

daughter, Lindsay and her friends. One of these friends left the party before passing out on his own front lawn until the next morning when his parents called the police.

“What?” Mary yelled out. “No, stupid, I’m not talking about that! Okay...this lady and her kids were renting the house from a couple that had moved back to Arizona...It turns out that she’s a stripper...which I’ve a hard time believing because she never looked that thin the few times I saw her...”

“Where are you going with this?” Nick demanded.

Mary took a sip of her mocha cream. “Okay...the next door neighbor called the cops on Friday morning to complain about a toxic smell coming from this lady’s home...well, the cops show up and find a meth lab in her basement.”

Nick didn’t dare point out the mocha cream mustache on Mary’s lip.

“Can you make meth in a basement?”

Mary pushed him with her good arm.

“Where have you been? Crystal Meth was the leading drug for teens last year and it’s growing like mad.”

Nick shrugged his shoulders.

“Well, why did this couple rent the house to a bunch of meth dealers?”

Mary threw up her arms and walked back to her station with the prescription that she needed to fax.

“I was just kidding, you know!” he shouted back to her and headed into his office.

His nurse, Melanie, came into his office two minutes later.

“Hey hon...there’s a Dr. David Clark waiting for you in the lobby, Should I send him in? You have about 10 minutes before the first patient.”

This was odd, because Nick had known David since Princeton and he had never come into the clinic. David was a cardiologist - a highly successful one at that - who had been a key part of five or six major heart-related drug studies in recent years and had a consulting gig with Distal Pharmaceuticals on the side. It helped that many of these companies’ drug studies were located around the New York metro area.

They tried to have lunch every month and they were pretty good at keeping that schedule. David loved Italian food, so Nick tried to accommodate him on that end.

They were roommates in college for one year along with four other guys. David was legendary for his upside down tap suck technique in which he would be held upside down by the side of the beer keg and drink from the keg’s tap. David grew up in Boston and still had a slight accent when Nick met him. An easy target himself, David stopped trying to make fun of the Jersey accent years ago. He was the first member of his family to go to college, though David rarely discussed his extended family with Nick. He had one boy, age 15, and was married to Toni.

Nick walked out to the lobby and spotted David reading last week’s Sports Illustrated. He looked up at Nick with a mighty smile.

“Interesting article on the Patriots...you should check it out,” David remarked.

David knew that Nick was a huge New York Jets fan and couldn’t stand the Patriots.

“Funny man! Good to see you, David...what brings you down here? I don’t think you’ve ever set foot in this clinic.”

David laughed and grabbed his arm. “Is your office back here?”

Was the great David Clark off today? That would make sense given that David only operated a few days a week and always in the very early morning. Nick couldn’t recall if Monday was an off day or not.

They walked down the hallway to his office, passing Mary who gave Nick a funny look.

“Have a seat,” Nick said.

He closed the door to his office. “Okay, what’s up?”

David kept standing and put his hands in his pockets. He stood 6’2 and always wore a suit during non operating business hours, which Nick found odd given that he never wore suits if he didn’t have to. He only owned two good suits that still fit him. Nick bought a tuxedo eight years ago, but had worn it just once to a black tie wedding and had thought since that he would have been much better off renting a decent one - no one would ever have noticed.

For five years, Susan wore a knock-off diamond wedding ring after losing the original ring during their vacation in the Bahamas. When Nick surprised her one Christmas with the real deal again, they viewed this as more symbolic.

“I’m sure you’re aware of the drug Zypotorin – it’s the coronary drug that aims to be 40-50% more effective in artery plaque reduction,” David started. “It stays in your system longer and spends more time in the arteries.”

“Okay...” Nick inserted, knowing David could easily be speaking for a few more minutes if he didn’t cut him off at the pass.

“Well, we’re about halfway done with the study and I’m one of the heads of the study committee,” David continued. He clapped his hands together. “Ralph Lacher, one of our committee members has had to drop out due to family issues and I’d like you to join the steering committee.”

Nick leaned back extra hard in his chair; the great David Clark was asking Nick to be on one of his high profile drug study committees. Susan was going to have a cow when she heard this, given that she had informed her husband on several occasions over the years how David was a pompous ass who could spend an entire dinner party talking about himself and his affairs. Nick couldn’t say he entirely disagreed with his wife but the guy and Nick had some strange bond, like David needed him as a constant in his life. Nick never called him to arrange their monthly lunch because David always called to set it up first. If David got Nick’s voice mail, he had been known to call again before Nick had a chance to even hear the message. Nick had a far busier day than Dr. David Clark, yet he made one fifth of what his college buddy pulled in each year and this only bothered him every other week.

“Really?” Nick tried to act as calm as possible, taking a sip of his bottled water. He probably drank 7-8 of those suckers every day.

David laughed. “Yes, really! It’ll be very helpful to have an Internal guy at the table, and you won’t have to do much of the work.”

Sitting back down in his chair, Nick looked at the clock on the wall, realizing that he had less than two minutes.

“Why’s that?”

“Well, the steering committee acts like a buffer between the study researchers and the drug company. We simply review the data...we have statisticians for the big leg work.”

Buffer was an odd, yet decent choice for describing how a drug study steering committee worked. Things could get kind of nasty when a drug company got a study result that they didn’t like, since neither scientist nor pharmaceutical CEO was fond of hearing that the drug they created had some nasty side effect or, worse, was conclusively ineffective.

“When does the study end?” Nick inquired.

“Not entirely sure at this point. My guess is that the committee will be able to release conclusive results nine months from now.”

David was a scratch golfer and played in pro-am tournaments across the country, a level of productivity in sharp contrast to his college days when he always said that he could be on the golf team if he put a little dedication into the sport. Enter the easy life as a cardiologist and the golf game blossomed.

“I’ll call you later this evening with more details,” David told Nick. “I believe there’s a meeting Thursday at 5:30, but I need to double check.”

“That’s fine,” Nick said.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” David declared. “I’m having lunch with Peter Hansen tomorrow to talk about investing some of my money with him. I hear PLH has been performing reasonably well.”

“You’re not a high flying celebrity but, whatever,” Nick replied. “Say hello for me.”

Nick’s son Tom was best friends with Peter’s son, Charlie. Peter ran an investment firm in town, though Nick could honestly say that he hadn’t been tracking Peter’s performance over the recent years. He had a Merrill Lynch broker in town that he had been using for over twelve years.

“I will do, sir!” David said and then let himself out of his office.

Nick sat back in his chair, thrilled that David finally asked him. He never wanted to beg to be on one of David’s cool drug committees but this was an opportunity to break out of the funk he had found himself in with his career. Was this a mid-life crisis, even though Nick had earned the same amount of money for ten years now? He couldn’t see any more patients, meaning that he had hit the proverbial glass ceiling. Meeting with pharmaceutical big wigs or hobnobbing with the upper ranks of the medical community was out of his league. The opportunity that David gave him could open doors in his stagnant career. It was not about the money – it wasn’t clear to Nick if committee members got paid for their service – yet he wanted to be looked at as somebody more than some Internal Medicine doctor in a small clinic.

He didn’t want to get his hopes up too much and he was sure Susan would ask him just to be happy with whom he was. This caused him to cringe every time she said

this. Why did everybody need to understand who they were and be happy with that? The ego is a complicated beast within us and it needs feeding. He shouldn't have needed somebody like David Clark to ride to his rescue but Nick kind of did need him. He wanted Susan to brag more about him to her friends, she needed that and he needed that.

Monday, September 1st

5 p.m.

Oleg Yashkov

“Five hundred thousand will be wired to your Swiss account on Thursday.”

Martin’s voice was tired and deep.

“That’s great...I really appreciate this.”

“Oleg, you handled a sticky situation the way we want it handled....Jerry said you were our man.”

The whirring of a vacuum cleaner could be heard on the background.

“Yeah, I thought doctors were an easier mark but that guy in Philly surprised us,”

Oleg told Martin. “So...how exactly do you make this kind of money on the information we pass on?”

After months of planning and waiting, the final money reward seemed hugely crazy and deserving at the same time. After all, Mrs. Linder put up quite a fight and was a real bitch about the whole thing. And they definitely weren’t expecting that Uzi.

“You don’t need the details...just keep doing your job. There are countless of clinical drug studies going on in the Northeast...”

“Right, we’ll be staying in central Jersey...laying low for the time being – like you said.”

An 18 wheeler trucker blew his horn behind the sedan.

“That’s good. Now, I don’t expect to hear from you again until we find another doctor on a study.”

“I understand.”

Oleg turned the cell phone off and merged the sedan onto the NJ Turnpike, heading toward Morris Plains, NJ. Traffic was quite heavy and they were moving just 30 miles per hour due to the heavy rain that had started. The rain was creating a loud noise inside the car.

“Looks like we need to find I-70 West.”

“Okay then...let’s give Mihail a call once we find I-70.”

Oleg glanced over at Karel wincing as he moved his left shoulder. That damn Uzi surprised them and Oleg was screaming inside over them not knowing what kind of heat the Linder bodyguard was packing. The week before played over and over in his head, how they first noticed this large guy hanging around the Linder house and acting like a security person. They were told not to meet with Mr. Linder or make a big scene over this development, but instead violently remove the bodyguard with a home raid and get the information out of the Linders a little earlier than the plan had called for. If they had met with Mr. Linder, he might have decided to bolt town. That was Martin’s and Fred’s conclusion, anyway, and they called the shots. Oleg personally thought Mr. Linder’s friggin ego would never let him disappear even for a short time.

Oleg didn't know they were supposed to plan for the Uzi, though. They were thinking shot gun or even an automatic pistol. But what was done was done, and Karel had a bullet in his shoulder that needed to get removed. That was priority #1.

Priority #2 was to make sure they were still cool with Julio. They sort of screwed up with the Lick Brothers incident in Miami. They needed this to run smoothly and it kinda didn't, at least not the way Oleg saw it. And they were pretty sure Mihail, their cleaner, was going to be pissed at their mess at the Linders. Martin thought they did a good job, but Mihail could have sent his complaint directly to Julio for all Oleg knew, especially since someone much higher in the cartel than Martin had brought Mihail into this drug study operation. It took them way too long to get the information out of Mr. Linder and Karel's blood was on the kitchen floor. They hadn't been able to get in touch with Mihail since they left the Linders fifteen hours earlier.

Friday, September 5th

5:30 p.m.

Nick Johnson

Nick found a spot in the outdoor lot on the westside of Overlook Hospital in Summit, NJ. The meeting was in the newly constructed glass tower on the west wing of the building.

It was raining, and the lot was $\frac{3}{4}$ full, forcing him to park toward the back of the lot. For a second he thought his umbrella wasn't in the car until it turned up under a jacket lying on the back seat floor.

"Excuse me...can you tell me how to get to Conference room 3A?" he asked the information clerk in the lobby.

Nick was guessing it was on the third floor, but you never know with hospitals and the odd room numbering.

"Follow the blue arrow around to the elevators on the other side of the tower. Take the elevator down to LL3. Conference room 3a is the big one in the center of that floor. You can't miss it."

He thanked the information clerk – it was a good thing to ask.

The elevator stopped on LL3 and Nick saw the conference room 3a, a fishbowl in the center of the floor just as the clerk directed. David Clark was busy talking with an elderly gentleman.

"Nick! Great that you could make it...you can hang your coat and bag on the rack behind you...refreshments and light snacks are over here," David stated warmly.

Wood blinds covered the windows of the room, and the aroma from coffee brewing in the corner took on its own dimension. Nick was not a coffee drinker - never had been - though Susan couldn't survive without a jolt first thing in the morning.

David introduced him to the elderly gentleman, Dr. Norman Watson, who was a Cardiologist from Boston.

"It's a pleasure to meet you, sir..."Nick stated.

"Nick, we appreciate you coming tonight on such short notice," Dr. Watson declared.

Dr. Watson had an incredibly strong handshake for somebody that looked 70. He was wearing a grey sweater vest over a white dress shirt and reading glasses dangled from his neck.

As two other gentlemen arrived, they began talking to another gentleman that Nick did not know.

The drug the committee was examining was called Zyptorin. This drug had been in the marketplace for three years, generating over \$1 billion in annual sales for Distal Pharmaceutical, Inc. Zyptorin had replaced nearly $\frac{2}{3}$ of the sales of the former leading artery drug, Balentor, claiming to be 40% more effective than Balentor in artery plaque reduction.

Over the past two years, complaints had surfaced about Zyptorin's claim as the superior drug for artery plaque reduction. Distal Pharmaceutical was funding the study of

2,050 heart patients receiving stents in the last year, with various doses being set for the study that extended to 10 cities across the U.S.

The Data Monitoring committee was due to present the statistical findings for ½ of the patient population to the steering committee that next week. The phase three study five years ago only tested 400 patients. Current complaints claimed that Zyptorin had not shown to be superior to Balentor in a much wider pool of heart patients.

Dr. Watson invited Nick to sit next to him at the table, a mahogany table able to seat twenty people around it. There were ten of them in the room and everybody but Dr. Watson looked to be within 10 years of Nick.

“Ok, everyone, if we can be seated at the table, I want to introduce the newest member of our committee, Dr. Nick Johnson.”

David Clark came over and patted him on the back.

“Nick here is the finest Internal physician in New Jersey and we’re lucky to have him with us,” David said to everybody.

“Okay, guys...let’s get started. I talked with Justin Witley this afternoon and he has confirmed that we have the statistical findings for half the pool,” Dr. Watson started. “And he’s ready to present these findings to us next week.”

A gentleman Nick didn’t know leaned over the table. “And we’ve covered all five dose classes across the patient sample?”

“Pete, all five dose classes have been covered, and the study for ½ of the patient pool is complete.”

“Was Justin able to give you any hints?” David Clark asked.

Dr. Watson grimaced while rubbing his chin.

“Well, this first half doesn’t look very promising...right now, the study is pointing us to between 10 and 15% greater effectiveness than Balentor,” Dr. Watson continued. “And remember, we’re looking to see how many patients fall into that range.

“Wow! Less than 15% is a lousy figure....Norm, we’re going to have our hands full with Jim Newel,” a bald gentleman stated from the other side of the table.

Jim Newel was the Chief Executive Officer for Distal Pharmaceutical who had been CEO for four years. In 2001, he was paid over \$12 million dollars in salary and bonus - the 8 million stock options didn’t hurt either.

“Paul, please don’t overreact here...The whole purpose of this Steering Committee is to act as a buffer between those running this study and Distal Pharmaceutical.”

Dr. Watson announced that a different dose pattern would be assigned to 10% of the remaining pool to see if they could get the greater effectiveness figure into the mid 20% range.

“Wait at a minute...so we’re reaching, so to speak, to get to 20% better than Balentor?” Paul asked.

Dr. Watson leaned back in his chair and put his hands on the back of his head.

“Paul, you know as well as I that so much of this business is reaching, as you say...It’s not like this is your first committee. So, I’m assuming the same time next week works for everybody?” Dr Watson asked the group.

Dr. Watson checked his watch.

“You know, Norm, I’ve been reading some of the testimonials given by these heart patients and I’m not sure that physicians would stop prescribing Zyptorin if it’s only shown to be 10% more effective than Balentor,” David Clark asserted.

Paul jumped in the flow. “But you gotta admit that Jim Newel’s precious Distal Pharmaceutical stock is going to plummet if we publish a 10% result for Zyptorin.”

David Clark slammed his hands down on the table.

“Well that guy could use a little humility!” David yelled.

“All right, that’s enough...let’s re-focus here,” Dr. Watson inserted. “I want everyone here to come up with two statistics questions for next week’s meeting. I don’t want to appear like we’re not doing very much work for this study.”

Several at the table burst into laughter and even Dr. Watson had trouble keeping a straight face.

“Oh, you’re all about image, Norm. I think that’s great. Guys, I think he’s being serious here,” David said.

“You bet I’m serious about this,” Dr Watson cried out. “Just once I’d like to run a steering committee where we have good news to tell our pharmaceutical client.”

This was Norm Watson’s third steering committee. The first two were Phase 2 drug trials for brand new drugs which never made it out of Phase 2, so Norm was thrilled that he could work with a drug that was actually successful in the marketplace.

Friday, September 5th
Oleg Yashkov

Karel laughed and slammed his hand on the bar at Luigi's, causing him to wince in pain from his shoulder wound. Any sudden movement in his upper body disturbed him mightily. Oleg refilled his champagne glass.

Karel was very lucky that the Linders' asshole security guy only nicked him with the array of bullets he sent flying their way that night. They knew he was in the house, but Karel had to take the security guy out in a way they hadn't considered. Barreling through the garage door was their only chance and Karel did a hell of a job. They were not sure how Karel was shot - they probably would never know. In any case, it was a divot taken out of his shoulder, so they were keeping peroxide and Neosporin on it.

"I can't believe you cut that guy's finger off - that was really nasty. There are less bloody ways to get somebody to talk, you know."

"C'mon, focus here! We gotta get Martin's guy to look at your shoulder, again."

Oleg thought he was too loud just then, making him look around the restaurant to see if anyone was staring at them. Two men were talking with a woman and her teenage son, though none of them was paying any attention to the two cartel men.

They had some homework to do on Dr. Nick Johnson. Oleg wished their friends in charge had a master directory for all drug trials and the projected date of completion, but they didn't. Ideally, they would know when the trial would end and make contact with the target doctor shortly before that date. Since they didn't have that luxury with Dr. Linder they were now caught cleaning up some loose ends. Oleg and Karel were going to have to watch this Nick Johnson more closely.

They gave Dr. Linder too much time to come up with a plan, and he thought he could outsmart them. He didn't, but he sure made everything messier than it had to be. Oleg sure would have liked to know where the doctor found that bodyguard.

Martin's guy was able to get the bullet out of Karel's shoulder and stitch him up, but the wound was oozing something green. Oleg knew that wasn't good. They had been trying Martin on the cell for a few hours, because Oleg didn't know how to reach the stitch up guy who had worked on Karel in Martin's office in New York. They could not risk an ER visit. Even though they would have no way of knowing that Karel's wound was from a bullet, the ER staff was sure to grow suspicious over the less than quality stitching job provided by Martin's guy.

Friday, September 5th
Peter Hansen

Dinner at the Crusted Top had been a Hansen family tradition since Charlie was a baby- they also had a 14-year old daughter, Isabelle – and tonight was certainly a night for celebration. Martin's security guy was keeping the 'pants on fire' harasser away from him, the image of the Linders' blood was fading in his mind, and his firm made a huge profit on Friday afternoon. It had been a year since Peter was forced to dance with the devil that was the Viola drug cartel. Something about a \$25 million gain on a stock trade got his blood moving. Even if the gain was grossly illegal, it was the best news his firm had gotten in a long time. When Julio first explained in entirety his plan for Doctor Linder, Peter didn't understand why he was wasting his time on what seemed to be a small potatoes project. However, sitting at the table at the Crusted Top tonight, Peter understood it all quite well. A few more doctor shake downs like that one, without the actual murder of course, and he would be well on his way to making up for his poor investment losses of the past two years. The fact that Julio controlled those profits in addition to all of PLH was being intentionally ignored in his mind as Peter needed to celebrate with his family.

The truth was, though, Peter had slept like crap all week long, and, by Friday night, Claire could have put a fork in him. Martin's security guy showed up in his office parking lot late Monday afternoon as promised. By Friday, Peter was kind of surprised that this 'pants on fire' guy hadn't called back. Maybe he noticed Martin's security guy arrive or maybe he wasn't watching Peter at all. He couldn't have full appreciation of who he was dealing with if he wasn't watching, so Peter kinda hoped he was watching. In any case, Martin's man hung around his neighborhood, where Peter only had two neighbors on his heavily wooded street, and followed him wherever he went in his car each day. Part of him hoped that 'pants on fire' did try something. That way he could find a bullet between the eyes.

When someone threatens your family, you try to think of every way out of the situation, and Peter did just that. That day a year ago, when the mustached man name Martin first visited him, Martin stood over Peter while he executed the nine different wire transfers. After each transfer, Peter tried his hardest to see how the financial maze they were creating could end up leading the authorities to him if things went wrong. But it was so stressful with Martin standing over him that it was crazy hard to think straight. For sure, if someone poked hard enough, they would see that the first wire transfer started inside his firm's office.

Over the next few months, Peter made sure to tape every conversation he had with Julio, which totaled five before year end. On the third conversation, he whined to Julio that the laundered money scheme would end up crashing down into his lap, and Julio assured him that he wouldn't let that happen. Once Peter got that on tape, that was enough insurance. Thoughts about picking up his family and bolting town were gone, replaced by confidence that Julio didn't have a reason to hurt them as long as the

laundering relationship continued functioning; and if authorities raided his firm one day, the tapes would point the blame directly at Julio.

PLH ended 2001 down 45%, having gone from 'not great' status when Peter first met Julio to 'likely disaster' a few months later. The Enron scandal was the reason, with Peter failing to believe the company would go bankrupt and doubling down his bet in late November of 2001. That single trade could have taken down his firm if it weren't for Julio's aid. Why he decided to swing for the fences, he didn't think he ever would know for sure. Julio definitely rattled him when he forced his way into PLH. Maybe Peter got to thinking that his \$75 million of laundered drug money was some kind of insurance.

By late December of 2001, his firm's performance had tumbled so badly that he knew his firm couldn't convey that in his year-end letter to investors. That was when Peter started appreciating Julio's investment into PLH a whole lot more. So, instead of telling his investors that his firm lost 45% of their money in 2001, he could tell them that his firm had lost 10% during the year. This was far better than the S&Ps 500's performance for the year. Nearly every investor would've demanded their money back if he had posted the -45% figure. His firm would've collapsed. Peter would've been a 49-year old with very dim job prospects since he had been working for himself for twenty years. No one in their right mind would have given him money to start a new fund. Claire would have divorced him for sure if his firm imploded. She had been urging him to go to marriage counseling for the past few months, and he had steadfastly refused. In his mind, there was nothing that they couldn't make better for their marriage by just talking to themselves and keeping an outside party away from the conversation.

Peter looked around their table at the Crusted Top and smiled at his family. "I think we should plan on going to Vail this winter," he asserted.

Claire kicked him under the table. "Hold on, you've been telling us for a year now to watch our expenses, and now you want to spend on a trip to Vail?"

"My firm had its best quarter ever and we made a fortune this week," he said with a wide smile.

"That's so cool, Dad," Charlie burst into the conversation. "I can't wait."

"Well look who's over at this table," a voice stated behind him. "Hello, Hansen family, are you all having a great night out?"

Peter whipped around to find Father Mike Nicholson dressed in a sweat suit. "Oh, hello, Father, do you want to join us?"

Father Mike was their priest at St. Anthony's parish in town. He was a gem of a person. Claire and Peter tried to have him over for dinner at least three times a year.

"Oh, no thanks," Father Mike said. "I just got done with my squash games and came in for the Swiss burger that they make here."

Squash is a funny sport, considered pretty much a North East sport, but even less followed than Lacrosse. Father Mike belonged to the Morristown Racquet Club, which was built in the early 70s and still looked that way. It was in the style of an airplane hangar, holding seven tennis courts upstairs and four squash courts downstairs.

Peter knew Father Mike tried to play three times a week in a recreational league that was pretty laid back. Nick Johnson was also in that league, and he'd been trying for

years to get Peter to join. He went with Nick once to the courts, though it was a complete train wreck.

“Oh, how was your squash game?” Claire asked.

“Tonight was a slow Friday night...only four guys showed up, which was actually good because I got in four games when, on some nights, I get only one or two.”

Peter had been meaning to talk with Father Mike in private about his problems with the Viola family because he would keep it quiet. Peter just had to tell someone else to get it off his chest. For the first two months after Martin first came to his office, Peter would sit up in bed in the middle of the night in a sleep filled trance and start talking about Martin, Julio, the French steel companies, just about anything that he was finding stressful. Claire woke up a few times, asking him one morning who Martin was. He had to do his best ‘I have no idea’ impersonation. But having not gotten around to talking with Father Mike, things had progressed so much with Julio’s latest drug trial insider trading plan that Peter didn’t think anybody would understand his side of the story. At some point over the last couple of months, he started to look at himself as equally criminal as the Viola drug cartel. And that was pretty damn criminal.

“Well, that’s good, Father, good exercise,” Peter said. “And, yes, the burgers they serve here are wonderful!”

“That, they are, Peter...Okay, then, Hansens, I’ll let you get back to your dinner. I’ll see you all later this weekend at Mass.” Father Mike said. He turned and walked back to the bar to wait for his burger.

“Why didn’t you ask him about a date for dinner at our house?” Claire whined to him.

“Me? You do all of that planning, in case you forgot!” Peter shot back. He was kind of torqued at his wife for not being more enthusiastic about the Vail trip idea. Maybe she would have preferred to take a trip to the inner parts of Mexico and visit the Viola drug cartel. That would get her to understand the stress that he had been putting up with the past year. He needed somebody to hear his side of the story, for Pete’s sake.

Friday, October 18th

2 p.m.

Peter Hansen

“All right, Peter!” Julio shouted joyously. The connection was not great, so he probably was at his compound in Mexico. “We have found a new drug trial to focus on and a new doctor target has come to our attention. This guy is on the trial committee and will have the inside information we’ll need.”

“That was fast,” Peter said. “Where’s this doctor and what trial is it?”

“Oleg found out about this doctor Nick Johnson who was recently appointed to the committee for the drug Zyptorin which is made by Distal Pharmaceutical.”

His heart took a few extra beats. “Say the name of the doctor again, please?”

“Nick Johnson,” Julio repeated. “Why, do you know him?”

“Yes, I know him!” Peter shouted. “He lives in my neighborhood.”

This was bad, really, really bad. He ran his hand through his hair, something he’d been doing a lot lately. If he had opened up his chest and yanked his heart out right then, the sucker would have definitely jumped off his desk.

“Wow, small world,” Julio said. “Peter, this isn’t going to be a problem for you is it?”

“Well, now that you know which drug trial it is, can’t you just find some other doctor on the committee?”

“No, that would take too much time,” Julio replied. “We’ve already spent a lot of time on this doctor Nick Johnson. His blind brother in law was blabbing all night last month at a restaurant my guys were at about his sister’s husband getting onto this fancy drug trial. That kind of luck doesn’t come around too often you know.”

“Well, if you hadn’t murdered the last doctor, I wouldn’t be so worried, right?” Peter shot back.

“Okay, Peter, this is going nowhere,” Julio declared. “Nick Johnson is our guy, like it or not.” Julio sneezed loudly. “Oh, and by the way, we only killed the Linders because they didn’t cooperate.” He really wasn’t a guy you could argue with.

“Keep me posted,” Peter told his drug cartel boss, then sunk back down into his office chair. He put the phone into the receiver, quickly reached for the waste basket under his desk, and threw up his lunch. “No! No! No!” he whispered loudly.

Peter put his hand over his face and thought about the Johnson family. He had just seen them three nights ago at a soccer game, and their two families tried to play cards a few times a year. The wives really liked to play bridge. He should have asked Julio if Oleg had already talked to Nick. Julio didn’t tell Peter how long they had been doing there homework on Nick. If they hadn’t talked to him, maybe Peter could have headed them off at the pass to warn him.

It was one thing to bring this plague upon his family, but Peter was responsible for bringing it upon the Johnsons, and, since Oleg murdered the last doctor he was threatening, there was every reason to fear the worst for Nick, Susan and Tom. Oleg

certainly would try his best in making Nick believe that he'd leave him and his family alone if Nick did what they told him to do. But Peter had complained about the Linder murder to Julio on several occasions and this was the first time that he even intimated that he wouldn't do it again. Peter was not sure he believed him, though, so Nick needed to know what Peter knew about who he was dealing with.

He wiped his mouth, spat some more into his waste basket and took a sip of his diet cola. It struck him while leaning back in his chair that Julio must have known that he knew Nick Johnson – he probably wanted to set him straight before they really put their plan into action – mainly because he didn't need to keep him in the loop like that. They told him about the Linders way late into the process, and Peter only learned their name, fate, etc. from Martin, not Julio. It sure sounded from Julio that they were in the early stages of targeting Nick Johnson. Why did Peter tell Julio that he and Nick were friends? He should have quickly realized that Julio wasn't going to change his mind, as it would have been nice to leave him a little confused by not saying anything. During the conversation, Julio didn't ask him at first if he knew Nick. If Peter had left it alone and steered the conversation away from such a question, Julio may have walked away flummoxed. That was the least that son-of-a-bitch deserved.

"Maybe I should go over to Nick's house tonight," he muttered to himself, but then realized that it may be difficult to get him alone.

Damn. Just when he thought he had the money laundering thing under control, this stupid drug trial scheme was starting to bite him in a new part of his ass.

"I should bring a helmet when I explain to Nick what is about to happen to him," Peter whispered. "He's gonna be really pissed at me, will want to take my head off. How am I going to explain my involvement with a Mexican drug cartel and its new business of trading inside information on pharmaceutical drug trials?"

While Peter didn't think he'd ever want to speak to him again, he needed to get him away from that immediate feeling of utter despair so as to focus on how he was going to help his family. Unlike the Hansens, the Johnsons had a lot of family in the immediate area, so leaving in the middle of the night would be much harder for them. Peter's mother passed away five years ago from lung cancer and his father lived in Ft. Lauderdale. His wife, Claire, only had her mother alive, and she lived in Jacksonville. They took the kids to the east coast of Florida twice a year, in the summer and winter, to see their grandparents.

The police would be no help at all, given that the real criminal was in the middle of Mexico, shielded from any authority. Peter had thought about turning over his taped phone conversations to the police last year, but quickly realized the futility of such an effort. Even if the police arrested Martin or Oleg, Julio would quickly find replacements who'd certainly teach him a lesson for talking to the police.

Peter got up to tell Judy and Darryl that he was taking the rest of the day off. They always left around 3:30 on Fridays, anyway, so he was sure they wouldn't find it too suspicious. He had wondered over the last year if they had heard the various episodes of him yelling at Martin and Julio - no one said anything, though.

Darryl had been with him for five years. Peter made sure to treat him well, given the major headache it would be in replacing him if he were to leave the firm. Darryl was gay, lived with his partner in Summit, NJ, and recently bought a home there. His partner, Jonathan, was a lawyer for some New York firm. Peter and Claire went to their home welcoming party, which turned out to be a whole lot more fun than they had imagined, on the account of the game Taboo.

Claire really loosened up that night - it was fun to see her enjoying things again. She was an ER nurse, had been for seventeen years, and recently witnessed two separate child deaths from car crashes over a two month span up until Darryl and Jonathan's party. Claire had to take a week off after the second incident. Their marriage went into the toilet around that time, mainly because Peter's head was so twisted around Julio and the gang, rather than supporting his wife through this painful period for her. He made the mistake one evening of suggesting that she retire from the ER wing and move somewhere else in the hospital.

Darryl had four brothers, all in the area, who were married with many kids among them. As long as Peter had known Darryl, it had only been recently that his whole family agreed to put aside his sexual nature and love him like a brother. Peter had never seen Darryl happier. That was right around the time that he first met Martin in his office.

"You got plans for the weekend?" Darryl asked Peter.

"We have a party to go to tonight, but, outside of that, not much going on for us this weekend. You?"

"Oh, we're having some friends over tomorrow night, so Jonathan and I are having dinner in the city, tonight."

Darryl and Jonathan had dinner in New York City every weekend, causing Peter to wonder aloud on several occasions why they didn't simply choose to live there. Jonathan didn't like Peter too much and certainly didn't appreciate his suggestions for their life together.

Friday, October 18th

5 p.m.

“Julio, it’s Martin.”

“Hello, sir, I hope you got good news for me. Everybody still alive?”

Martin laughed. “Well, Joseph caught him trying to break into Hansen’s patio door, but he didn’t get any farther than that.”

“Tell Joseph ‘good work’ and for him to find a spot for the body.”

“I’ll do just that...you know, Julio, I was thinking that keeping this thing a secret might have its advantages later on.”

“Good point, so tell Joseph to stick around – we might need him again. Oh, and please swing by Peter Hansen’s this weekend to hold his hand through this Nick Johnson deal. I don’t think he’s too pleased with me over this doctor friend of his.”

Martin laughed again. “Consider it done, and have a great weekend.”

Monday, October 21st

9 a.m.

Peter Hansen

All weekend, Peter thought about heading over to Nick Johnson's house and laying the news on him. That didn't happen, though, which only made Peter wonder if his hesitance would be back to haunt him. Maybe it had to do with him never talking to anybody outside of the Viola drug cartel's network about what Julio Viola was planning. He didn't want his confession to Nick to be the first time he opened his mouth to his friends and family about him playing a key role in Julio's scheme.

He picked up his office phone handset and dialed Martin's number.

"Peter Hansen, what's up?" Martin, the acne - scarred, mustache man, asked him.

"Hello, Martin, hey listen, do you know if Oleg has talked to Nick Johnson, yet?"

"No, not yet," Martin said. "We have found out that the Zyptorin trial will likely end around March of next year, so we don't want to keep Dr. Nick under our pressure for more than a few months."

"Oh, okay," Peter said. "You know, Oleg keeps talking about this guy Fred...who's he in all of this?"

"He's in charge of the ground operations, tells Oleg when and where to be at all times."

"Boy, Julio is pretty organized, huh?"

Martin laughed into the phone. "Hansen, you don't want to know"

"All right, then," Peter said. "Talk to you later."

He hung up the phone and, sitting back in his chair, it dawned on him that he may just have to suck it up: Nick would be the first person he would open up to about Julio's cartel. Claire and Susan hadn't been speaking since their late August card game where Claire crossed the line in asserting that Susan was wasting her career away looking after very much independent Stanley who was her blind brother. It was surprising to hear a nurse say that kind of thing. Susan was really offended. They had seen each other at soccer games but hadn't really talked all season, and that's why Peter had no idea Nick was appointed to this drug trial committee. There had to be a way for Nick to believe this, convince him that Peter didn't turn Oleg onto him.

"Good luck with that," he told himself.

Tuesday, November 5th
Nick Johnson

Susan and Nick pulled onto Harrison Street, down the road from Morristown High School. Tom had a soccer game at 4:00pm against Madison High School. They found a spot to park that required just a short walk up to the school on Early Street.

It was 3:45 p.m. and Susan was pissed about something. Even though Nick had picked her up fifteen minutes earlier, exactly what was bugging her was still a mystery to him. She asked him to be quiet during the ride over, so he'd been batting that around his head since. Susan slept in late that morning, but she almost never slept past 7 a.m. and usually was out running by 6:45 a.m. Tom hadn't needed her help in the morning for the past year, getting, instead, a ride from a senior boy, Paul Wheeler, who lived up the street.

Nick tried to get out the door by 7:40 in the mornings, so this gave Susan plenty of time to get her run in. He was surprised to find her still in bed when his alarm rang at 6:50. After shaving and showering, he shook her upon coming back into the bedroom to get dressed.

"Do you feel sick?"

"I'm fine! I don't feel like a run this morning, that's all," she snapped back at him.

Not used to getting dressed in the dark, he missed a button on his shirt. Luckily, Melanie caught this before he saw any patients this morning.

Tom left the house at 7:20 each morning and didn't even notice that his mother was still asleep. He probably thought that she was still running.

This was a big game for Tom's team - they were ranked the #1 team in Morris County heading into the fall - which recently lost to Madison in the Morris County Tournament finals. They had already beaten Madison in early September but they got stung in overtime in the tournament.

Tom blamed the loss on the referees and was torqued for over a week. It got kind of old, but you can't force a teenager to be happy. Not that they hadn't tried a million times.

This game tonight was a make-up game from mid October since that game was cancelled due to a bomb threat at the high school. Everything at the school was cancelled for 24 hours. They never found a bomb, though that didn't stop the two high schools from pointing fingers at each other. Tom had several friends from Madison High, yet they didn't think they'd been friends the past few weeks.

Tom and Susan couldn't wait for the season to end and for everybody to calm back down. They loved the fact that Tom played just one sport. Some of his friends played two or three such that the parents never got a break.

He tried to make a joke to Susan about the uptightness of all involved parties surrounding this game today, when Susan told him to be quiet. What was wrong with

trying to lighten up the moment? The funnyman, though, wasn't any closer to understanding what was wrong with Susan despite running the past 24 hours around in his head over and over again.

He pulled between two minivans and turned off the car. Susan got out without saying anything. When she noticed that he was still in the car, she opened her side door again to inquire.

“What the hell are you doing? Let's go!”

Susan was clearly trying to keep her voice down, especially since there was no telling which friend might overhear her. They were not that far from the school, but it didn't matter how quiet she was being, Nick got it. Susan's scrunched up face alone told him how steaming mad she was. Against his better instincts, he felt like putting up a fight, though, as he looked up at his wife.

“You go ahead. I don't feel like being around you right now. I'm going to dictate today's notes. I'll just be a few minutes.”

“Huh... You don't feel like being with me... that's just great. Take your damn time!”

Susan slammed the door, then walked off.

Nick reached in his bag and pulled out his voice recorder, a tape recorder that was nearly nine years old. The digital ones looked cool, but there really wasn't the need to dump his steady eddy quite yet. The recorder needed new batteries so he took a minute to make the change with the fresh batteries he had thrown into his work bag right before leaving the office that afternoon.

The car was shut off... keys were in his pocket.

“Tuesday, November 5th,” he announced into the recorder. “Patient Ralph Roddick...”

The back passenger door whipped open and Nick promptly felt a cold metal blade against his throat. He flinched to his right in hopes that he could see anything but the knife was too tight against his adam's apple.

The voice recorder fell to the floor.

“Look... here's my wallet... take it!”

Nick reached to the center console where his wallet was sitting and lifted it up.

His throat was starting to sting... whoever was behind him ignored the wallet.

“If you listen to this man carefully, you'll not get hurt,” a male voice with an accent stated very deliberately.

The front passenger door opened calmly and another male climbed in next to him.

“You are Nick Johnson, yes?”

“Uh-huh.”

Only the man's legs were visible. He was wearing black slacks with Italian looking shoes.

“I'm Oleg. You currently serve on the Zyptorin study committee?”

“Uh-huh.”

Nick's stomach was starting to seize up, but he was too scared that his head might flinch and slice his throat.

“Please, can you loosen the knife, sir? You can have whatever you want!”
Oleg spoke to the knife holder in a foreign language and the knife was removed.
While taking a deep breath, Nick looked over at Oleg, not daring to look behind him.

His front seat mate had dark slicked back hair, eyes that looked Eastern European, a small gap in his upper two front teeth, and was wearing a tan button down shirt with no tie.

“Susan is a fine woman and your son Tom is a pretty solid soccer goalie. You should be very proud,” the man stated.

Nick shrunk his eyes before shaking his head in confusion.

“What?” he asked exasperatedly.

“Nick? Look at me. You’re going to tell us the official study results and media release date. Do you understand?”

“Who are you?” he asked continually in his head.

Nick simply nodded, not saying anything. Oleg reached for his shirt pocket and pulled out a device that looked like a small video camera. After working with it, he opened the viewer screen in front of Nick.

“The last drug study physician thought he could out smart us, so he didn’t follow the instructions. If you tell the police or do anything other than what we’ve told you...you’ll end up like the last doctor and his wife.”

There in front of him was a picture of two people tied to chairs. The woman on the left had tape over her mouth and she was thrashing around trying to break free. Her right eye was smashed in, while the left side of the male’s head was very bloodied.

Oleg pressed the play button and the male in the video began to speak.

“I am Dr. Harold Linder. I didn’t follow simple instructions. Now my family is paying for it.”

Dr, Harold Linder was crying and Nick could barely understand his words. The doctor was wearing a blue bathrobe. He looked over at a woman about his age, who was yelling something inaudible because of the tape on her mouth. Nick guessed that was his wife – she was wearing a plain night gown - and they were both sitting in their kitchen. The two victims were in front of a dining set that looked out through a bay window.

A man looking a lot like Oleg emerged behind the doctor and placed tape over the doctor’s mouth. Next, he yanked the doctor’s hand up, held his arm from moving, and out came a huge knife. The man had black gloves on. As the doctor was now screaming into the tape, he began fighting the man with the big knife by trying to free his hand, but it was not helping him. The time on the video screen was 1:27 a.m.

In less than five seconds, the left pinky was cut off and the doctor looked to pass out from the pain. His head slumped into his chest. The man with the knife held up the pinky, yelling out,

“It didn’t have to be this way, doctor. You screw with me, you get a whole lot more screwing back!”

The man dropped the finger onto the tile floor.

Mrs. Linder was really thrashing around in her chair now and knocked herself over in the chair. The man picked Mrs. Linder up from the ground, punching her in the face, twice.

Oleg closed the video screen and started speaking to Nick.

“Now, you and Susan don’t want to end up like this, do you? We got the information from Dr. Linder anyway, but he chose the very hard way by not following our instructions. Just tell us the official study result and the media announcement date. Anything other than that, and you and Susan end up like the dead Linders. Got it?”

Oleg was an inch or two from Nick’s left ear - he could feel his breath as Oleg spoke to him.

The guy behind Nick said something in his foreign language to Oleg and started laughing through his nose. They exchanged a few thoughts, though it sure seemed like the conversation was less than pleasant.

“Okay, I got it!” Nick said firmly.

Holding out his hands as if to show nothing but obedience to these men, he just wanted them to leave his car.

“We’ll be in touch, Nick. Remember, don’t get tricky on us. No one knows about this but us, all right?”

“All right...no need for anybody to get hurt here.”

“Good. Have a great time at the game.”

With that, the two men left the car and Nick whipped around to see where they were going. The two men were around the same height, except the man who held the knife against him had a pony tail and was wearing blue jeans. Neither of them looked back toward his vehicle before disappearing onto Early Street.

Nick pulled the rear mirror down and frantically tried to see the condition of his neck. It was really stinging, but there was only a small dollop of blood at the top of his adam’s apple. The cut didn’t look too bad, mildly worse than a shaving cut. He was lucky.

He had a few napkins in the inside console and dabbed his neck gently to stop the bleeding. His hands were shaking while he did his best to place a napkin piece on top of the cut in hopes that the bleeding would stop in a few minutes. It was a few minute walk to the soccer fields, anyway

Nick sat in the driver’s seat for a while, probably for a minute or so, trying to deal with the image of the Linders in his head. What did they do wrong and why didn’t they understand the danger?

There were eleven other committee members, why didn’t these thugs target them? He knew the least of anybody on the committee. The questions were flying through his head so fast that he couldn’t keep track.

Picking up his voice recorder from the floor, which was still taping, he shut it off and dropped it into his bag.

It wasn’t clear to him if Oleg said when they were going to meet again but the voice recorder likely taped the whole conversation so Nick would make sure to listen to this later.

The car clock got his attention. 3:59 p.m.

“Wait,” he said aloud. “You might not know when the trial results are released to the press... Crap! What if they don’t believe me if I tell them I don’t know?”

The press release was established in conjunction with the pharmaceutical company. The more he thought about it, the more he became convinced that he wouldn’t have such information. This worry was especially reasonable given that all signs of the trial up to this point were quite bad for Distal Pharmaceutical, and the company may have decided to delay the news release beyond the committee’s knowledge.

He slammed his head against the head rest.

“Nick, what have you gotten yourself into? Dammit! How are you going to keep this from Susan? How are you going to go to this dang game and act like nothing happened?”

Only a few minutes into this development, this whole deal was already eating away at his insides.

Nick got out of the car and locked it. He looked around to see if anybody they knew witnessed these thugs in his car. That would be bad for him and, quite possibly, them. It occurred to him that the Oleg gang took quite a risk in choosing to invade his car since Susan could have returned to the car at any time, but they had to have been aware of that risk, right?

“You should have locked the car when Susan left, you idiot!” he said quietly to himself.

He realized that it didn’t do him any good to focus on how these thugs found him, because the fact was, they did and he needed to move forward.

Nick started walking toward the stadium, hoping that no one he knew bumped into him. The bloodied napkin piece on his neck looked pretty stupid, especially at this time of day.

Why did these two thugs want this information anyway? He supposed they could play the stock of Distal Pharmaceuticals if they had the timing and content of the trial result press release. But how much money could these two guys have between them? Something didn’t seem right, here... cutting off that poor doctor’s finger then probably killing both him and his wife...all for a few thousand dollars, maybe.

He realized that searching on the web for news of the Linder deaths would be a good start given the possibility that these people could still be alive. Maybe the video Oleg showed him was staged. Though this was not likely, he knew he had to get smart about all of this.

The game had already started by the time he found Susan. The napkin piece was removed from his neck just before his entering the stands.

Susan leaned over and gave him a kiss on his cheek.

“We’ll talk later, sweetie,” she told Nick.

“Hey, talking is promising. Can’t wait,” he responded.

Nick checked his neck casually with his index finger...the bleeding seemed to have stopped.

When he got nervous he often scratched his left thumb nail with the nail of his right thumb, a habit that Susan found really annoying, and Nick had the scratching going on strong while trying his best to focus on the game.

Susan put her left hand over his two hands.

“Something wrong, Nick?”

“No, hon, I’m fine. Just watching the game.”

No team had scored yet. Tom looked to take up so much more of the net space, having grown two more inches since late last spring. He had let in just eight goals all season, one of which was given up to Madison during the tournament.

Suddenly, Johnny Milken, their right winger, took a run up the right side with the ball and crossed a beauty into the penalty box where Max Stanford was waiting to head the ball into the Madison net, a real beauty. Morristown led 1-0 and Madison’s goalie never had a chance.

Susan and Nick embraced in a celebratory hug, followed by a kiss. Whatever had her so peeved at him apparently was gone and he thought he may never find out just what ticked her off so much, but he’d learned not to press...just let it flow right on by.

“Hey Nick, how’d you bruise your neck?” the voice behind him rang out.

He turned around to find Peter Hansen’s wife Cheryl, mother of Charlie who was best friends with Tom. Charlie was a fullback on the Morristown squad. Peter and his wife Cheryl played cards with Susan and Nick two, maybe three times a year – Peter was a good guy and one of Nick’s better friends.

They last played cards in August at their house where Susan and Cheryl got into it, sort of. There was no yelling, no real acknowledgement that there was a problem, but they both knew it, so they fumed. Cheryl was pressing Susan over her decision not to return to the corporate world for a while, maybe never. Charlie’s wife could be pushy and, when she intimated that Susan was throwing her life away all to care for her highly functioning, adult brother, she crossed the line. This, of course, happened right before the start of the soccer season. While they usually sat quite near the Hansens during the games, not this fall. In fact, Nick had only briefly shared a few “Hey bud” moments with Peter the whole season.

“What?” Nick asked Cheryl. Peter was sitting next to Cheryl, though not at all focused on their conversation.

“On the right side of your neck...it’s a little bruised.”

He reached back and realized that it did smart. The guy in the back seat came around the right side of his neck to place the knife on his throat. He must have applied a lot of pressure but he hadn’t picked up on the pain up to now. It actually didn’t hurt unless he pressed on it.

“I got mugged on the way over here?”

Nick laughed while he said this and Cheryl got the joke, Susan didn’t find it so funny, though.

“Let me see that, Nick,” Susan stated.

She pushed his head to the side, taking a look for herself.

“That’s weird. Really, you don’t remember how you got this?”

“I stood up into a door knob in my closet over the weekend. I was looking for something on the floor, but I had no idea it left a bruise.”

This was the first of many lies to come.

Susan held his arm. “It’s a sign that you’re getting older, dear.”

Nick looked at her like he couldn’t believe she just said that, so he decided that he’d had enough of the game – a walk sounded really good.

“I’m gonna get some fresh air,” he told his wife.

Nick weaved through the people next to him and began to walk down the stands.

“They had the meeting?” Peter Hansen whispered into his cell phone. “Okay, thanks.”

Peter stood up, patted Nick on the back, and followed him down. Charlie kept telling Tom that his father had been acting really weird lately, though Susan and Nick always took that with a grain of salt. Every teenager thinks that their parents are weird. Peter ran his own financial advisory firm for celebrities, and they understood that he was very good at what he did. Peter always said that he never hung with the Hollywood crowd, which was believable mainly because he ran his office out of suburban New Jersey which was clearly not the sexiest of locations for a celebrity focused business. Peter rattled off his client list to the Johnsons one night at their house during dinner. They pretended like they knew most of those clients but really only recognized maybe half of the names.

Peter ran a staff of two administrative people, handling all of the investing himself. Peter’s goal was to bring Charlie into the business and, at some point, turn the entire thing over to him.

“Hey, Nick,” Peter said. “Can we talk for a second?”

Nick nodded his head and waited for Peter to make his way down.

“Thanks, bud,” Peter said. “Uh, let’s take a walk.”

Nick looked at him curiously because it sounded important. They walked around the stands and Peter started talking.

“Nick, about a year ago, this Mexican drug cartel forced its way into my firm and made me launder drug money,” Peter told him. “I had no choice, they threatened my family.”

This was sounding a little familiar. “Okay...”

“Well, this cartel has diversified its business into trading inside information on pharmaceutical drug trials.”

Nick exploded into Peter and grabbed his collar with both hands. “You asshole! You sent those guys to me! How could you do that?”

He was right up into his face which made Nick feel like head butting Peter, but he had never done that before to anybody. Peter didn’t respond right away and, since there wasn’t a lot of oxygen in between their bodies, his bloodshot eyes looked huge. The disturbingly angry moment passed. Nick quickly realized that they were in a very public place, so he let go of Peter’s shirt.

“Nick, I swear to you, I didn’t send those guys to you,” Peter pleaded. “I didn’t even know you were on the Zyptorin trial until they told me. I wouldn’t betray you like that, anyway, you gotta know that.”

“Uh huh, keep talking,” Nick said.

“Well, would I be telling you all of this, if I did set you up? Think about it,” Peter said. “I want to help you deal with this problem.”

Nick sighed. “Peter, not tonight. I need to let this whole thing sink in for a bit.” This all was way too much, and he honestly felt he could process only so much stress in one night. Peter looked like there was something more he wanted to tell him, but it would have to wait.

“Okay, but if you need anything, you let me know,” Peter told him. “Let’s talk later on this week.”

Nick turned around, glancing at those near to them to see if anybody had seen him grab Peter. They were at the back corner of the stands and he couldn’t spot anybody staring at them, so that was good. Maybe the only good thing in this screwed up evening. Peter did have a point. He had brought up the discussion of the drug trial insider trading mess to Nick, not the other way around. That kinda proved he was innocent.

They didn’t say anything else to each other during their climb back into the stands.

Tuesday, November 5th
Peter Hansen

‘Huh, that went about as I expected, though I really did think he would throw a punch,’ Peter thought to himself.

He knew that was the right decision to pick a very public place to drop the bomb on poor Nick. It was for both of theirs good, mainly because Nick would need some time to settle his anger and properly assess the situation. Peter could also keep all of his teeth.

If he knew exactly what Oleg said to Nick, he believed he could help him, but Nick seemed to be in no shape for a full recap of the conversation. Obviously, they weren’t going to tell him he was a dead man no matter what, so Peter was running 50/50 on whether he believed Julio’s word to him that he would leave Nick and his family alone if he cooperated. The cartel didn’t like loose strings. Yeah, the Linders screwed up big time by trying to fight off Oleg and his gang instead of just giving the inside information of the Zintar drug study, but Julio still scared the crud out of him. Not a day went by that he didn’t think about the day Julio finds himself an easier drug laundering solution and Peter’s firm becomes expendable. That’s the day his family runs for the hills.

“Honey, you okay?” Claire asked him as he sat down next to her. They were no longer sitting near the Johnsons.

Peter looked at his wife with a huge, fake smile. “Oh, yeah, I heard Nick was appointed to a drug trial for Distal, and I wanted to congratulate him. You know, it’s not like we speak to each other anymore.”

“Well, don’t get me started on all of that!” Claire whispered. “You can thank poor, easily wounded Susan for this mess. I thought she was thicker skinned, you know, with her business background and all, but...”

“All right, all right!” he interrupted. “How’s the game going”
Morristown was up 3-1.

Tuesday, November 5th
Oleg Yashkov

If Oleg didn't need Karel, he would have shot his partner in the head. They didn't talk on their walk back to their car - Karel knew how he felt, though - and when they pulled away from the curb, Oleg laid into him.

"What the hell was that? Why were you talking and making jokes back there? You're supposed to be the nasty bad guy here, but instead you're laughing after he sees a video that's meant to shock him?"

"Oleg, I'm sorry. You do all the talking, I know that. It won't happen again, I promise."

Karel covered his forehead with his right hand and started shaking his head. He was breathing heavy, having outweighed Oleg by a solid fifty pounds.

"I meant what I said in the car back there: if you keep doing that, the doctor won't be the only one dead in a few months."

Oleg pulled the car over on a side street and took a casual surveillance of the surrounding area.

"You better hope he understands our threat, because if he takes us lightly...that's how we ended up with the problem of Dr. Linder. They thought they could just hire a security guy and that proved to be a real hassle for us. I don't want the same thing to happen here."

"Okay, okay!"

"Good."

They drove off. Oleg planned to let Dr. Nick sit on this development for a week or two before meeting him again. They needed to make sure he was fully on board.

"Let's grab some dinner," he told Karel.

"Sounds good. I'll buy."

Karel never paid for anything, so maybe he did understand that Oleg might shoot him.

Clearly tired of talking to Karel at that moment, Oleg picked up his cell phone and dialed Fred's cell number. Fred would be happy by their progress with Dr. Johnson.

"It's me," he told Fred. "It's all set...we scared the crap out of the good doctor. You had a good idea of showing the Linder video to him."

"All right, then," Fred said. "Oh, I guess you need to know that Mihail has been whining about you guys."

"Oh, screw him!" Oleg shouted.

"Don't worry, he's not terribly valuable."

Wednesday, November 6th

11:30 a.m.

Nick Johnson

“It’s great to see you, Nick.”

Marjorie Letten leaned in with a kiss on the cheek and Nick’s senses filled with strawberry scented perfume.

Marjorie Letten was the head of the Eastern European Studies department at Drew University in Madison, NJ. Marjorie and Nick dated in college during their sophomore year. After four months of casual dating, she started talking about marriage which freaked him out enough to break off the relationship. Marjorie went on to date a senior. They were married the following year. Able to graduate in three years, she had two kids well before Nick finished medical school.

“You said on the phone that you needed a translation of some people speaking in what you think was an Eastern European language.”

Nick’s voice recorder did manage to tape his entire ordeal with Oleg and friend, and the quality was pretty good.

He put down a mini sculpture of some Greek goddess in Marjorie’s office which was lined with books on the right side when you walked in. Her desk was in the back left corner, with just one small pile of paper on it and no sign of a computer. The floor-to-ceiling window was a nice touch, as was the bear rug that rested by the door on the wood floor, but Marjorie’s bright yellow curtains stood out oddly against the dark wood panel.

“Right, these creepy guys were in our waiting room late last night, talking up a storm in some language we all didn’t know,” Nick said, sitting down. “Then they just left suddenly, but one of the nurses was able to record their conversation on a medical recorder.”

“And they didn’t say anything to your staff?”

“Well, they kept telling my front desk clerk ‘one second’ and they were there for maybe three minutes. One of them kept looking out the window like they were hiding from something.”

It took him over an hour this morning to come up with this whopping lie. He was increasingly aware that he had to learn to be a little more creative and create more quickly.

He played the part of the conversation where they were speaking. Marjorie leaned in for a careful listen.

“Can you play it again?”

After a second time, Marjorie leaned back in the chair, then started to stroke her chin.

“Well, I believe that is the Czech language.”

Marjorie picked up the phone.

“Hey, Jane? Marjorie here. Do you have a second to swing by my office? Thanks a bunch.”

Marjorie looked up at him while putting the phone down.

“Jane Kaplan knows Czech along with five or six other European languages.”

They small talked for thirty seconds, during which he learned that Jane’s youngest was in medical school, studying to be a Neurologist.

There was a knock on the door and Jane Kaplan walked into the office.

“What’s up, hon?” Jane asked.

Jane, holding a pile of papers, sported dirty blond hair a tad out of place - she looked like a graduate student.

Marjorie pointed at him to start the tape.

“Can you grab a listen to this? I believe its Czech. This is Nick Johnson, by the way.”

They shook hands quickly. Jane sat down and listened to the two men speak. She looked up at him with a puzzled look on her face - this was not good news.

“The first guy says,

‘Yeah, and maybe you can keep your index finger.’

To which the other guy says,

‘If you keep talking, he won’t be the only one dead in a few months.’

That is really horrible and disturbing, who is speaking and who are they going to kill?”

Nick’s stomach fell to the floor. It was now crystal clear that they were going to kill him no matter what he did. He wanted so badly to scream out to Jane ‘it’s me! Please, you gotta help me!’, but instead, he just shifted in his seat and looked over at Marjorie.

“These scary guys came into Nick’s waiting room,” Marjorie informed Jane.

“He’s an Internist...and they started speaking to each other for a while. His nurse was able to record part of the conversation.”

Leaning forward, Nick put his face into his hands and didn’t hear Jane’s next question.

“Oh...so you don’t know who they were?”

Marjorie shook his right shoulder.

“You okay?” she asked.

He looked up at Jane.

“You’re right, Jane. This is not good news for somebody,” he told her.

“But you don’t know who these guys are?” Jane asked again.

“No, I don’t,” he replied.

“Well, I’d say the police should hear this but if you don’t know who they are...” Jane stated.

“Yeah, if they come back to my office, I’m calling the police...that’s for sure,” he replied.

He knew the police couldn’t help him with his real problem, as opposed to the fictional one he had created for Marjorie.

Nick got up to walk out of the office, stopping to give Marjorie a hug and shake Jane’s hand.

“Thank you two, very much,” he told them.

“Give my best to Susan, Nick,” Marjorie asserted.

As he headed back to his car, his brain was in a fog, obviously feeling the effects from only getting three hours of sleep last night. Though now more vividly frightened than he had been since last night’s encounter, the fear was unable to cut through the fog in his head.

He plunked down into the driver’s seat and sat there for ten minutes with the door open.

“You gotta suck this up, Nick. Don’t freak out. There’s a way out of this, you just know it.”

On the drive back to the office, he realized that he had to talk to someone about this, someone who wouldn’t say anything to anybody, but might have some good advice. He was starting to talk to himself out loud and this alone scared him mightily.

He had about three or four months to work something out. After this, the trial results would likely be made public.

How did Dr. Linder react when he first learned of his fate? He didn’t want to act like Dr. Linder, because his actions got him and his wife killed.

Maybe Nick should have seen this coming because they showed him the video of the Linders being tortured. Dr. Linder must at some point have told Oleg what he wanted, yet he killed the doctor anyway. Why would Nick expect things to be different for him?

Wednesday, November 6th

11:20 a.m.

Peter Hansen

Peter was preparing for a lunch meeting with Brad Dellan, the lawyer for Ashley Wells, who was the late 20s pop star with four #1 albums and several drug rehabs under her belt. She broke it big when she was 19. She became a client a year later. Brad handled everything including setting up a trust fund through Peter's firm that paid Ashley \$60,000 per month in cash living expenses. Two years later, more funds were given to him, such that the monthly figure spiked to \$180,000 per month. That was it for the money flowing to him, however, and Peter did find that odd given that he knew Ashley's earnings had risen tremendously over the past two years.

His son Charlie was obsessed with Ms. Wells, so much so that Peter stopped talking about her with his family. When Ashley made it onto Charlie's screen saver, he knew she was something huge. He had only met her once, at a fashion show in the city six years ago, just before her second album. That was typical given that he spent way more time talking with the lawyers than the clients he represented. His firm had twenty five clients in 2002, and, of those, he had not met eight.

Martin's security guy had cut back his hours by now, at his urging, mainly because there had been no sign of the 'pants on fire' harasser since the first week in September. He became convinced that the extra security was in fact noticed and effectively scared this joker off. Part of him, though, still expected the Attorney General to march into his office and arrest him based on some 'anonymous' tip.

Judy entered his office with the year-to-date report for Ms Wells's investments, of which 20% was fictional.

"I printed it double-sided like you wanted, but the color smeared a little in the bottom right corner." Judy pointed to the error.

Peter smiled at her. "That's all right...I highly doubt Ms. Wells ever sees this report."

Darryl was out sick with the flu, a real bummer because he was signed up for a flu shot the next week.

Brad was kind of obnoxious and Peter really didn't enjoy his company. Ashley was Brad's first big client - she pretty much launched him into the big-time of entertainment law - so he split his time between Hollywood and New York City. Brad always told Peter how he did not understand his move out to the New Jersey suburbs. Ever since they first met, Peter maybe had gotten in 10% of the words exchanged between them. But Ashley was a very important client, so Peter was happy to put up with that.

"You could be so much bigger than you are, Peter," Brad told him the last time they met.

After Judy and Peter heard some people out in the lobby, they both went to see who it was. They rounded the corner to find Brad on his cell phone, next to Ashley Wells

who was sitting on the lobby couch. She sprang up, darted over to Peter, and gave him a hug. Ashley was wearing an over sized sweater with jeans that were sucking the life out of her legs. Her blond hair, smelling like peaches, looked way blonder in person.

“It’s great to see you again, Peter,” Ashley announced. She had a sweet southern accent that could put a roaring lion at ease, though the accent didn’t come through in her singing.

“Oh, you didn’t have to come way out to New Jersey for this,” he said.

Ashley giggled. “Yeah, I kinda did... we have a surprise for you.”

Brad got off the phone. “But let’s wait ‘til the restaurant to share it with you.” Brad stood about 5’10, was sporting a George Hamilton tan, and his teeth were alarmingly white.

Judy headed off for her lunch break, while Peter climbed into Brad’s suburban, not too eager to see the surprise they had in store for him. As Brad started talking on the ride over to the restaurant, it struck him that Brad’s voice kind of sounded like the voice of the ‘pants on fire’ harasser. That was probably just his dislike for Brad surfacing, however, so he told himself to relax.

As far as he could tell, Brad had two passions away from his law practice: baseball cards and operas, neither of which Peter liked to listen about for more than two minutes. Yet, his growing baseball card collection was on Brad’s mind that day. Apparently he had taken advantage of the recent recession and bought several large card collections over Ebay from unemployed sellers looking for quick cash. Brad had first row, 1st base line season tickets at Yankee Stadium. He managed to throw that fact in twice during their ‘conversation’ on the way over to the restaurant, Zebra. The topic of operas had yet to surface, but it was coming because Brad also was in the inner circle at Lincoln Center. Peter would bet hard Vegas money that the topic of Brad’s baseball collection was still virgin to that inner circle of old money.

Zebra was a French restaurant in town. The three of them were seated at a table in the back. Ashley wore her sunglasses and a sun hat into the restaurant, clearly not understanding that the diners at this establishment had no idea who Ashley Wells was. They would, however, be drawn to her disguise, as ridiculous as it looked. Peter was at Zebra less than a month ago. His steak was way overdone, and the waiter couldn’t have been more rude about it.

Ashley thrust her left hand across the table and an enormous rock was on display, a rock that must have been in her purse back in the office. Peter would have spotted it otherwise.

“Peter, Brad and I wanted to tell you our surprise.” Ashley leaned over to Brad and gave him a very wet kiss. She then turned to Nick. “Brad and I are engaged!”

Peter had never been very good at hiding shocked expressions, and this was no exception: mouth bullfrog wide and eyes all bugged out. Nobody said anything for a few seconds until Brad blurted,

“Whoa, buddy, you didn’t see that one coming, did you?”

Peter smiled awkwardly. “No, Brad, I was not expecting that piece of news...but congratulations to you both...that’s awesome.”

While he was busy trying to figure out just how much older Brad was than Ashley, the two of them started talking with their waiter. He had figured on the way over to Zebra that Brad was going to give him more of Ashley's money to invest. It did seem kinda strange that they couched this as a 'surprise', though.

Ashley's fourth album was two weeks old and she was still busy promoting its sales, but the active rehearsing for the summer tour wouldn't begin for a few months. Why she wanted to make this special trip out to New Jersey to spring her engagement news to her money manager who she couldn't possibly remember meeting just the one time they had met was way beyond his comprehension.

Brad began yapping away about how their relationship morphed from a professional nature to one of love and passion. Peter could certainly see how he would be supportive of this transition, but how the great Ashley Wells could fall for a slightly overweight, hair plugged man that was Brad was simply mind boggling.

"I'm going to be touring in Europe for the first time," Ashley told him.

Brad leaned in. "Yeah, I'm going to try to run my practice while on the road with her," he declared. "I think it can work."

Brad flashed Peter a wink, making him want so badly to pop the guy in the face. The scallops and salmon plate appetizers arrived. Brad shut up for a while.

No one else in his family liked sea food, so Peter loved coming to the Zebra. Yet, he knew Claire would smell the ocean scent when he got home.

"I'm selling my place in Los Angeles and we're looking to buy a place together in the city," Ashley stated.

Ashley didn't take more than six or seven bites of her meal the whole lunch and kept checking her Blackberry every few minutes because her agent, Chris Thompson, was going to let her know if she was hosting Saturday Night Live in two weeks. Not many music acts got to play host, so this was a big deal. Ashley grew kind of on edge about the whole thing as the lunch went on.

They were there at Zebra for about an hour. During the ride back to the office, Brad decided to start talking business and went on about the stock market losses from the prior two years. Worldcom and Enron were on everybody's mind. Peter was happy to report to Brad that none of his clients owned either of those two stocks. By the time they dropped him off at his office, they had worked out where to put another \$42 million of Ashley's money. The goal was to bring her monthly spend money to close to \$400,000 in addition to starting a sizeable long term investment fund.

Ashley Wells was hotter than ever and his firm was a key part of her team, but the back of his mind couldn't focus on that because of the house of cards Julio had made of his business. It wasn't really his business any more – it was Julio's - and Peter Hansen was only the front man. Walking back into his office building, he should have been jumping with pride. Yet, all that he could think about was the mess that Julio had forced him to get Nick Johnson into.

Exactly what Oleg told Nick during their meeting wasn't known to him, so he had no idea just what Nick was thinking at that moment. One thing was for sure, Nick was scared out of his mind and madly wondering how this problem landed in his lap. Peter

wasn't sure if he should tell Nick exactly how Oleg found him because it wouldn't do him any good and would only get him upset at his brother in law, Stanley. Oleg probably told Nick that they would leave him alone as long as he did what they asked. While Julio had pretty much told Peter the same thing, he was not convinced. Way the heck down in Mexico, it was in Julio's best business interest to kill Nick and his family even if he gave Oleg the drug study information in a few months.

Judy was back at her desk and on the phone when Peter walked into the office. The day's mail was on the lobby coffee table, so he began thumbing through it. An official looking letter from Metrogroup Bank caught his attention because his entire business funneled through the cash and investment service of this bank. Every client dollar and stock market trade was managed by Metrogroup Bank, even Julio's money.

The letter from Metrogroup informed him that starting at 3pm on January 17th, their web site for private client services was going to be shut down for the weekend due to major re-construction of the web site. This action by Metrogroup only affected the cartel and not his other clients because Julio was the only client with a private brokerage account at Metrogroup. Martin had insisted on this the day he forced him to do all of those illegal wire transfers for the first time. Everybody else's money was put into a pool which Peter managed as one account all together with Metrogroup. Martin didn't like that idea at all when Peter explained it to him on that fateful Monday. Except for a few minutes that morning, when Martin was on the phone with Julio, Martin stood over Peter's shoulder to watch his moves on the computer and make sure he didn't pull a fast one on the cartel.

After bringing the rest of his mail into his office, Peter sat down at his desk. The yellow sticky on the desk, right in front of him, caused him to shoot up from chair. In large, red marker writing, it said: LOOK UNDER YOUR CHAIR.

Getting onto one knee, he looked under the chair and found a cassette taped onto the plastic molding beneath the fabric seat. Pulling off the cassette, he looked over to his ten year old boombox in the corner of the office, which had a cassette and CD player. The cassette started to play...Mr. Pants on Fire was back.

"Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire, keep it up and you'll be one big crier," rang out the same deep voice as before. At least it sounded like the same voice, but he couldn't be sure because the first episode was a slowed down tape recording that sounded underwater and the second phone call was only a few words. That last phone call was nearly two months ago.

In any case, this was a huge problem because, clearly, he was in this office over their lunch break. What else had he touched or gotten into? His client file drawer was locked and the key was still under the rug corner behind the bookshelf. He never used to lock this drawer, but the first two calls from 'pants on fire' shook him up enough to want a lock installed, so he told his staff to leave early one Friday and brought in a locksmith. Not needing those files every day, it was no big hassle to him to leave the key in an inconvenient, but difficult-to-find place.

He would have to give Martin another call. He really didn't want to do that because he couldn't help but feel a little too sucked into Julio's evil web when that guy that Martin assigned was around watching him and his family.

But 'pants on fire' was good, always watching and waiting for his opportunity. He must have known that Martin's guy had pulled back a few weeks ago, so he began his patient hunt. The parking lot was heavy with the trees, so there were many good places to watch the front of his building without being totally obvious.

It was a good thing this guy was gone before Judy got back, but, as Peter thought that, it occurred to him that he may still be in the office hiding somewhere. He sprang up from his chair, raced into the conference room and looked under the table. No one there. Judy was still on the phone at her desk and was laughing at something – probably a family member on the line. Slinking across the hallway, he sneaked into the spare office that they kept furnished. No one there either, not behind the door or under the desk. Walking back into his office, he plunked back into his chair. His brain was pounding against his skull. Peter began to rub his temples and put his head between his knees.

If 'pants on fire' had stolen one of the client files, that might have given Peter a huge clue who was behind this whole thing. Martin's guy could start following this client and maybe catch a break in the case. Then, Peter could worry only about Nick Johnson's problem and not his.

His cell phone started to ring – it was Martin. What, did this guy have a sixth sense or something?

"Hello, Peter Hansen," he answered, wanting to act like he didn't recognize Martin's phone number.

"Peter, it's Martin. I wanted to let you know that Julio will be traveling to the New York area in the next few months, and he'll want to see you again."

"That's a lot of advance notice, but, okay. Martin, that guy harassing us a few months ago broke into our office over lunch and left a message to stop lying to my clients."

"Now that's a development, hmmm," Martin responded. "I'll re-assign someone to watch you again, maybe on a full-time basis now. We need to keep you problem free, don't you agree, Peter?"

Why Martin didn't consider roping in a friend of Peter's into Julio's doctor scheme to be problematic for him was a reflection of the cartel's ability to completely separate business decisions and emotional responses.

"Nobody likes problems, Martin," he responded. "So, you're sending a guy over this afternoon?"

"That's right, now I gotta run, but call me if you need anything, okay Peter?"

"I will, and thanks a lot Martin."

Martin never told him the name of the first guy protecting him, but it was not like he ever needed to know. He wasn't going to invite him out to dinner or anything like that. Of course, if they did manage to catch this guy, then maybe that did call for a nice dinner for all involved.

Peter hung up the phone and looked out the window which had a view of the eastern part of the parking lot. There wasn't anybody suspiciously staring at the building. Anyhow, 'pants on fire' probably left the area as quickly as possible after accomplishing his mission.

Wednesday, November 6th
6:40 p.m.

Father Michael picked up the St. Anthony membership directory to look up the Milers. William Miler was a retired Morristown detective, married to Betsy, and lived on Eagle Boulevard. Father Michael had known the Milers for over 22 years during which he confirmed both of their boys, Will and Andy, into the Catholic Church. Father Michael was a rookie priest when he arrived at St. Anthony's, just 27 years old. He met William and his family a few weeks later. The years were getting harder and harder to count, though Father Michael believed that Will, the youngest boy, was now out of college.

"Betsy?" the priest asked.

"Yes?"

"Hello there, it's Father Michael...how are you, Dear?"

"Oh, Father Michael, we're doing great. We need to have you over for dinner – it's been too long since we last had you over."

Not quite nine months, he believed. "That would be wonderful. Hey, is William around?"

Father Michael normally tried to stretch out the conversation but he felt pressed at the moment. He hoped he was not being rude.

"He sure is, Father; he's downstairs in his workshop. William's building our granddaughter, Claire, a doll house."

"Oh, that's really neat, Betsy."

Father Michael thought little Claire was two or three, though he'd only met her a few times, as her family lived in Westchester. William was often bemoaning how far away his oldest son, Andy, lived.

"Her three year birthday is next month," Betsy revealed.

The priest heard Betsy talking to William, telling him that the white paint she had bought for the doll house was still in her car. She said something about the house, but Father Michael couldn't make it out. William took the handset. "Father Mike, to what do I owe this pleasure?"

"William, I think I could use your help. Can we talk alone?"

"Yeah, sure...Betsy has gone upstairs. What's up? You sound upset, you all right?"

"A fellow that I know, who doesn't go to St. Anthony's, came in tonight to talk about a problem that he's having - it's a doozy, William."

Nick Johnson had just spent thirty minutes with Father Mike in his parish office.

Father Mike kept telling himself to be careful not to give William too many details given that he was going behind Nick's back to help him. He needed to wet William's interest with as little information as possible.

"Okay."

“Through his job, he has information about a very sensitive subject and has attracted some thugs who are now threatening his family if he doesn’t give them the information.”

William paused for a few seconds. “Right, has he gone to the police about this?”

“No, apparently, they showed him a video of them killing the last guy and his family who had gone to the police.”

“Where did this happen?”

“He didn’t say, William, he’s being careful with the details because he doesn’t want to put me at risk.”

William put down what sounded like a heavy tool. “Well, did he come for confession or something?”

“No, he just came in for a talk, but he said it really felt good to tell somebody else about his problem.”

William chuckled slightly.

“I can imagine – that’s quite a load to keep inside. Does this guy have access to customer databases or something? Is that what these thugs want?”

Father Michael stood up from his chair. This wasn’t right. He should have simply asked Nick to contact William. Father Michael couldn’t force Nick to talk with William, and the retired detective was asking too many questions, of course he was.

“William, this guy is in some real trouble. Those thugs showed him that video for a reason.”

“Well, if he won’t talk with the police, do you think he would talk with me?”

“I don’t know if he’ll talk with you, but I was thinking...no, forget it.”

“What?”

“How hard is it for someone to disappear?” Father Michael asked.

William coughed lightly. “Disappear? What’s his family status?”

“He has a wife and teenage boy.”

“That complicates things.”

“But you’ll talk with him if he wants to see you?”

“Sure, I’ll talk with him, and maybe I can help.”

Father Michael heard Betsy ask William if he was still talking with him and the priest really hoped she hadn’t heard any of this.

“Uh, William? I need to trust you to keep quiet about this, Okay?”

“Of course, Father. Hey, I should probably run, Okay?”

“William, I really appreciate this.”

“My pleasure, Father.”

Father Michael hung up the phone and sat back down in his chair. Boy, some days, you really don’t know what’s going to come your way.

Wednesday, November 6th

9:20 p.m.

Nick Johnson

“Damn, that’s a nasty problem,” Tiger87 typed.

This was the first person to respond to Nick’s *ChatNet* post which laid out how some Czech thugs were demanding sensitive information from him and planned to kill him afterward. Nick also said that going to the police would only worsen the situation.

“I would get the hell out of dodge if I were you,” Tiger87 continued.

“I’ve thought about that...but I have a wife and child. It’s not so easy to pick up and leave.”

He really had given this much thought, even drawing up a list of reasons why they all couldn’t simply disappear into the night.

Susan couldn’t be trusted to stay quiet or even mentally focused if he sprung this kind of a plan on her. He’d read John Grisham’s *The Firm*, recalling how the character played by Tom Cruise in the movie version whispered one night to his wife that their house was bugged...how they were in big trouble with his law firm. The wife ran out to the street in hysteria. But she was able to, keep quiet, and execute a capable plan to solve their problem. Susan couldn’t do that.

Susan would never leave her brother Stanley, and she would most certainly tell Stanley about the Czechs. Stanley was too much of a loudmouth. He had thought about possibly taking Stanley as well, but that was way too complicated.

He gave Oleg more than a reasonable chance of tracking them all down if they were to re-locate. There was no telling how big their organization was, but they seemed very organized to him. He still didn’t know how the Czechs found him to begin with. Yet, they did, and that alone led him to keep a healthy respect of their criminal abilities. Three people leaving in the middle of the night always leave a trail.

“Why not?” Tiger87 wrote. “I don’t understand why the police can’t help, but it seems that the only other choice is for you all to leave town.”

Nick offer up a condensed version of his list to Tiger87.

“Why are you convinced they’ll kill you no matter what?” Tiger87 wrote.

“I overheard them talking about it.”

“Let me chew on this...I’ll get back to you.”

Tiger87 logged off from the chat room.

No one else had responded. Nick was not sure how popular this chat room was, though it seemed to be one of the few where he was completely anonymous.

Nick was able to find a small article from September 2nd on the Linder murder from the Montgomery Star. No details were given, except their names and address of the house. He wasn’t entirely sure why he bothered to search for verification of what Oleg showed him on the video, mainly because Peter made it quite clear these guys were evil to the bone. But the video didn’t show the Linders dying and Nick hadn’t asked Peter yet about their fate.

Friday, November 8th

“PLH, this is Darryl, speaking.” He put his ¼ eaten tuna salad sandwich onto his desk. Darryl tried to eat at his desk at least three times a week given the hard economic times. He figured he saved at least \$18 per week doing that.

“Oh, yes, hello Darryl, this is Brad Dellan, attorney for Ashley Wells.”

“Mr. Dellan, how can I help you?” Darryl responded while standing up and thinking that Peter must be on the phone since he was right down the hall.

“Well, this week, I deposited \$42 million of Ashley’s earnings into your firm’s accounts at Metrogroup...I got the craziest question from the banker when I called to confirm the deposit.”

“Okay...” Darryl didn’t have the foggiest idea where this was going and looked longingly over at his tuna sandwich.

Brad laughed nervously into the phone. “They asked me if I wanted to put the money into the general fund, but I didn’t know anything about a general fund.”

“Mr. Dellan, Peter can walk you through how he intends to invest your client’s assets.” Darryl had his headset on now and started pacing around his cubicle. He rarely had a reason to use the headset though this conversation seemed like as good a time as any.

“Darryl, the question that I have is why does it sound like there’s money sloshing around recklessly at PLH?”

Darryl sighed and put his hands on his hips. “In all fairness, sir, I don’t think it sounds like that, I mean, we’re not a brokerage firm where each client has a separate account, but I’m confident that there’s nothing irresponsible behind all of this.”

“I just don’t like the sound of this, you understand,” Brad said. “I mean, Peter was acting funny that whole lunch and didn’t seem too professional when I mentioned the \$42 million that was coming his way.”

Darryl didn’t want to tell Brad Dellan that he was being silly and clearly overreacting. On top of that, he definitely did not want to invite a follow up call from Brad subsequent to Darryl’s grilling of his boss.

“Okay, Darryl, just let Peter know I’ll call him later,” Brad stated. “Sorry for dragging you into this.”

“That’s okay, you take care Mr. Dellan.”

Darryl took off his headset, plunked down into his chair, and took another bite of his sandwich. How was he going to ask Peter about this because no client had a private account with Metrogroup? He walked out into the hallway to hear if Peter was still on the phone.

“What was that phone call all about?” Judy asked Darryl.

“Oh, some attorney that works for Ashley Wells,” he responded, not wanting to give Judy any of the details.

“It sounded like he was upset at something, and you seem a bit rattled if you don’t mind me saying,” Judy pressed.

“I’d rather not talk about it, okay?” Darryl snapped. “How long has Peter been on the phone?”

Judy frowned at Darryl, deciding to make him wait a few seconds for the answer. “Five, ten minutes? I don’t know... Oh, he’s off!”

Peter’s line #1 light had gone off. Darryl walked down the hallway to talk with his boss.

“Good luck!” Judy whispered loudly.

Darryl told himself to be careful how he approached the subject with Peter. Don’t go rushing into any accusations like Brad Dellon had done with him. Maybe it was best that Brad had talked with Darryl first, after all.

He knocked lightly on Peter’s door.

“Darryl, come on in,” Peter said while sitting at his computer.

“Peter, I just got off the phone with Brad Dellon,” Darryl started, and waited to see if Peter knew who that was.

“Right, I had lunch with him and Ashley last week,” Peter said. “Very odd lunch...they’re engaged you know.”

Darryl laughed. “Dude, you’re kidding, right?”

“No, I’m not...so what did Brad want?”

Darryl took a deep breath. “He seemed upset that Ashley Wells wasn’t getting a separate account at Metrogroup.” He looked intently at Peter to examine his body language, but didn’t spot anything unusual, just Peter’s hands rubbing his chin.

“Really?” Peter asked. “I walked him through how I handle everybody’s assets, how it all gets pooled collectively.”

“A banker at Metrogroup asked him if the \$42 million was to be deposited into this fund,” Darryl said as flatly as possible. “Why would they ask him that if that was the standard practice?”

Peter threw up his hands in frustration and moaned deeply. “Those idiots!”

Darryl looked confused at Peter’s reaction. Maybe it was because only Metrogroup and the cartel knew that Julio had a private Metrogroup account that was meant to be untouchable by PLH. Darryl was left in the dark about that little tidbit, so Peter could understand his confusion. At that moment, Peter really wished that Brad had talked with him directly.

Julio did leave \$40 million in the pooled money managed by PHL as a bone thrown to Peter for the ‘inconvenience’ of the cartel taking over his firm. It was that money that he used to bet on the outcome of the heart drug study. The bet that went badly enough to cause Julio to concoct this drug study insider trading plan. If Peter hadn’t bet on that drug study’s outcome, the Linders would still be alive and Nick Johnson would never have heard from Oleg.

Darryl laughed and exhaled loudly. “Thanks, Peter” he asserted. “Just know that Brad will be calling back later this afternoon, and you can calm all of his concerns.”

“Well, that’s an attorney’s job to be suspicious,” Peter said. “I’m sorry that Mr. Dellan put you in the middle of that.”

Nick Johnson

Saturday, November 9th

Nick was beginning to think he should let his immediate family, mother, mother in law, and Stanley in on this predicament because he really may not have had another choice. Secretly relocating his family seemed like his only option, as crazy and wildly difficult such a move would be. If they all decided to bolt town in two to three months, everyone was going to need as much advance notice as possible. They probably would have a hard time wrapping their hands around the whole thing. They might not even believe him. But, he had the tape as proof and could remind Susan about the smoky smell in the Camry earlier in the week.

That list he drew up during his first 'chat' with Tiger87 was becoming a fluid working document in his head. He woke up a few nights ago with the cold realization that they couldn't leave Stanley or the two mothers behind if his family did decide to bolt. The Czechs could easily get to them out of revenge. So, the count was now six people, five of whom were going to need heavy convincing. They had spent their whole lives in this area, thus, he knew the odds of five people keeping totally quiet about this were pretty slim. Joan, his mother in law, posed the biggest risk to run to the police.

He decided to draw up a chart for all six people involved. The first issue for everybody was buying into the real threat that the Czechs posed to them all since he liked to think that, once they believed in this threat, their level of trust in him became less important.

He started drawing up the issues for Joan, to start.

Issue: Czech believability
Solution: Audio tape of the Czechs

Issue: Medical Care
Solution:

Issue: House arrangements
Solution:

Issue: She doesn't like me
Solution:

Issue: Keeping her from the police
Solution:

The idea of abandoning their houses posed so many problems that he wondered if this may be the biggest hurdle for all parties. They all could rent their homes for a year or

two, but that would be too easy for the Czechs to ferret out. They all needed to believe that they were never coming back if they stood any chance of selling this to the Czechs.

They needed to be harsh to ourselves, in other words, and this included significant financial loss – particularly for Joan who had much of her net worth tied up in her house – not to mention emotional despair.

They all could put much of their belongings in storage, hoping not to tip off the Czechs. He believed that everyone would insist on this point. Susan certainly would. They had a mortgage to consider but nobody else did. He thought it was around \$102,000 and they would obviously have to keep paying their bank each month lest the bank start foreclosing on the house 60-90 days after the first missed payment. The monthly payment was drafted out of one of their checking accounts, so they would need to leave enough cash in that account for at least a year or two.

Joan lived mainly off a fixed annuity that she set up ten years ago and Nick thought her only remaining key asset was her house. His mother funded her lifestyle via his father's pension that transferred to her upon his death.

Nick inherited a two bedroom apartment in Manhattan that his parents owned for twenty five years. He remembered his father spending a weeknight every few weeks in the city during the heyday of his career. His mother never liked the apartment and would often sob herself to sleep during his father's nights in the city, so, a few weeks following his father's funeral, his mother asked him to sell the apartment. He understood why.

He did sell the apartment in the late '90s for \$910,000, or roughly \$575,000 after taxes. Susan and Nick had about \$1.6 million in assets, not including their home equity. This should have been enough for them to fund a new life somewhere else, far away from the Czechs.

The Czechs probably didn't have access to their financial accounts, at least he hoped not. But he needed to figure out how much money they would transfer to the new location and leave in the New Jersey banks and brokerage houses.

Nick picked back up the laptop to re-log into the chat room.

"I actually lost sleep on your problem last night, but a real cool plan hit him around 3am," Tiger87 wrote.

Four other parties had now commented on his ordeal and it made him feel kind of queasy to think that this many people knew his business. Yet, this was what he wanted – to get ideas – so who was he to complain? He was sure they viewed him as almost fictional given no one on the site was privy to any real names or addresses. Since the service was free, there was no way for the service to track a chatter down unless they talked to the telecom company and identified the phone line the chatter was using. He didn't think even his 'fictional' problem would warrant that kind of action.

"What are you all discussing?" Nick typed.

T-man responded. "We all think you should fake your death."

Fake his death? What, was he some kind of super spy? He'd seen this done in movies but those people knew what they were doing.

Nick stood up and started rubbing his face.

“Bud, listen to us...this will work and it involves no police or harm to your family,” Tiger87 wrote.

“I’m listening,” he typed.

“If you can convince the police that you’re dead, we’re all guessing that these guys threatening you will pick up on that and move on. You’ll probably have to disappear for a year or two but it buys you some time and your family safety,” Tiger87 typed.

T-man chimed in. “Start collecting your blood, because you’ll need it to spread around whatever death scene you create.”

Suddenly feeling nauseous, Nick folded his arms against his stomach.

How the hell was he going to create a death scene? Who did these ‘chatties’ think that he was? Who did he think he was?

Saturday, November 9th
Oleg Yashkov

“Oh, Oleg, baby...why don't you come back to bed?” she asked him.

“Go back to sleep, get some breakfast...I don't care...I'm going for some smokes.”

Oleg laced up his boots and fumbled for his watch – 9:37 a.m.

He and Karel were staying in a suite at the Holiday Inn on the upper west side of Manhattan. They had no idea when they would return to New Jersey. He believed they made their point to the doctor on Wednesday night, though; Karel's shoulder wound was still pretty sore.

Harold Linder had started off on the right foot with them, telling them that he would do as they asked. He would give them the information about the drug trial's decision and the date when the decision would go public.

The Linders were their first job shaking down drug trial doctors. Maybe it showed. Julio Viola told them one day to head up to Philadelphia and hook up with this guy named Fred. Once they got there, Fred said that he had spent months finding the right doctor to threaten, and all they had to do was to put some heat on Harold Linder of Philadelphia, PA. If they scared him enough, the plan would work.

All was going as planned until Harold told them a month out from the expected trial result announcement date that he didn't know anything anymore, suddenly claiming to have been removed from the drug trial committee. They hadn't been watching the Linder house around the clock, but they quickly started. Fred told them to pick a night for a home invasion. A few days later, a large male began going in and out of the house. It sure looked like good 'ole Harold had hired a security guy.

On the night of the attack, they pulled up to a dark house. They cut out a window in the family room, and walked right into the Linder home. Oleg thought they were quiet but they were surprised by a spray of bullets from the mud room off of the kitchen. This dude had an Uzi with a silencer and he was making mincemeat of the kitchen door frame and the walls. All they could do under that spray of bullets was to reach around, then fire blindly into the kitchen. Karel and Oleg knew this guy was inside, but the Uzi surprised them. Though this wasn't out of their league, they didn't expect an Uzi from a person that they pegged to be an off-duty cop.

They heard the Linders slam into their truck that was parked against the garage door, so Oleg told Karel to go through the garage and take out the security guy hiding out in the mud room. Oleg kept Mr. Uzi busy by firing back until Karel could go around the house. He barged into the mud room from the garage and tackled Mr. Uzi. His gun went flying onto the kitchen floor. Karel pinned Mr. Uzi to the floor until Oleg could run up and shoot Mr. Uzi twice in the head. Somehow during the tackling, a bullet nicked Karel's shoulder. It could have been real nasty.

The Linders were locked inside their car and Dr. Linder kept ramming his sedan into their truck, hoping to work their way free. Given another two minutes, they would

have done it. Oleg smashed the driver window, yanking Dr. Linder out of the car. They were screaming and Oleg was surprised that they didn't wake the neighbors. With Dr. Linder out first, they got duct tape on him quickly; he didn't put up much of a fight after that.

His wife was a total bitch. She had stopped yelling once they pulled out her husband. Oleg calmly went around to her side and got her out of the car. Mrs. Linder was real quiet until Oleg tried to get the duct tape on her mouth, when, suddenly, she sprang to life, managing to knee him in the balls and scratch the hell out of his neck. Oleg bowled over in pain, so Karel left Dr. Linder to help him out by driving his fist into Mrs. Linder's right eye which sent her crashing to the floor with a thud. Duct taping her mouth and wrists wasn't a problem then.

Oleg had a clump of her hair in his hand as he held Mrs. Linder down on the floor while Karel got Dr. Linder set up in the house. When he picked Mrs. Linder up, the bitch tried to head butt him. He was ready for her, though, and slammed her head against the garage refrigerator. This knocked her out cold, sending her slumping back to the floor. He was really pissed by now, his neck was bleeding and it felt like his balls had shot into his stomach. Dragging her body into the house by her feet, he did a number on the back of her head.

This gal was in solid shape, probably from aerobics or running. Mrs. Linder was their first female target and, though she wasn't the primary target, dealing with her surprised the hell out of Oleg. He definitely let his guard down while getting her under control with the duct tape, and she made him pay for that mistake. That bitch did a real sneaky job playing possum until she kicked him in the balls.

When Dr. Linder saw Oleg dragging his wife into the kitchen, he thought that they had killed her. Oleg wished he could have killed the bitch. But they needed to keep her alive to entice Dr. Linder into telling them the information they came for. Dr. Linder didn't believe that his wife was alive until his wife came to. Once they doused her with gasoline, Dr. Linder sang like a canary.

Mrs. Linder woke up really pissed and began thrashing about in her chair, knocking herself over in the chair several times. She wouldn't stop. The doctor's wife had an attitude all night, even with the duct tape on her mouth. Her eyes were telling them how thrilling it was to inflict pain on one of her attackers. Mrs. Linder was mocking them, and Oleg didn't know if Karel picked up on it, but he certainly did.

It was real sweet to slit her throat. He yanked her head back by her hair and sliced slow and deep while whispering in her ear,

"This is for the fight, you bitch."

It took over two weeks for the scratches on his neck to heal. Oleg thought the area was getting infected, but a lot of Neosporin eventually cleared everything up. His balls were sore for a month.

The video tape was set up like Fred had told them to and they kept both Linders alive before Harold confessed the result of the drug trial. He told them that the press announcement was scheduled for the following week. They called Fred on the spot and he told them to kill both Linders.

Karel's bullet wound proved to be trickier than they had thought. They needed to see Martin's guy twice to deal with it right - guys like this weren't exactly in the yellow pages - and Oleg didn't appreciate the frustration of having to see him a second time.

Karel was one tough sucker who didn't notice his wound that night of the Linder home invasion until hours later at the motel. Luckily, there was a Wal-Mart down the street that was open at 4am for all the peroxide and bandaging they wanted.

"Hey bring back some breakfast, we can have it in bed!" his lady friend yelled at him as Oleg walked out of the bedroom.

Karel and his lady friend were asleep on the couch pullout. The nasty blend of cheap perfume, sex, and sleep odor invaded his sinuses, making any thought of snorting the small line of coke on the coffee table obscenely repulsive at that moment.

He reached for his back pocket to find his wallet and make sure he had enough cash to make these girls happy. They didn't seem too interested in the nose candy last night, so plenty of cash would have to spin their wheels. He kind of liked them...the one with Karel was quite funny.

A family of four was already on the lift. Two little ones were arguing over something, but, after the father grabbed a lock of hair from the older one and gave a good glaring, the arguing stopped.

Oleg stepped out into the lobby. The gift shop sold smokes but he felt like going for a walk toward 9th avenue. It was a nice fall day.

He planned on grabbing four breakfast platters at that busy diner on 9th avenue they all ate at nine hours earlier. There was nobody on the sidewalk - not a cab in sight - as the city was showing a different side of itself this Saturday morning.

Saturday, November 9th
Nick Johnson

“Hi William, Nick Johnson.” Nick walked up to William Miler in his garage and shook his hand.

William’s garage was a whole lot cleaner than Nick’s, with a neatly painted grey floor, wall-to-wall cabinets and shelves, and a tool collection certainly a class or two up from the one in his garage. The tract lighting was a nice touch. Nick’s garage featured a lone light bulb that seemed to last half as long as in-home light bulbs.

Nick had sat in his home office for an hour, thinking about the chatroom folks’ plan for him before concluding that getting out of the house would be good. Susan and Tom weren’t back from their shopping expedition, yet he totally didn’t want to see them at that moment anyway, so he gave William a call.

On the way over, he decided not to tell William about Peter Hansen, because William would probably head right over to Peter’s and give him hell. And for the former detective’s sake, Peter needed to be kept in the dark about his conversations with William. Oleg might have re-directed his might in William’s direction if Peter found out and that would have been horrible.

“It’s a pleasure, Nick. I’m glad you called...Father Michael really wanted me to listen to you,” William replied.

They began to walk down Eagle Boulevard where the all brick, fifty or so year old Miler home rested. William had his four-year old golden retriever, Jules, with him. The damn dog was a disaster on a leash, trying to run after every squirrel in sight. Even though William stood 5’10 and was quite stocky, Jules’ energy kept William’s focus mainly on the dog.

“So, you have information that has caught the attention of some thugs and these thugs are threatening your family?” William didn’t look at him when saying this.

It sounded like Father Mike was pretty general in describing his situation with William. Nick didn’t know why this was surprising to him given that Father Mike had assured him that he was careful during their phone conversation Wednesday night.

“Right, they’ve already killed a doctor and his wife down in Philly,” Nick told William.

“Father Mike also told me that you cannot go to the police.”

Jules tried to run after another squirrel, effectually spinning William around, but William recovered and they started to walk again.

“How’d you meet these jerks?”

“They met me, in my car...with a knife at my throat. It was a real treat,” he replied back.

William managed to look right at him.

“So, how do you see your options here?”

“Well, as I see it, I can either grab my entire family - in-laws and all - and disappear into the night, or manage to fake my death and go into hiding for some time.”

The dog stopped to take a dump.

“Why can’t you simply give them the information? They’d leave you alone then.”

He nodded his head and cleared his throat. Here came the kicker.

“Yeah, about that...I overheard them saying how they were going to kill me regardless. I guess they don’t want any witnesses.”

“Jeez, maybe you could hire someone to protect you and your family,” William asserted with his arms crossed.

It was annoying that it took ten minutes to simply walk somebody through his problem. They all found it hard to believe that giving these thugs the information wouldn’t keep him alive.

“They showed me a video of the last couple that tried that very thing – they ended up dead. These guys seem pretty seasoned and weren’t stopped by the guy this couple hired.”

“How do you know the video isn’t a fake?”

“I looked up the murder on the Internet and found a story in a local Philly paper. The guy in the video being tortured is the same guy in the article photo.”

Nick was amazed how casually that just rolled off of his tongue, like this was a simple conversation between two guys.

Jules was done with her business and demanded that they start walking again down Eagle Boulevard. It was a busier street to walk on than Nick had thought. Eight cars had passed them already.

“If you suddenly relocated your extended family, you guys would lose most everything, right?”

“Houses, friends, jobs, you name it...”

“But if you can fake your death in a way that convinces the police...”

“That’s why I needed to talk with you,” he inserted.

William yanked on the leash, then they stopped walking.

Nick knew that he was taking William and his detective career lightly by assuming that he would help him commit a crime. But what choice did he have? At this moment standing on Eagle Boulevard, he didn’t know if William was going to erupt at him in anger or graciously offer to help out of some sense of duty or sympathy or whatever would drive somebody to help him down this twisted path.

“Just to be clear here, you wouldn’t be doing anything illegal unless you defraud on your life insurance or something like that,” William asserted.

He laughed slightly and William looked at him curiously.

“But my family will kill me after I put them through the hell of a funeral and all of that grief.”

Nick didn’t know why he was bringing this up, because William couldn’t possibly have cared about that. He needed to focus.

Jules started barking at something and William snapped at his dog.

“Yes, well, I suppose there will be many sacrifices if you choose to do this, but it can be done,” William remarked. “And it probably will throw these thugs off your back if the police determine you to be dead.”

“And I wouldn’t be committing a crime by fooling the police?”

“No...but you’ll need to know how to fool the police.”

Nick looked down at the street and kicked up some dirt when suddenly a car pulled up to them. The passenger side window rolled down.

“Hey William, can you have Betsy call Wendy. We’re trying to arrange a holiday party and we need to talk.”

William chuckled.

“George, I’d be happy to...gosh, is it holiday season yet?”

“Yeah...hard to believe, huh?”

It occurred to Nick standing there next to these two chummy neighbors talking about holiday party plans that he was intruding on William’s life much like the Czechs were disrupting his. Granted, William was a willing participant whose life was not being threatened. Yet, if he was going to help him, then William would need to take his eye way off the ball of holiday parties and tree trimmings. Nick knew he knew that, and wanted to apologize to Father Mike and William for his mess, but he couldn’t.

He realized William was retired and may have actually welcomed a drive down danger lane. William looked to be in his early 60’s. Plus, he mentioned that he retired two years ago. He was sporting thinning, blond hair and looked like he could easily stand to be 10 pounds lighter. That was something Nick told to most of his patients who were in that age range.

The neighbor across the street started up a chain saw to take care of a fallen tree limb causing Nick to wonder what storm they had lately that would have taken out a limb that size. The chain saw spurred William and George to end their conversation.

As George drove off, Jules started pulling hard on the leash, clearly bothered by the amazingly loud chain saw.

“Whoa girl!” William shouted.

They started walking again down Eagle Boulevard.

“Does George live on this street?”

William pointed back toward his home.

“Three houses down from us,” he replied.

Susan always arranged a holiday party for mid December. Actually it was more like a two hour cocktail event, so that people could pop in for a short time before heading off to another party. Nick liked it and was always amazed by the volume of folks that they could round up, between all of his doctor acquaintances and Susan’s Morristown clan.

“Hey, what’s with that guy’s tree limb? Nick asked. “We haven’t had a storm lately that would do that.”

William guffawed and Jules had to stop, looking up at William.

“That’s a real bone of contention between Chuck and his neighbors. That limb has been in Chuck’s yard for nearly a month and a group of neighbors finally got the nerve to talk with Chuck about removing it.”

Nick put his hand on William’s shoulder.

“Wow...let’s hope Chuck doesn’t go too nuts with that chain saw!” he exclaimed.

Puzzlement came over William's face.

"Nick, can I ask you what the information is that they want and are willing to kill you over?"

The wind was picking up, beginning an itch in Nick's right ear so he started to scratch it. Nick tried not to be surprised that it took William this long to ask this question. He was the first person to hear everything, so part of Nick did appreciate the difficulty in putting it all together mentally. Especially for someone trying to help him with a solution.

"Sure, it concerns a pharmaceutical drug trial for which I'm on the oversight committee and will know the results of the trial ahead of the public."

"And these guys wish to receive those results before the shareholders learn of them. It's like the movie *Trading Places* – I love that movie."

Nick tried to laugh but it came off as a gas driven grimace. William's eyes suddenly lit up.

"Wait a minute! Why don't you just quit the committee?" William asked.

"Oh, these guys warned me not to do that or I'd pay dearly."

He hated to disappoint his new friend who was only trying to help him, but Oleg was a seasoned pro who was covering all of the bases.

William started rubbing the stubble on his chin.

"You know, I bet someone on this committee is behind this whole thing," William stated. "When did you join this group?"

"Early September. Oleg found me two months later."

Nick was kind of a midway substitute for the committee, and it definitely was strange that they wanted a non specialist like him. Was there a conspiracy driven by someone on the Zypotorin trial committee? Oleg didn't specifically mention the idea of leaving the committee, yet he did make it clear that he would kill Susan and him if he didn't end up with the information. Nick was sure suddenly leaving the trial would qualify under that killing statement.

"I don't know, Nick... There's always a good explanation for these kinds of crimes."

David Clark did appear out of nowhere two months ago and he had all of these years to ask Nick to join one of his glorious pharmaceutical drug trials, but he never did.

"Yeah, I admit, it's kinda suspicious, this committee thing," he told William.

William eyes grew wider and he started to whisper.

"Are you sure you weren't followed?"

Nick hadn't even thought about that, though it sure made sense that Oleg would follow him here. They both scanned the street and didn't see a car in sight in either direction. One thing was clear: he had to start thinking more like a criminal. The last thing anybody wanted was for William to be put at risk.

William put his right hand on Nick's shoulder. "So, let me get this straight. The guys threatening you are in the video they showed you?"

"One of them is, the leader, Oleg."

"So, they must have left some DNA at the scene. You could tell the police that they're connected to this Philadelphia murder and they could match the DNA."

Nick thought for a minute. “Oleg was wearing black gloves in the video, so I don’t know. I don’t know where these guys are to point the police in their direction, and, even if they find them, it would just be my luck that they can’t match the DNA and can’t hold them.”

William sighed. “Right, and then they would come after you in a nasty way.”

“You got that right, I just can’t take that chance,” Nick told his new friend.

His cell phone started ringing.

“Hello?” Nick asked into the phone. Only Susan ever called him on his cell, but it wasn’t her.

“Nick, it’s Peter Hansen, we need to talk and not at your home,” Peter told him.

“Uh, okay, what did you have in mind?” he asked.

“Let’s meet at the train station, in the parking lot.”

“What? Why so cloak and dagger, man?”

“Please, I’ll explain when you get there, okay?” Peter pleaded.

“All right, give me fifteen minutes.”

They walked back to the house, where Nick thanked William hugely for listening to his mess. They agreed to talk again – he needed some time to craft a plan.

Off to the Morristown train station, he half expected Oleg to be there waiting for him, rational or not. How Peter got hold of his cell phone number was beyond him, but he could have simply called the office this week and asked Mary for it. Susan probably didn’t give it to him, because he wouldn’t have called her on account of the stupid feud between Claire and his wife.

Pulling up to the station to find Peter sitting in his SUV, he parked his car, then looked for any signs of Oleg and his friend. Nothing. He decided to climb into the front passenger seat next to Peter.

“Okay, you got me here,” he snorted in the most ‘I don’t trust you in the slightest’ tone of voice.

“Well, I tried to tell you this at the soccer game this week, but you wouldn’t let me,” Peter exclaimed.

He sighed loudly. “So, I’m letting you now,” he said exasperatedly. “What is it?”

Peter turned, looking right into his eyes – it was very disturbing – and took a deep breath. “Nick, they’re going to kill you no matter what.”

Nick looked at him and quickly decided to act surprised. It was more like a natural response even though Nick was way ahead of him on the information side of things.

“What?”

“They don’t plan on keeping you and your family alive once you give them the trial information,” Peter exclaimed, looking really stressed out and beet red in the cheeks. “You guys need to leave town.”

If Peter was not on his side here, he would never be telling him all of this. That would just be crazy. He was sure Peter had considered the risk of Oleg following him to their meeting at the train station, so Peter had to be on the level. Oleg and his criminal

network would not like to see them talking. Nick would hate to think what they would do. He thought about warning Peter about this, but he'd be preaching to the choir.

"We can't easily pick up and leave in the middle of the night," he told Peter. "My family is too big and I haven't told any of them about this crap."

Peter sat back on his seat and rubbed his forehead. "Oh man, we need a plan!"

"Hey bud, can we talk outside the truck?" he asked, motioning his head outside and bugging out his eyes.

Peter looked at him, nodding his head. "Okay..."

Nick walked around to his side of the SUV. "I wouldn't be surprised if Oleg has bugged your truck."

"Oh, they trust me, but if you want to play it safe..."

"I'm going to fake my death," he told Peter.

They looked at each other and didn't say anything for a few seconds. Peter began to rub his chin. "Really? You thought of that just now?"

"Not exactly," he said. "I've known about their plans for me for a few days now, actually."

Did Peter just expect him to sit on his hands and not try to think his way out of the Czechs' grip? Maybe he really did believe that Oleg trusted him, because he was way more paranoid than Peter.

Peter squinted at him and laughed mildly. "Now this is how you need to be thinking!" he shouted. "How'd you figure it all out?"

"Oh, it's a long story, but let's just say that Oleg slips up sometimes."

"Okay, now what did you tell them about when this drug trial is going to wrap up?" Peter asked him. "It's not anytime soon, is it?"

"No, no, we should finish by late March, early April, but I'll need to pull off my crime scene well before then."

Nick decided to hold off on telling Peter about his talk with William. It wasn't really a trust issue here, but it was more that he didn't want Peter running off to talk with William. He totally would have done that which could have blown Nick's plan to pieces. It surely would have pissed William off mightily, in any case.

"How do you intend to pull it off?" Peter asked.

"I haven't thought that far, yet, but it's really the only choice that I have. Oleg will be watching me very carefully."

The past few nights he had woken in the middle of the night from dreams where he had plowed over Oleg in the street.

Peter stared at the ground and started to shake his head. "Shit, man, I'm so sorry for all of this. You know, I thought I had this whole money laundering thing under control until Julio Viola decided to spread his wings. That doctor in Philadelphia didn't stand a chance."

These cartel guys needed Peter to stick around and be functional enough to keep up the money laundering scheme. Nick was sure Peter was doing his best to stay important in the eyes of Julio Viola. That was a luxury Nick clearly didn't have.

"How'd you meet this guy?" Nick asked.

“Oh, a while back, I was looking for new investors and I was on a boat trip with a buddy of mine from college. It was a wild party on that boat that day, and Julio was there. We started talking, and the next thing I know, he sends some dude named Martin the following Monday to threaten me into laundering a huge amount of money for the Viola drug cartel.”

“It sounds like you got set up,” he said, slapping Peter on the back.

“No, I was just in the wrong place at the wrong damn time,” Peter shot back. “But I can’t say it hasn’t been pretty nice having their millions parked in my funds over the past year. The stock market is in the toilet.”

Spoken like a true money launderer.

Nick Johnson

Saturday, November 9th

“Where have you been?” Susan asked, while putting groceries away in the pantry. Nick leaned down to help her out. They were spending a small fortune feeding young Tom every week.

“The snow blower needed oil and one of the cables had to be replaced,” he replied. “Real fun stuff.”

“That’s nice.”

That excuse came to him on the way home from William’s. He knew Susan would tune him out at the mention of the snow blower and having her poke around with questions about where he really was this afternoon, he didn’t need.

He looked around but didn’t see Tom in the family room.

“Is Tom in the house?”

“No he took off for Charlie’s.”

William told him he should draw up a list of everything needing to get done before starting his plan. Thoughts crossed his mind about the end goal with the Czechs. What if they didn’t end up believing that he was dead? That was easily the biggest risk here.

“Charlie is spending the night with us, he’s cleared it with Cheryl” Susan informed him.

“Cool.” Nick put away two jars of pasta sauce and headed into his office.

Staring at his computer, he wondered if he should tap into his chat room ‘team’ that was pretty helpful earlier this morning. Would they have advice for pulling off the faking of one’s death?

He sat down on the window seat, suddenly asking himself what he was doing. William Miler was the best he was going to get in the most positive of circumstances, let alone this loser hand that he’d been dealt.

William may have been right on with his theory about the committee. How else could Oleg have found him? But if Oleg was working for somebody on the committee, how was this somebody connected to the Philadelphia murder? There had to be a connection between what happened in Philadelphia and what was going down here in northern New Jersey. He had to find out who was on Dr. Lindor’s trial committee. Granted, even if he learned who was behind all of this, it didn’t change Oleg’s threat and that had to have his complete focus.

He was currently targeting mid-late February for his disappearance. Latest signals from the Zyptorin committee indicated that trial results were to be made public in late April of next year. He really had zero idea how long it was going to take him to get all of his ducks in a row. Two or three months maybe, but hopefully not that long.

Susan was singing in the kitchen. She absolutely loved it when Tom had friends over for dinner. The holidays were also rapidly approaching and his wife was fully aware

that they only had so many of these left before Tom became a full-fledged adult. She was particularly jazzed about this upcoming holiday.

A ray of quickly disappearing sunlight shined on him...a brainy moment hit his mind.

“Wait a minute, bud...if you have Oleg believe that somebody else is stepping onto their turf...also threatening me,” he told himself. “Then you don’t necessarily have to make them believe you’re dead.”

There was nothing like a moment of intelligence to bring a smile to his face.

“Winner, winner, chicken dinner! Dude, I own you!” Tom screamed, most likely at Charlie, upon entering through the garage door.

He swore the whole house shook when Tom and his friends entered their abode, as nothing got these particular two yelling at each other like their video games. The latest NFL game was a huge hit apparently, hogging up Tom and Charlie’s attention whenever possible.

“Tom, why don’t you boys take that into the basement,” Susan shouted on instinct.

“Smells great Mrs. J!” Charlie exclaimed.

Susan was heating up some appetizers given that she liked to eat at 5 p.m. on the weekends.

Nick tried to re-focus and started rubbing his feet. Getting Oleg to believe that somebody else was trying to shake him down was going to need some work. First of all, he didn’t know when he would see Oleg again. But he was thinking the idea of a competitor to them needed to be planted at that unknown meeting. Also, it would need to be a hell of a story to make it all believable.

William told him that the crime scene that he created needed to look like a violent struggle, including enough blood, hair and tissue remnants to highlight the forensics report. William said that often times in knife attacks, small pieces of flesh are left behind. Nick had no idea, though, how he was going to leave behind pieces of his flesh to simulate a knife attack.

The blood and hair part of the crime scene was not going to be too difficult to arrange - he would simply need to draw pints of blood a few times to make the volume needed for a believable crime scene – so it didn’t require much thinking ahead.

The location of this event was another key item to plan out. Their house was ruled out, given that the last thing he wanted was for Susan or Tom to discover the crime scene. Nick probably had the most control over his medical office. He would need to make sure it looked like someone had taken him dead or alive because, obviously, his body would not be there.

He also thought about his car as a potential crime scene since somebody could attack him while driving. That would possibly be harder in that it had to be made to look like he’d been forced off of the road. There would be the need to ding up the driver and rear sides of the car, yet he didn’t know how he’d do that to make it believable.

Nick drove around the neighborhood on the way back from William’s street to see if Oleg was anywhere near watching him, but didn’t see him. Nobody looked to be

following, so he didn't know what was up with their routine. It'd be hard to pull his plan off if they were watching him closely all of the time. If he did this at night, driving to whatever crime scene arranged by him, the last thing he wanted was for Oleg to follow him. He needed to believe that he was either dead or abducted by a competitor to the cartel. And if these guys had a routine, he could plan around it.

He wondered if Oleg had been in their house because it wouldn't shock him. He and his thug friend could have bugged their house for all he knew. Nick unscrewed the receiver of their landline but didn't see anything suspicious. Who knew what kind of technology these guys had access to? He had to think it was advanced, though. Right then, he decided that all calls were to be made on his cell phone and preferably, all communication with William was to be done in person.

"Hey stranger, what are you doing in here," Susan asked, walking into his office.

Nick stood up from the window seat.

"How's the dinner prep going?" It was a weak attempt at changing the subject - it just flew out of his mouth - and it didn't work.

"You seem so stoic. What are you thinking about?"

"Oh, thinking about the holidays," he replied. "Do you have any idea how lucky we are?"

Susan smiled and walked over to him for a hug.

"You know, this window seat is beautiful this time of year with the early sunset."

They sat down on the seat, looking out onto their front yard. The house was strangely quiet given Tom and Charlie's presence. Susan began to rub his left thigh.

The thigh or any real fleshy areas of the body were possible candidates for his crime scene. Regardless, he needed to take the flesh from an area that would not produce a lot of blood or require a lot of stitching. He had taken enough moles and cysts off of arms, under-arms, legs, backs, and necks, almost all of those requiring 1-2 stitches to close the wound. His practice probably saw two patients a week with this medical issue.

"I'm proud of you, Nick," Susan said. "Most men in their mid-late forties are not happy where they are or what they have achieved."

He gave Susan a long kiss. His lips were getting chapped, so he had to take care of that.

"And you think I'm happy?"

"Yes, Nicholas Johnson, I do," Susan answered. "This drug trial committee could bring great things to your career."

"It is a big honor," he said. "But I don't think most male friends of mine are unhappy. I mean, yeah, Wall Street sucks right now and the Arbors aren't happy..."

How long could he keep this up? Did he really seem happy? In the past three days, he had come to the conclusion that the best course of action for his family was to fake his death and disappear. What was not to be happy about?

"Sorry for being dramatic about men your age, but I'm proud of you," Susan stated firmly.

Susan slapped her hands on her knees and stood up.

"The appetizers should be ready. I'll tell the boys."

“Sounds good, hon.”

Many non fleshy parts of the body still weren't going to work if that area required steady use like the hands, fingers, feet and ankles. Wherever he disappeared to, he would need to walk a lot and carry things, so he would need these parts to be pain free.

“Boys, I have some chicken wings and potato wedges ready for you before dinner,” Susan shouted from the top of the basement stairs.

Nick was definitely living parallel worlds, mentally concocting the best part of him to slice off in one world and playing the holiday, fun with the teenagers, engaged in his marriage husband in the other world - he was trying to figure out which was more stressful.

As always, they would have everybody over at their house for both Thanksgiving and Christmas this year. Stanley had his chair in their family room – he did his best to stay clear of the mayhem in the kitchen. Each year, Tom grew less and less interested in these family holiday events, but Susan and Nick heard that was normal.

Nick met the boys in the kitchen.

“Thanks Mrs. J! You guys rock!” Charlie exclaimed upon seeing the heaping portion of hot wings.

He looked at Tom and threw his head toward Susan and Nick.

“Hey, Mom, Dad...Coach is hearing I have a shot at third team all state,” Tom remarked. “It's kind of a long shot, but still surprising.”

Nick walked up to Tom and mussed up his hair a little.

“That is awesome, bud!”

Saturday, November 9th
David Clark

“As I was saying David, that bunker on 12th idea is a bad one,” Alan McLuhan stated firmly.

Alan was up in arms over the course planning committee’s latest idea to keep the course current. Sure, with the 14 handicap that Alan sported, David Clark could see why he’d want to keep any more bunkers out of the picture. David belonged to Palm Golf Club in Mendham, where the golf was solid, yet he didn’t quite care for the social scene. The Clarks would be looking to upgrade next year as there were too many wannabes at Palm Golf making upper middle class dough.

But his wife, Toni, loved the place, so they found themselves at the club at least one Saturday night of each month. Palm Golf usually did have a decent band and Toni and David were better than average dancers. If he did say so himself.

“Oh, come now, Alan, that slice of yours won’t put the ball anywhere near this new bunker.”

It was his way of saying nicely, ‘kiss my bald rump, Alan, and stop your whining’.

“David Clark, how’s that Zyptorin trial going?,” said a woman whose name he should have known, but he had nothing. “Toni says you’re busier than ever.”

“Oh, you know I can’t talk about the trials I work on,” David said in his kindest, teasing way.

Zyptorin. Distal Pharmaceuticals didn’t need to spend millions on this stupid trial, David could have told them the drug was average at best. However, the \$450k Distal had already paid him in consulting fees over the past year kept him interested enough, and the Clarks now had a quasi beachfront three bedroom condo in Miami Beach, thanks to Distal and friends. They bought it out of foreclosure, so, of course, it was nice to know the right people.

The next thing David knew, this woman had her hand on his butt.

“Well, when are Steve and I going to get invited to your Miami Beach pad?” she whispered into his left ear. “Toni just told me about your hot tub.”

David looked over at his wife who was talking with the Robinsons. Why he could not remember this woman’s name was beyond him.

Toni was the co-executive producer for CBS morning show. The Clarks had been married for 17 years and it had been truly exciting to watch the rise in Toni’s career. The thing about becoming a cardiologist was that once David was done with his residency in 1988, he was basically a star from that point on. Granted, his income had seen a nice pop thanks to the folks at Distal, though he was making great money fourteen years ago.

His chest started to vibrate - it was his cell phone - so he reached inside his jacket and pulled it out from his pocket. David glanced at the number and he knew there was big news on the other end of this call. A call from Norm Watson this late on a Saturday night had to be important. Norm was heading the Zyptorin committee.

“Hello Norm,” David said, flipping the phone open.

“Oh, David, am I glad I caught you,” Norm said hurriedly. “Have you heard about Jim Newel?”

Jim Newel was the CEO of Distal Pharmaceuticals.

“No, I haven’t. What’s up?” His pulse started to pick up the pace.

“David, he’s had a heart attack and it looks bad. He’s in a coma.”

That certainly wasn’t the good news David was hoping for because he was due to have lunch with Jim Newel in less than two weeks. He wasn’t sure about his consulting arrangement once the Zyptorin trial finished up, and David was hoping to get inside Jim’s inner circle. He had been trying to get on this guy’s lunch schedule for six months. They had met on a few occasions, but it was always in a small group of people, each equally eager to talk with the glorified CEO.

David didn’t know what to say back to Norm, so he thought for a moment.

“David, you there?” Norm asked.

“Yeah, I’m here, sorry about that. So what does this mean for our trial?”

“We don’t know yet, and probably won’t know anything for a while,” Norm replied. “Do you think you can call the rest of the committee to assure them that nothing is changing, at least not for a while?”

“Well, if Jim dies, the board will have to act fast,” David pointed out.

The reality here was quite stark, even if this guy lived through it. Heart attacks rarely lead to comas but, when they do, big problems often happen. Somebody was going to need to step into the CEO slot even if Jim made a full recovery. What a mess. This was going to set David back two hard years of work to get as far inside Distal as he had.

“Well, David, I’ll call you next week. Have a great weekend,” Norm stated.

“Thanks for the heads up, Norm.” David put the cell phone back inside his jacket and finished his drink while clenching the glass that was just crying out to be hurled across the room.

“Dammit, dammit, dammit!” he yelled to himself. Jim Newel was done and David knew it. This was no mild heart attack. There was no way he was going to be able to handle the pressures of the CEO job, even if he stabilized.

David wondered what to tell Toni. It was going to be all over the news in the morning anyway, so why ruin a night?

Toni was promoted to her current position last year. She arose each weekday morning at 3 a.m. and drove into the midtown Manhattan studio. Toni was able to leave the office at 4 p.m. They had one son, Andy, who attended the ninth grade at the Pingry School. Andy was under the services of their nanny, Lucy, up until last year.

The Clark family would be in Vail for the Christmas holiday, where they owned a slope side chalet. David had an easier time taking vacations than did Toni who lived in constant fear that some up and rising star would take her highly coveted position. If they could take two 7-8 day vacations a year, David considered himself lucky. In the prior year, the Clark family was only able to take one of these and David felt the overall mood in the Clark household suffered as a direct result of this.

Toni was one of few people to put David in his place and was not at all impressed by him as a Cardiologist. She was impressed when they first met at a New Year's eve gala at the top of the World Trade Center One. Yet, the years had grown long and the fascination turned to mid-life reality. Toni definitely felt like she had earned her career success a whole lot more than her husband had earned it.

"All you needed to do was to score well on your MCATs," Toni had told David on a few occasions. "Granted, that's not easy to do and I respect that but it was still just one test."

David couldn't really argue with that, though his inroads with Distal's management team had been watering down these feelings quite a bit in recent months. Then friggin' Jim Newel goes and has a heart attack! Crap!

Of all of their friends, Toni had the most spectacular female career, though lots of women they knew had banged around in the corporate world. Susan Johnson was an example and she actually achieved decent success. David always wondered if she started to make more money than Nick because Susan must have gotten close to Nick's salary level when she made the Vice President level at her company. But, Nick didn't seem like the kind of guy who would be bothered by that kind of thing.

It had been fun to watch Nick's wide-eyed enthusiasm during the Zyptorin committee meetings. David knew this committee had some celebrity doctors on it, though he hoped Nick didn't think this was going to lead to anything. Nick was basically a glorified family doctor and non-specialists almost never got onto these trials. David hoped Nick knew how lucky he was to be on the Zyptorin committee.

The band had been playing for ten minutes what sounded like blues band music, heavy on the saxophone.

That worked for the Clarks.

Sunday, November 10th

8:45 a.m.

Peter Hansen

“What the hell is going on over at Distal?” Martin hollered.

They stepped out onto Peter’s front porch. This was the first time Martin had been to his home, at least the first that he was aware of, and the cartel man was clearly rattled.

“Look, calm down. This trial is way too important to Distal, they’re not going to shut it down.”

Peter was mainly worried about the stock price reaction on Monday to the news about Jim Newel’s highly precarious medical state. The board needed to act quickly to stabilize the ship, and if it did that, then the stock would recover from any initial weakness in early Monday trading. Every stock analyst on the street was awaiting the results from the Zyptorin trial, and the health of the CEO had no direct bearing on the trial results. The irony here was that Jim Newel could possibly have benefited from Zyptorin and its artery plaque reduction ability.

“Well, what do I tell Julio?” Martin asked.

“Tell him nothing changes, because that is the truth. Keep the heat on.”

Peter knew that if he told Martin that the trial was in danger, Julio might do something dangerous to the Johnson family while cutting the cord.

“Oh, that we’re doing! We have this doctor scared out of his gord!” Martin exclaimed.

The wind was starting to pick up and Peter wanted to get back inside. “All right, let’s not talk for a while unless it’s urgent, okay?”

Martin nodded and walked back to his black sedan. He knew better than to rattle Julio. It was in nobody’s interest to have the Violas make a rash, emotional decision. As for Peter, he needed to keep Julio happy with his new drug trial plan, happy with his firm.

Peter had only met Julio once, on a boating trip in August, 2001 that was hosted by the Lick Brothers of Miami Beach. The brothers were in the middle of building an all-glass luxury condo tower right on the ocean. The trip was on a Saturday and Peter was in Miami visiting a college buddy of his, Carl Williams, an amazingly successful real estate agent for the \$1 million plus market and very good friends with Bruce and Jim Lick. Their boat was half a football field long and seemed to hold ninety to one hundred people easily. Only twenty of them were traveling on it that day, however. When the flame throwing stilt walkers came onto the boat for the early evening entertainment, Peter told Carl that he had outdone himself and reminded his old buddy that his celebrity friends never invited him anywhere.

Julio began talking with Peter over the buffet dinner. He briefly described himself as a Mexican industrialist, but Julio seemed more interested in Peter’s investment firm and peppered him with questions about his asset size, number of investors and use of off

shore accounts. The guy had a really annoying nasal whistle when he laughed, making Peter wonder how he got anywhere in business with it. The night drew to a close and Julio told him that he wished to invest some money with his firm. Peter really didn't think anything of it, thought Julio was joking.

The following Monday, he found out just how serious Julio was. An acne-scarred, mustached man in a crazily expensive dark blue suit was waiting for him in their lobby when Peter came in that morning at 7 a.m., and he told Peter that he represented the Viola family. Judy, his receptionist, was sitting at her desk, typing madly on the computer. The mustached man didn't offer up his name, and quickly got to the point. \$170 million had been deposited overnight in a Swiss bank account, and, when the man told him how to move the money, it became clear that he was helping the Violas wash their cash. Basically, he was told to move the money around various European accounts before moving it on shore as a formal investment in his firm. A Belgian cement company, two French steel manufacturers and a Spanish vineyard were all involved in the transactions. Peter would have to coordinate nine different wire transactions that day.

The mustached man continued to talk and Peter began to panic because it looked like Julio Viola was involved with a large drug operation in Mexico, and he was now deep into it. Granted, his investment results thus far in 2001 were pretty bad, but he didn't need to descend to the dregs of money laundering for a Mexican drug lord.

"There must've been a misunderstanding with Mr. Viola on the boat on Saturday," he told the mustached man while springing up from his office chair. The twenty years he had spent building his firm were flashing right in front of him, like a sandcastle towering mightily just ahead of a crashing wave.

The man smiled, though not in a friendly way. "There has been no misunderstanding, you're wife's name is Claire and your sixteen year old son is Charlie, right?"

Peter looked at him, crossed his arms, and leaned over the desk. "What, so you'll screw with my family if I don't cooperate, is that it?" he yelled as softly as he could without being heard out in the hallway.

"Peter, I'm just the messenger here," the mustached man said while pulling out a satellite phone from his bag. He dialed a number and began speaking in Spanish to someone on the other end. After maybe twenty seconds, he handed the phone over to him.

"He wants to speak to you."

Grabbing the phone, Peter had a pretty good idea who was on the other line.

"Hello?" Peter said into the satellite phone. There was a loud hissing sound on the line.

"What's this about me screwing with your family?" the voice asked. "You whined to me Saturday night about the lousy stock market, your investment results and your need for new investors, so here I am helping you out."

It struck him quickly that Julio Viola wasn't somebody you yell at, so he tried to calm down. "Please, Julio, this is all too complicated for me and I'm only looking for much smaller sized investors right now."

“Look, do as Martin tells you, and you won’t need to worry about anything,” Julio said firmly.

“There’s no changing your mind about this, is there?”

“No, Peter, but this is a good thing, a very good thing, just remember that, all right?”

“Okay.” Taking a huge breath, Peter handed the phone back to Martin. He talked with Julio for another minute before hanging up.

By noon that day, they had completed all nine wire transactions.

Monday, November 11th
12:25 a.m.

Ashley Wells ran in her flip flops and naked under her robe back to the heated hot tub, taking care not to slip on the tile that was wet from the five minute midnight rain shower that just passed through.

Twice a week, Ashley eagerly flaunted her palatial estate in South Hampton, New York; tonight's flaunt was for nearly 100 music industry people. Ashley's assistant, Judy, confirmed twenty minutes earlier that everyone was out of the home and exiting the property.

The hot tub was one of seven on the estate and rested on the third floor balcony off the master bedroom.

"Okay, stud, thanks for the potty break," Ashley giggled. "Hope the chlorine level is fine."

Ashley grabbed her vodka drink from the ledge, lifted her left leg, and nudged Brad in the back of the head.

"Hey sweetie, cat got your tongue?"

Brad fell face forward into the water, leading Ashley to send into the night a screech that would spin her music producer's head around. Ashley reached over the edge of the tub to save Brad before noticing the blender in the tub, pouring strawberry daiquiri into the water. The blender was sparking and Ashley knew better than to reach into the electrified water.

"Help!" she yelled from the balcony.

Ashley took her towel and grabbed Brad's head to pull him back up into a sitting position. Lifting her fiancé up by the arm pits, she pulled him out of the tub. Ashley was in the middle of mouth to mouth when Linda hurried into the room.

"What happened?" Linda asked Ashley, ready to dial 9-1-1.

Ashley looked up from Brad and shouted tear streamed instructions to call for an ambulance.

"He electrocuted himself with the blender!" Ashley yelled.

Eduardo could hear Ms. Wells shouting for help while descending down the home on his removable cable. He was almost to the first floor balcony when Ashley discovered Mr. Dellan dead in the tub. He made sure not to make any noise.

It was supposed to look like an accident and things could not have worked out any better for Eduardo, who camped out in the house for 36 hours prior to the killing so as to study the couple. When Julio first called Eduardo on Friday night, he wanted him to kill Mr. Dellan in the most horrible way possible, but, hours later, Julio had changed his mind. Now, it had to look like an accident, and that made the task so much more difficult.

Pushing a target down the stairs can break their neck though it's not full proof by any stretch; same with heavy furniture like an armoire falling on the victim. Electrocutation is the most common way because it is the most reliable, yet the target obviously needs to be in water. Eduardo knew they used the hot tub nearly every night, but he didn't want to kill Ms. Wells so he needed to have Mr. Dellan alone in the water.

Ms. Wells was in the tub for part of Saturday night, but never left her fiancé alone. Eduardo hid right below the third balcony ledge, in the darkest part that faced some woods. His back was stiff the next morning, however, it was the best spot to hide by far. On Sunday night, an opportunity opened up when Ms. Wells went to the bathroom for a few minutes. Eduardo put his plan into work. Scaling the side of the balcony, he scared the crap out of Mr. Dellan, who tried to stand up, but the turned-on blender was quickly in the water and Mr. Dellan didn't stand a chance.

Eduardo hooked up his removable cable and waited to make sure the target was dead. When that became clear, the hit man started his descent.

Monday, November 11th

9:05 p.m.

Peter Hansen

Peter was watching Giants vs. Eagles when Charlie ran into their family room, clearly excited about something.

“Did you hear about Ashley Wells?” he queried.

He looked at Charlie, thinking that his son should know that he didn’t follow entertainment industry news.

“No, what happened?”

Charlie laughed. “Well, CNN just reported that her fiancé was electrocuted in a hot tub last night.”

“Did she do it?” he asked while sitting up and suddenly paying a lot more attention.

Charlie walked over and sat next to him on the couch and he tried to remember the last time they sat on the couch together, but came up empty.

“They’re saying it’s an accident... a blender fell into the water when he was alone in the tub.”

“Really!” he said trying hard not to laugh. “I suppose there was no way to keep this kind of thing from the press.”

Charlie punched him in the arm. “Are you kidding? The paparazzi covered her party and were hanging out by her front gate.”

As he was saying this, Peter had that pit in his stomach again, the pit that was a gift from Julio that just kept on giving. It didn’t sound like Julio’s work, but Brad was complaining about where Ashley’s money was going. It would not surprise him at all if the cartel had tapped Peter’s phones.

He slapped Charlie on the knee.

“Good stuff, my boy!”

Peter walked into the kitchen, found his cell phone, and dialed Martin’s number that he knew by heart because he didn’t dare to put it into his contacts folder.

“Martin, we gotta talk,” he opened.

The cartel man sighed into the phone. “Oh, this doesn’t sound good.”

“Do you know about Ashley Wells and her fiancé?” he probed.

“The singer? Gee, I guess I haven’t.”

“Come on now, Martin, level with me!”

Martin didn’t say anything for a few seconds. Peter knew he was thinking about whether or not to tell him anything.

“Are you on your cell phone?” Martin finally asked.

“Of course.”

“Now, you gotta know by now that we have your phones tapped, right?” Martin continued.

Actually, he didn't think there was much to alert him that he had tapped his phones, yet he played along.

"That's why I'm calling you," he said, trying to corner Martin into telling him everything.

"Okay, so we knew this Brad guy was poking around with questions about your firm that could've landed us all in trouble, and we could not afford to take that chance," Martin revealed to him.

"So, you had him whacked?" he asked, now in the basement.

"You said it, I didn't," Martin stated.

"Jesus! Brad was harmless!" Peter ran his hands through his hair.

"Hey we cannot have lawyers sniffing around your firm," Martin said quite firmly. "There's way too much at stake here, and I'm surprised that you don't realize that!"

He knew Martin was right but just could not let himself ever feel okay with killing somebody – ever. That self promise was made back when he learned about the Linders.

"And someday you can tell Darryl how lucky he is because Julio was going to have him iced as well, but I convinced Julio that it might look too suspicious if two people associated with the firm were killed."

Peter didn't know what to say to that so he simply stood there silent in his basement for a good twenty seconds. His family was moving around upstairs, though he felt he might as well be on a deserted island faced with imminent danger and no one to turn to for key decisions other than himself. At some point, Julio was going to find him expendable – it was only a matter of time. He could see Martin taking the spare office at PLH, making nice with the clients and gradually running him out of the picture.

He had to do something to change the course because if he didn't alter the status quo, Julio would eventually do it for him. His whole family would be wiped out and Julio wouldn't give a rip about it.

"You still there?" Martin asked. "Look, I know this is hard for you, but think how much harder it would be if the feds suddenly show up at your door demanding to see your cooked books. It wouldn't take 'em 20 minutes to figure out the scam you're running."

Peter let out a loud sigh and started to rub his temples. "You're guy is just down the street watching over me and my family, so don't think that I don't appreciate it, but why did you have to tell me about Brad Dellan and the Linders?"

Martin's guy had been around since the prior Wednesday and Peter hadn't had any more problems with 'pants on fire.'

Martin laughed mightily into the phone. "Dammit! Because you asked...you have always been curious about what kind of organization you're linked to the hip. We're a drug cartel, after all, and we don't play nice in the sandbox."

Now that was the understatement of the century.

"Dad, you down there?" Charlie shouted from upstairs. "Jamie Lyons is on the phone for you."

Jamie Lyons was a low A list actor who was in his late 20s and starting to get some really big roles over the past year. He could not quite yet headline a movie, but Jamie was being seen as the next big action star. He was well received opposite Maggie Lewis in *Survivor*, a movie set in 2055 after a nuclear explosion. *Survivor* grossed over \$400 million in North America as Jamie's career hit a new level. He could now command \$9-12 million per picture and was filming an untitled blockbuster due Christmas, 2003.

Jamie had only been a client for eighteen months and Peter hadn't the foggiest idea why he would be calling him at home on a weeknight. The Vegas line pointed to bad news for Peter, however.

He said his goodbye to Martin and grabbed the handset from the basement landline.

"Hello, Jamie, what can I do for you?" he asked, not wanting to come out firing with the 'why the hell are you calling me at home' question.

There was an awkward pause on the line but he swore he heard a woman in the background.

"Peter, I need to take out my money, all of it...I'm buying a house," Jamie blurted.

He didn't have the exact number, but knew it was around \$12 million that Jamie had with PLH. At least that's what he believed Jamie's last statement showed. He was kind of hoping that Jamie would send him a few more million this year, now that he was making the obscene Hollywood bucks.

"Okay...Jamie, shouldn't you have Dan Hale handle this for you, maybe tomorrow morning when I'm in the office?"

"Oh, I fired Dan's ass this afternoon," Jamie replied. "I'm handling everything now."

Peter had already figured that Martin had his home phone lines tapped in addition to his office lines, so he was sure Martin would hear this conversation at some point in the next 24 hours. He had to be careful in order to not motivate the cartel into wanting to go off and kill Jamie Lyons for pulling his money out of the firm.

"All right then, I'll tally up the exact amount you have with PLH as of today's market movement and give you a ring tomorrow," he told Jamie.

He certainly didn't want to press Jamie as to why he fired his attorney of several years, and Jamie didn't sound as if he was going to offer that information up anyway.

"Sounds good, my man," Jamie said. "And you're being real decent about this...I mean, I know the stock market sucks right now and you probably don't want to part with the cash..."

Jamie was starting to yammer away so Peter figured he could easily warp into a statement ripe for being misconstrued by Peter's cartel friends. He decided to cut Jamie off.

"Jamie, I gotta run, but I'll call you tomorrow morning from the office."

"Okay, dude, Ciao!"

Peter leaned back in the basement sofa he had sunken into, and wondered just how many hand holdings with his clients he would have to do in the future. All because

he was so worried about what the cartel would think. No one had taken money out of the firm since Julio came on board, so this was going to be heavily scrutinized. Best of luck to Jamie Lyons, but if the news reported how an ice pick found its way into Jamie's forehead, Peter would know that Julio had been a bad boy.

His cell phone began ringing and it startled the heck out of Peter.

"Peter, Martin," Julio's point man told him to start what he presumed to be yet another unhealthy and stressful conversation.

"Uh huh, what's up?"

"Julio is coming to town the night of January 15th and will be in New York for a few days. He wants to meet you the afternoon of the 16th."

"Does he always plan things out so far in advance?"

Peter couldn't say that he was terribly surprised by that, because if the cartel was anything, besides being scaldingly ruthless, it was obsessively organized in all that it did.

"Yes, and simply listen....I'm not in the mood for your snarky comments,"

Martin stated firmly.

"Okay, okay," he replied. "I don't think I've anything on the calendar on that day, but I'll check first thing tomorrow and block that entire week off if I have to."

Dang, he'd call it a month if that would make Julio happy. Sitting there in the couch before Martin phoned back, the thought of Julio someday finding a more suitable money launderer haunted his frontal lobe.

He decided not to tell Martin about the Jamie Lyons money withdrawal right then – it could wait until morning – or maybe he just never mention it at all. And this Julio news was big. Could Peter somehow use this Julio travel information to his advantage?

Tuesday, November 12th

8:20 a.m.

Peter Hansen

“Martin, I got a call from a Hollywood client last night who wants to withdraw \$11.89 million of assets.”

The reality was that Jamie had \$7.1 million after his investment losses the past few years, so the difference would have to come out of somebody else’s funds. A few more sizeable customer withdrawals, and PLH would ordinarily be facing meltdown. That’s why the \$40 million that Julio left in the pooled assets was so critical, a nice cushion for a rainy day.

After much thought from the night before, a decision had been made: it didn’t matter if Peter was telling Martin something he already knew, he just didn’t want to be viewed as withholding key information like the first customer withdrawal since the cartel took over PLH. That said, he didn’t want to give up Jamie’s name if he didn’t have to, because there was a chance that Martin had not tapped his home line.

“You better be sure this guy wasn’t talking with Brad Dellan.”

Peter didn’t like that question and did his best to steer the conversation away from Martin’s suspicions about those poking their noses into PLH.

“Nothing like that, Martin,” he said. “Funds needed for a home purchase, that’s all. Hey, the afternoon of January 16th is all clear for me, just let me know when Julio wants to meet. I’ll probably need to meet him in the city, right?”

He glanced down at the yellow sticky note that he had written to remind himself to call Nick Johnson.

“No, I think he plans to spend a day out in suburban NJ, take your family out for lunch kind of thing.”

Great, this guy now wanted to meet the family. How was he going to explain that to Claire and the kids? He didn’t think he ever had taken the family on a business event. They all did go to Disney World five years ago. That trip coincided with an investment management conference in Orlando that Peter attended for a day, but business and family still didn’t mix on that occasion.

“That would be lovely, Martin,” he said as sarcastically as possible.

“Personally, I think it’s a bad idea for Julio to meet your family,” Martin said. “There really is no upside.”

Boy, he couldn’t have said that better himself. Did Julio want to play with his mind, as if he hadn’t done that enough already?

“Well, keep working on him,” he replied. “I think it’s a terrible idea. What, are we going to start exchanging Christmas cards or something?”

Martin laughed softly. That was one of the few times he had heard that man laugh. Peter had never seen it, only on the phone.

“Oh, I forgot to tell you that I’m switching men to watch over you, just a scheduling adjustment, that’s all,” Martin said. “You shouldn’t experience anything different.”

He breathed heavily into the phone. “That’s good, because I’ve hardly noticed anybody watching over me.”

And that was the truth. Yeah, Peter saw Martin’s guy follow him to work and back home every day, but he parked away from the house, near some woods, so no neighbors would complain or become suspicious. Most importantly, Peter’s family didn’t notice. That would be bad.

Martin said his goodbye, telling Peter that he’d be calling later.

His call to Jamie Lyons lasted maybe thirty seconds. It felt weird to call Jamie back on so many levels.

First, he should have been talking to his attorney, not Jamie - he had no idea why Jamie fired his longstanding attorney and he didn’t want to pry – since most celebrity clients of his never talked business with him. Steven Angle was the exception, of course, yet maybe that was a reflection of him simply being older and wiser. Or maybe not.

Second, Martin quite possibly considered Jamie to be a threat to PLH and he was helpless to warn him of that.

So, there Peter was on the phone with Jamie, telling him that he would be wiring the \$11.89 million at the end of the day.

Darryl leaned into his office. “Metrogroup has confirmed Mr. Lyons’s transaction and they’re sending over the documentation right now.”

Darryl had an interesting weekend. Apparently, someone was following him and Jonathan. Peter did his damndest to act clueless while Darryl was telling him the story but it wasn’t easy because he was fuming inside.

They noticed the same man four times in a few hour span midday Saturday. Twice in the flea market, once outside the shoe store – Darryl needed some new penny loafers - and finally, during the drive home. Jonathan noticed the man two cars behind him and made a few quick turns to let the man know he’d been spotted. They were so spooked that they cancelled their Saturday evening plans for dinner in the city. Instead, they hunkered down in their home all night. Jonathan and Darryl had not seen the man since. Taking the 5:45 a.m. train into Manhattan for his attorney job every morning, Jonathan spent the entire Monday looking over his shoulder.

Martin had told Peter that Darryl was off limits, but this made him nervous. Julio had been known to change his mind, even in the short time that Peter had known the man, so this could be serious. Peter cared for Darryl and if another person close to him got caught in the cross hairs of the cartel, he just might have lost it. As Darryl was finishing up the story, he made a mental note to call Martin after lunch about this mystery man.

Tuesday, November 12th
6:05 p.m.

Darryl ran his fingers over the new black granite countertop he and Jonathan had installed in their kitchen three weeks before. The granite still felt cold and slick to the touch, a feature that Darryl found quite endearing. The couple was actively looking for new appliances to match the new countertop.

Darryl had just arrived home, roughly ninety minutes before Jonathan. He cracked open a Miller Lite and stood against the 30-year old stove that was a week or two removed from the trip to the junk yard. Darryl and Jonathan lived at 34 Maple Drive, ten minutes away from PLH.

The couple had agreed to take a nice vacation to Aruba before using most of last year's bonus money on fixing up their home. They had the place re-roofed, windowed, and sided. Only recently had they set their sights on the interior. The wood floors were re-finished last month, a process that inspired one of the worst fights ever for the six-year old couple.

Jonathan hated the new color of the floors once the final stain had set into the wood and wanted to call the contractor with demands for a major fix. Darryl couldn't disagree more, mainly because he feared a long dragged out battle with the contractor but also because he had already tired of not being able to use the downstairs. The refinishing was into the third week.

The two didn't talk for 36 hours until Jonathan's mother got into the middle by suggesting some large area rugs to blend in the wood color. His mother never seemed to have an issue with Darryl, and his father was already dead by the time they met. Darryl's parents were another story, having only recently appearing more comfortable with their son's sexual state. Darryl's four brothers were only mildly less intolerant than his parents, though the prior Thanksgiving dinner at Darryl's parents' home was the warmest it had been in years. This was the first relationship that both Jonathan and Darryl announced to the world.

Darryl's cell phone began to ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey, I'm hopping on the train right now, but I wanted to tell you that this company you gave me, United Enterprises, doesn't exist...I mean there are several of businesses with that name but none of them acknowledged having an account with Metrobank, and, frankly, none of them seemed to be remotely successful enough to have that much cash sitting at Metrobank."

Darryl had called Metrobank on Monday, asking for a list of all PLH accounts and the account names. Darryl expected to be told that there was just one account for PLH at Metrobank, namely the account Peter used to pool all investor money.

But there were two accounts, and, when Metrobank faxed the list over, Darryl saw the name United Enterprises. That night, Jonathan agreed to do some legal searches on the name to see what came up.

“What the hell is going on?” Darryl shouted. “Should I talk to Peter about this?”
“No, we need to do some more digging,” Jonathan said, starting to fade out.
“Let’s talk when I get home. Love you.”
“Love you too.”

Darryl hung up and opened the refrigerator. He was the one to cook dinner every night and was thawing out some Cajun steaks. Jonathan tried to do most of the cooking on the weekends, yet both of them acknowledged that Darryl was much better in the kitchen. A honey - mustard dressing for the salad would be nice, thought Darryl.

The arm came around his neck as Darryl closed the refrigerator door and, before he could even try to pull away, a sharp object penetrated his neck.

“In a few seconds, you’ll be dead,” the voice whispered to Darryl. “Just relax.”
Darryl fell to the floor, dropping the plate of steaks, and leaving quite a surprise for his beloved Jonathan.

Tuesday, November 12th

7:40 p.m.

Jonathan closed the garage door and walked into the pantry area which served as a large coat closet with tiled flooring. Hanging up his coat, he placed his briefcase up onto the cedar shelf the couple had purchased the weekend they moved into the house two years ago. Jonathan didn't have any office work to do that evening but did pull out his United Enterprise folder from his briefcase.

"Darryl, hon, I'm home!" Jonathan yelled while opening the door to the main hallway of the home.

The television was off, which was strange because Darryl adored the evening news. There was no smell of dinner wafting from the kitchen, though the kitchen and front foyer lights were on.

Jonathan put the United Enterprises folder on the front foyer chest that belonged to Darryl's grandmother, and walked into the kitchen.

Jonathan's heart leapt against his chest as his eyes fell upon Darryl collapsed and dead on the wood floor. He swooped in for mouth to mouth for thirty seconds before realizing that he needed to call 911.

Fifteen minutes later, the EMT team whisked Darryl away, but Jonathan knew Darryl was dead. And all he could think about was the man that was following them last weekend. In Jonathan's eyes, his soul mate was murdered and someone was going to pay.

Police officer Will Roberts had arrived shortly before the ambulance. He was trying to calm Jonathan down.

"Jonathan, let's wait for the coroner's report because I didn't see any damage to the outside of Darryl's body; no gunshot wound, strangulation marks, nothing like that."

Jonathan's mother ran into the house and hugged her son. "I'm so sorry, sweetie," she sobbed. "What happened?"

Her son explained everything including his suspicions, just as he had told Officer Roberts.

Tuesday, November 12th

8:15 p.m.

Fropogil is a wonder drug, most commonly used in hospital settings for outpatient surgeries. A sedative, Fropogil will knock people out in seconds after injection, and even five minutes of sedation can make the recipient feel like they've had a full night's rest. This characteristic makes the drug highly addictive to students crashing for exams and medical interns on 48-hour shifts.

It also makes the perfect weapon for killing. A forty milligram injection will cause the heart to arrest within ten seconds. Also, with a half-life of less than ten minutes, coroners don't stand a chance to catch the drug during autopsy. Eduardo would have used it on Brad Dellan but he couldn't get his hands on the drug with such short notice from Julio. For Darryl Ludsten, though, Eduardo had plenty, and he'd spent the past few days observing Darryl and Jonathan.

He learned on Monday that Jonathan arrived home at least an hour after Darryl, so that was Eduardo's opportunity. Since the drug acted so quickly, there wasn't any need to do anything fancy or engage in a heated struggle. One clean shot to get the injection in – that's all Eduardo needed. He broke the lock on the basement sliding glass door and positioned himself in the house at 4:00 p.m. Once Darryl arrived two hours later, Eduardo listened for him to enter the kitchen from his position in the dining room. The refrigerator door was open long enough for Eduardo to move in from behind. It was remarkably easy.

Wednesday, November 13th

7:15 a.m.

Peter Hansen

“Hello?” Peter answered their home phone.

“Peter! It’s Judy!” his receptionist yelled into the phone. Judy opened the office each day at 7:00 a.m. “Darryl is dead!”

He slammed the cabinet above the phone portal so hard that Claire called from upstairs asking what the noise was. Wanting to call Martin right then and completely lay into the asshole, he tried to figure out how to make this short with Judy.

“Peter, you there?” Judy asked all panic like.

“What the hell happened?” he asked.

“They’re telling Jonathan that it was a heart attack.”

“Dammit to hell!” he exclaimed. “I’m coming in.”

He hung up the phone and leaned over because his stomach was starting to turn. How many people were going to die on account of his mistakes? He stood there hunched over in his kitchen for thirty seconds.

Martin was going to get an ear full, so he ran over to his office to grab his cell phone. He yelled to Claire and the kids to have a great day, hustled into the garage, and hopped into his car. Almost driving into the closed garage door, he hit the brakes at the last second.

“Martin, I am out, I am so out it’s not funny!” he screamed into the cell phone.

“Peter, what has happened?” Martin asked quickly. “Something has happened, what is it?”

“Don’t insult me, you ass!” he yelled again. “I want to hear you say it.”

Suddenly, he had this feeling that Martin didn’t know what the hell he was talking about, so he decided to take a different tack even before Martin could respond.

“You don’t know, do you?” he asked sinisterly. “Julio did this without consulting the great Martin!”

“Peter, please tell me what has happened,” said remarkably calmly.

He paused, wanting this jerk to feel left out in the cold, to feel the calculating whims of their favorite drug lord. Julio killed for fun, plain and simple. He really could not have actually believed that Darryl was a threat to their operation. Julio was smarter than that, so why kill him?

“Julio had Darryl killed last night,” he finally revealed for Martin.

“What!” Martin yelled for the first time in his presence, on the phone or in person.

“That’s right, your lunatic employer has outdone himself this time.”

Martin didn’t say anything for fifteen seconds and Peter wondered if he was thrashing himself or something.

“Peter, I gotta call you back.”

As they hung up, he realized that somebody wouldn’t have to do much digging to make a connection between Brad Dellan and Darryl. That Peter was the connection was

something that he planned to take to his grave. Now it was sitting there out in the open for some detective to start asking some tough questions.

Wednesday, November 13th
7:20 a.m.

“Julio, it’s Martin, just when were you going to tell me about your change in plans for Peter’s assistant?”

The drug lord sighed into the phone. “Martin, my boy, this was one of those things that was best delivered without your glorious handiwork, believe it or not.”

“I cannot believe you did this,” Martin stated.

Julio replied, “You gave me your advice, I considered it, and it happened that I chose a different path, that’s all.”

Martin got up from his chair and started to pace the room. This was big though he wasn’t sure that Julio realized it. Or he simply didn’t care. Martin and Julio had their disagreements but nothing quite like this. Connecting the dots between Brad Dellan and Peter’s assistant wouldn’t be too hard if someone were pointed in the right direction.

“It won’t matter if you waited a month or two, someone will clue into the two deaths and trace it all back to your favorite money laundering center,” Martin declared.

“And if I didn’t take care of Darryl Ludsten, I like the odds that he starts sniffing around based on what Brad Dellan told him,” Julio replied. “And that would hurt worse.”

Julio had already heard Martin’s reply to that worry a few days ago, that they had all of the business lines tapped. Of course, tapping the guy’s home line as well as checking his cell phone every day was all part of the package.

“You know we could easily have tracked all means of Darryl’s communication to anybody, and I also know we cannot control the communication of the first detective to make the not so hard connection between what happened to the fiancé of a PLH client and a PLH employee.”

Julio yelled to somebody in his house. “And I know that you’re easily replaceable, Martin. I’ve never asked you to do any dirty work, clean up after an icing, count some dirty drug money...”

Martin had successfully irritated Julio - he suddenly felt foolish, if not outright insane.

“Okay, Okay, have it your way,” Martin interrupted as politely as he could.

“Good boy, now hang up the phone and make me some more money.”

Wednesday, November 13th

7:35 a.m.

Peter Hansen

Judy ran up to Peter as soon as he walked through the door to the lobby.

“Peter, can you believe this?” she cried. “For the love of God, he was only 29!”

He knew of professional athletes that died of heart attacks, but this whole thing had to be looked upon as a very strange occurrence.

“So, what else did the coroner say?” he asked Judy.

“Nothing else other than that the heart was very stressed for his age.”

He couldn't think of how Julio pulled this off, and been trying to mentally grasp that killing method since hanging up from his conversation with Martin. Martin was no help, so that had him quite nervous. Martin was his steady contact with Julio, so if Julio went with someone else, maybe that person would like a money laundering center somewhere else, not with PLH. That meant bad news for the safety of the Hansen family.

He closed his eyes to try to stop his mind from racing so much and didn't think Judy even noticed. The three of them at PLH were a tight team, their lives wide open at all levels – his time with Julio notwithstanding – but this could tear them apart. How was Judy going to behave over the next few weeks? Months? By trying to save PLH, he actually ended up destroying a big part of his firm.

They were going to miss Darryl's laugh, it sounded like Ed McMahon's. Darryl also made a mean cheesecake.

“Jonathan was beside himself when he called me this morning,” Judy told him.

“He'd been up all night.”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “Can you let him know that if he needs anything, we're happy to help?”

Martin might not even have had a job after his talk with Julio, and that was something Peter had to be prepared for. He had so little control over anything at that moment that he felt numb to the curtain that was being lifted, showing the world what evil Peter Hansen had unleashed.

He began to walk down the hallway to his office when Jonathan entered the lobby. He charged right up to Peter with an index finger angrily extended. Jonathan looked like crap, with hair that showed like it had spent five days camping in the Adirondacks and clothes that should have been removed twelve hours prior.

“Darryl told you about that guy following us last Saturday, right?” Jonathan blurted.

Peter looked over at Judy who was clearly perplexed by the question and was shifting in her desk chair.

“Yes, he did,” Peter replied. “Have you seen him since?”

Knowing that Jonathan hadn't, he simply was trying to defuse Jonathan's anger.

“No...we've not...and the cops think I'm crazy.”

He gave Jonathan his best puzzled facial look and took a small step back.

“You talked to the cops?” he asked.

“Well, they keep telling me that this has been ruled a heart attack and that there’s no sign of foul play....”

“But you don’t believe them,” he interrupted.

Jonathan scratched his head. “I don’t know...I’m sure the coroner would have found something if there was foul play...it’s just so strange that we start digging up information on United Enterprises, and he goes and dies on me.”

Peter couldn’t believe what he was hearing and the numbness feeling that he had earlier gave way to stomach knots.

“United Enterprises?” he asked, forcing a smile onto his face and trying to act as cool as possible. “They’re a client of this firm. I can tell you all about them, except what’s confidential, of course.”

Jonathan looked at him, taking a deep breath. With his shoulders slumped, he suddenly appeared more like a freshman debate student getting stumped for the first time than somebody hot on the trail of a major scandal.

“No, that’s okay, this is all so crazy...I don’t mean to be accusatory to you...I mean it’s not like you had anything to do with Darryl having a heart attack.”

Peter’s puzzled face was back, maybe a little too strong. “No, I’d say not!”

Jonathan shook both his and Judy’s hands and started walking to the lobby door. “I won’t waste any more of your day...”

“If there’s anything we can do....let us know, all right?” he affirmed.

Jonathan looked back at them, flashed a weak smile, and exited the lobby.

“What was all that about?” he asked Judy.

“I don’t know...I’ve heard that grief can bring about some strange thoughts and emotions in people,” Judy replied. “But why was Darryl digging into United Enterprises?”

Shaking his head, Peter laughed through his nose. “That’s nuts. United has an account with Metrobank that I manage, have for years...he may have been surprised that United is not in the general pool of funds, but all he had to do was to ask me.”

Judy began talking to a UPS delivery guy who had entered the lobby.

Peter walked down the hall to his office and closed the door behind him.

Collapsing into his desk chair, he put his head down on the desk. He wasn’t sure if he was going to hurl, but it felt touch and go.

What the hell was he going to do now? He didn’t want to bother Martin again, as he obviously had some issues to clear up with his drug lord boss. Yet, Peter would need to make sure they set up some non-traceable tracks for United Enterprises by establishing a legitimate business front. This was not the last question he would hear about this client. As things stood right then, their dummy United Enterprises account had a business origin of Sweden, but that might not have been so believable to a probing detective. He needed to get Martin to change that to a U.S location.

One crazily important question Jonathan did not ask was about Brad Dellan. Peter had to assume that Darryl told Jonathan about the lawyer of a PLH client getting killed in an accident, so why hadn’t Jonathan made that connection? This would only be a matter

of time, though the facts kind of spoke for themselves – both deaths showed no signs of criminal activity – and Peter had Julio’s clever assassin to thank for that.

It didn’t surprise Peter that there was a drug out there that could spark a heart attack and, at the same time, become untraceable in the body. For all he knew, it was Julio’s home brew, concocted and chemicalized in his own operation. For over a year now, he had wondered - even lost sleep - over the scale of Julio’s operation. Just how big was his cartel in the world of cartels?

One of his phone lines began to ring. It was his wife. She probably heard about Darryl’s death from the Morristown gossip hotline.

“Hey hon, what’s new at the house?” he asked.

“Sweetie, I heard about Darryl,” she said, probably wondering why he had time to think about ongoings at their house.

“It’s terrible, complete shock...what 29 year-old gets a heart attack?”

“Judy must be beside herself, poor thing!” Claire said. “And what’s with your bad luck string? I mean, two people associated with your firm end up dead in less than a week. Is somebody out to get you or something?”

His whole family knew about Brad Dellan, so Claire’s question was hardly guesswork. Charlie loved the fact that Ashley Wells was single again, and, like most kids his age, found the facts around Brad’s death to be rather comical.

“No, it’s nothing that I’m aware of...but I feel so bad for Jonathan,” he replied, getting up for a stretch. “You should make him one of your casseroles, and get the church group involved. Darryl always said what a lousy cook Jonathan was.”

Claire was silent for a few seconds. “Hey, some guy from the power company was just here to check the meter. Don’t they check the meters on the first of the month?”

“Yeah, I suppose...all right, let me go back to work.”

“Okay, love you sweetie.”

Sitting back down in his seat, he thought of all the ways Julio was going to amp up the watching and listening of the ongoings around Peter Hansen. What had been security related to ‘pants on fire’ was likely to quickly morph into outright surveillance. Julio had to know that Peter would be royally pissed at the killing of Darryl. This was as personal as Julio had gotten. Peter didn’t know the Linders, and only partly knew and didn’t like Brad Dellan. But Darryl was a good friend.

So, while he didn’t expect Julio to steal a power company truck, uniforms and masquerade as a meter reader in order to hook up some new monitoring system for his house, he did expect full audio and possibly video of 95% of his actions. Or maybe Julio did steal a power company truck.

Wednesday, November 13th

11:30 a.m.

Peter Hansen

Nick Johnson pulled into the covered garage connected to their building. Peter wanted to meet in person because he didn't really trust any other form of communication. His work lines were tapped, and who knew if the Cartel had a way to intercept his cell phones and e-mail? He had one cell phone that he rarely used and didn't think anybody knew about, so that was the phone he used to ask Nick to meet him at 11:30 a.m. But even then, it was a quick call with no names acknowledged, kind of like, "Hey it's me. Can we meet at 11:30 in the garage?"

Peter got this cell phone a few months after he first met Julio, for the sole intention of owning a communication device that could be kept a secret. He never left it lying around in the office or at home, and probably had only used it five or six times.

Judy had gone for lunch already, something she did a few times a month usually with Darryl. He didn't expect her back until 1:00 p.m. Though he tried to take the three of them out to lunch once a month if not more, it had been over six weeks.

This morning, he couldn't leave Judy all alone down the hallway, so from 8:30 on, he sat in Darryl's spot. They talked about their favorite memories of him, of the holiday parties he organized for just the three of them during office hours, of the disaster of a car Darryl owned up until last year, and of his fanciful clothing. They both knew Peter would have to hire a replacement for Darryl, but he really was in no hurry.

There were maybe fifteen cars in the two story garage. Peter never used it, except on snowy days, something Claire hated because she claimed he would stay healthier if he kept out of the foul weather.

"Peter, what's up?" Nick asked while stepping out of the car. He was dressed casually in a brown leather jacket and tan slacks. The man watching Peter was on the other side of the building and couldn't see into the garage, only the entrance. Peter trusted that Martin's guy wouldn't recognize Nick, unless Martin had given him a picture with the instructions to be on the lookout for a visit to Peter's office by Mr. Johnson. That wasn't real likely.

"Okay, January 16th is your date, if you choose to go ahead with your plan," Peter said, looking around to make sure no one else was listening.

Nick looked puzzled. "Why that date?"

He couldn't be honest with Nick here so he made up something believable from his standpoint.

"Because there's a big Cartel meeting in New York on the 16th, so there will be way less attention on you."

Nick nodded his head. "All right, I was thinking hard about the middle of January, so that date is as good as any, I suppose."

Peter's heart was beating at a coronary pace. He never liked lying, but this was the rare occasion where it was clearly in Nick's best interest.

“How are Susan and Tom?”

“They’re good, don’t suspect a thing,” Nick said. “I can’t believe what Oleg is forcing me to do.”

He put his hand on Nick’s shoulder. “It is the best option for you in the long run.”

It definitely took balls to try and pull something like faking your death to fool a Mexican drug cartel. Peter couldn’t imagine how many sleepless nights Nick Johnson had experienced since Oleg forced his way into Nick’s life. For God’s sake, Peter knew he had his share.

The sad thing was that Nick didn’t understand who he was dealing with. He was thinking far too rationally, that if he could fool the cartel into thinking he was dead, the cartel would leave his family alone. But Peter could easily envision Julio killing Susan and Tom just in case they knew something dangerous to Julio’s operation.

Nick smiled weakly and looked down at the garage floor. The man had such limited options at this point that all Peter could do was to act like he stood a chance.

“What are you doing for lunch?” Peter asked.

Saturday, December 7th

5:45 p.m.

Nick Johnson

The Johnson holiday party ran from 5:30-7:00 and people spent 20-25 minutes at the party on average. They knew of four other parties happening at the same time, so they were impressed each year that a good 60-70 people rotated through over ninety minutes. Most people didn't want to talk with Nick for more than three minutes anyway.

He'd been in a lousy mood all week because there had been no sign of Oleg and his thug partner. Having crafted his story and gotten it down pat, it was time to sell it to the criminal network. His success in convincing them that there was a competitor out there would play a big role on how he could move forward. If they were only partly convinced, or worse, didn't believe him at all, that could prove to be disastrous.

William called him at work last week, basically affirming his decisions to date.

"You know, the more I think about it, there's no way to move six people in four different homes in the middle of the night," William told him.

The logistics alone would be crazy hard to figure out but, more importantly, Nick knew the group couldn't keep it quiet. Oleg was able to find him to start this whole thing, so he had to assume the cartel had eyes and ears everywhere. And if Oleg was watching their house the night they left, that could turn ugly in a hurry.

He knew it was not helpful to his plan going forward, yet it was simply killing him that he didn't have a clue how Oleg found him. He had lunch with David Clark last week and got a zero read on the conspiracy theory. Frankly, he didn't see how anybody on the committee would benefit any more by setting him up than they could benefit on their own. They all had inside information. If they wanted to set up some financial game to benefit from that, they could just as well do that without involving him.

Oleg probably had other doctor targets - it made sense. Distal alone had four other clinical drug trials going on right then so there must have been at least 40 trials happening across the nation. Oleg and his thug buddy were likely putting their murderous squeeze on a few doctors in the NY metro area. Why stop with Nick Johnson, after all?

Everyone at the Johnson holiday party was in, or around, the kitchen. Nick sauntered in and saw Melanie, his nurse, talking with Susan. Melanie's husband, Tim, was here. Tim was always good for a few stock picks, never telling Nick if his hedge fund bosses were doing the same thing, but Nick had a strong inkling they were. That was cool.

"Hey, bud, nice party...you two pull out the stops every year."

He spun to see David Clark. He didn't let the Clarks in but they could have slipped by while he was in the living room. The Clarks came every year.

"I thought you were going down to Miami Beach for the weekend?"

"Nah, Toni has been raising a real stink about that purchase lately, so I've it rented from Thanksgiving through the New Year."

The life of the rich and famous Nick would never understand. They were sending Tom on a ski trip with a group of his buddies and two sets of parents the week between Christmas and the New Year, so he would represent the Johnsons to the rich and famous at the ski slopes.

“That’s too bad, you’ve told me how sweet it is,” Nick said.

David snorted. “I don’t know...we got a steal on that condo. Maybe it’s the bikini babes on the beach she doesn’t like.”

“So, I guess the beachside Villa in the south of France is out,” he remarked. They both smirked at the thought of that location.

“Hey, Andy wanted to know if Tom made all-state,” David asked.

Nick acted like it was a reasonable question, though he wondered why David’s son didn’t read the local sports pages.

“Well, we were hoping that Tom would get third team all state, but we had to settle for honorable mention.”

Morristown lost 2-1 to Westfield High in the first round game of the state tournament, during which Tom got elbowed in the head on a corner kick and lost track of the ball which was headed in for the go ahead goal. Tom needed four stitches in the top of his scalp.

“Honey, can you get some more white wine?” Susan yelled through the conversation cloud hovering in their kitchen. “Tom must’ve run off somewhere!”

Tom was in charge of keeping their two ice buckets full as well as the white wine and beer trays stocked with bottles. They were keeping the alcohol and ice on the back porch given the 27 degree temperature outside. Nick looked around - he didn’t see any sign of their son, either.

He was also serving vodka and scotch but no one seemed to have touched it. The bottles and glasses were sitting on another table, so maybe people thought it was not part of the offering. He slid the table next to the counter where the beer and white wine sat with the ice buckets.

“Do you want any help with that?” David asked.

“No thanks. I just need to step out to the back porch.”

David walked over to Toni and whispered something in her right ear, probably telling her that it was time to go. The Clarks didn’t really know any of their friends, so Nick was glad they came.

He looked over at the two ice buckets. One of them was empty. Tom must have been in the bathroom, on the phone, or both.

Jill and Dick Tesser were talking inside their back entry way with a couple that he didn’t know. He gave Dick a gentle pat on the back. Susan had heard they were trying to work things out; they seemed to be having a good time. He slid between them to get to the back porch. The pile of ice bags looked kind of trashy but no one was coming or going through this door.

“Hello, Dr. Johnson,” the voice said as he bent down to pick up one of the ice bags.

Nick knew that voice - it made him swallow so hard it hurt. It was Oleg; he slowly turned around. Oleg came out of the dark and walked up to him, seemingly alone, although Nick could only see about ten feet in front of him.

He'd been rehearsing what to say to Oleg when they met next, and, since he didn't know when Oleg would pop out at him, he practiced his delivery every day, thinking that could be the day. So be ready.

"What are you doing? You stopped by here last night and talked to my wife," he said accusingly, waving his finger at Oleg.

Except he didn't mean to say it like that - he meant to say that he talked with some guy who threatened him like Oleg did; that he saw this person, not Susan. Dammit! He waited to see what Oleg said next before saying anything else.

"Now, calm down, Dr. Johnson," he said firmly.

Oleg certainly had a puzzled look on his face but that didn't stop him from reaching into his coat like he was going to pull out a weapon of his liking.

This was the second good look Nick had gotten of this jerk. Oleg had dark, slicked back hair and stood about Nick's height. He looked to be in his mid 30' with an angular face that culminated with a pointy chin. There was nothing distinctive about his eyes - it was too dark to see their color. His black pants struggled to stand out from his dark polo type jacket.

"I didn't stop by here last night," Oleg replied. "And if you do as we've told you, I'll never talk with your wife." His hand pulled out from his coat with nothing in it.

Oleg had a noticeable gap between his top front teeth.

Nick thought for a second. He just told Oleg that Susan talked with this person and not him, so he needed to get Oleg thinking that this person was planning to lay the same threat on him as Oleg was.

"Well, somebody with a European accent came here last night asking for me," he said. "But I promise that I'll turn everything I know about the Zyptorin trial over to you guys."

Oleg took a step closer. "Is that all they said?"

"No, he told my wife that it concerned the Zyptorin trial, and I just assumed it was you."

Turning around, Oleg yelled into the dark and, suddenly, his thug partner with the pony tail emerged. Oleg asked this guy a question in Czech, which produced an argument. They argued for maybe twenty seconds during which his partner raised his arms in frustration as they yelled.

The partner outweighed Oleg by fifty or so pounds but gave up four or five inches in height. He was wearing a white turtleneck and blue jeans. Oleg was clearly the one in charge, though a physical bout between these two men would appear to present quite a challenge for the leader of these dangerous men.

"Dr. Johnson, we know who these guys are and we'll take care of it."

Nick walked up to the two of them and asked the most important question: "Are these guys in competition with you?"

Oleg laughed awkwardly. “When they talk to you, just tell them you’ll do as they say.”

He turned back to his thug partner - they started arguing again.

Nick needed to sell this and, despite his verbal screw up, it sure seemed that he had done just that. Oleg could have assumed that this unknown European guy was no threat to his plans, that maybe he was simply a Zyptorin committee member like him. If Oleg thought that, then he wouldn’t believe the crime scene that Nick intended to create. He would think Nick faked it.

Nick got lucky and he knew it. If he had said, liked he had rehearsed, that this European guy talked with him and not Susan, then he could say that this guy threatened him. Yet, since he slipped by saying that this guy talked with Susan, there could be no mention of a threat so Oleg might have thought nothing of it.

But, amazingly, Nick had touched a nerve here like he had hoped, as Oleg now thought that somebody was trying to move in on his turf. Even better, he had a good idea who that somebody was.

“Hey, I need to get back to the party,” Nick said firmly to them with a sudden burst of confidence.

Oleg looked at him. “Go back inside, Dr. Johnson. We’ll be in touch soon.”

It occurred to Nick, as he picked up an ice bag and some wine, that someone at the party could have heard them talking, especially since Oleg was arguing pretty loudly with his thug partner. He walked into the house and looked at the crowd to see if anybody was staring at him.

“What were you doing out there? Staring at the moon?” Susan asked. She rushed up to him, taking the ice bag while he put the wine on the counter next to the beer. The beer supply appeared to be okay.

“Har har,” he responded, hoping to God that she didn’t press any further because he couldn’t think of an excuse.

Thankfully, Sarah Robinson, the neighbor directly behind them, started to talk with Susan; Sarah’s husband, Henry, died six months ago - Susan had been a great friend to Sarah.

Tom emerged from the back staircase that led up to the bedrooms over their garage.

“Hey, bud, we’ve been looking for you,” Nick told his son.

Tom held out his hands to explain. “Sorry, Dad. I had to make one phone call – I’ve been gone maybe five minutes,” he pleaded. “I’m back on duty for the rest of the night.”

Susan walked up to him, gave him a kiss, and handed Tom the ice bag. Tom emptied the ice bag into the buckets while Susan started talking again to Sarah Robinson.

Nick was able to walk downstairs to the basement unnoticed. Collapsing into the leather sofa, why had his much rehearsed talk with Oleg gotten so messed up? He leaned back, cocked his head over the top of the sofa, and recalled the moment where Oleg made him spin around from the ice bags with as much finger pointing fury as he could muster. At that moment, emotion took over. All that his insides wanted him to do was to yell at

Oleg; his rehearsed talk was to say that he talked with a new guy threatening him, but he couldn't yell at Oleg for that, so, instead, he accused him of talking to his wife and it felt great to yell at this guy. For just a second, he had control - him, not that murdering son of a bitch.

Of course, his new story made it less clear if this guy with whom Susan talked was indeed another threat to him over this damn drug trial. This wasn't a smart move, but he didn't account for the emotional angle. Oh, how his family lucked out on this one.

Nick sat up in the couch, tuning into the chatter upstairs. He had to get back up there and put on a smile - he had missed 10-15 minutes of the party - though he needed to come downstairs to think while the Oleg moment was still fresh. It was his first big mistake, but, oddly, it may have played in his favor. Bottom line: he needed to learn to be cold like Oleg going forward, no more room for emotional outbursts.

What was Oleg doing there? The cartel man couldn't have been planning on talking with him. How would Oleg know he would step out for the ice bag, especially since Oleg must have noticed Tom taking care of the ice and wine all night? Oleg and his thug partner must not have been watching their house last night or they would know that Nick's story was crap. He got way lucky on that account as well. It sure would have been nice if those two guys operated on a consistent schedule, since their ad hoc watching of his house put his ability to pull off his plan at risk.

Nick assumed that he was going to hear from Fred by the morning as Oleg seemed pretty rattled and news of what he had told the Czechs was sure to travel up the ranks. Hopefully, he had sent them all scrambling to find this 'other guy' that talked to his wife. Maybe now he had some leverage... he had to admit, it was starting to feel good. Really good.

He walked up the basement stairs and spotted a tuft of Zeke's fur in the carpet.

Sarah Robinson was at the top of the stairs talking with Laurie Arbor, their next door neighbors to the west.

"Well, hello, you two," Nick said as cheerfully as he could. "Mrs. Robinson, it is good to see you enjoying your holiday season."

That didn't come out quite right, given that this was the first holiday season without her husband Dale. Sarah didn't seem to mind, though.

"I'm getting by," Sarah said. "I have all three boys home for Christmas; three spouses and seven grandkids."

He clapped his hands together. "That is wonderful to hear."

Susan touched his arm. "Nick, dear, Father Michael just arrived...he's asking for you."

He scanned the kitchen but didn't see the priest. Susan had met Father Michael a few times in recent years. She probably thought Nick invited him because they were squash buddies.

Stanley's laughter rang out from the hallway, so Nick investigated and found Father Michael talking with Stanley. He always found it odd how these two got along that well. Stanley had been so critical of the Catholic Church for as long as Nick had known him. He knew that Father Michael had a very thick skin, however.

“Well, look who the cat dragged in?” he said, trying to be warm and funny. “It’s good to see you Father Michael.”

“Hey, Nick. Good turnout tonight,” Stanley inserted.

Stanley was wearing a red cardigan sweater and looked to be drinking eggnog, a last minute call by Susan. She had Nick prepare it. He believed Stanley was the only one drinking the stuff tonight. Perhaps he should’ve told his brother in law that there was no alcohol in it.

“Nick, your brother in law was just telling me about your son’s soccer accomplishments this fall,” Father Michael said.

“Well the whole team beat expectations this season, but, yes, we’re quite proud of Tom.”

Looking intently at Nick, Father Michael threw his head toward the living room, his eyes quite large at the moment. Stanley was usually quite good at catching people making gestures around him, thinking that, since he was blind, he was oblivious to gaps in conversations and awkward silences. But he didn’t seem fazed here - Nick breathed a sigh of relief. Stanley could raise a bit of a fuss when he caught folks doing this.

“Uh, Stanley? Will you please excuse us? I gotta talk with Father Michael about something.”

Stanley was smiling as he walked into the kitchen. He knew their house so well that he didn’t need help except on the stairs.

Father Michael and Nick walked into the living room. No one was there. It seemed there were about 25 people left in the house, spread between the kitchen and family room. Most of them were Susan’s friends that he didn’t know real well, and, not including neighbors, there were only a handful of couples here tonight that were decent friends with both Susan and Nick. As they got older, Susan and Nick had found that they needed to work hard at keeping the couple friendships strong.

“Okay, look. If you’re gonna do this, you’re gonna need to get your ducks in row,” Father Michael whispered loudly to him.

Nick didn’t recall telling Father Michael about his plan. “I’m sorry, what exactly are we talking about?”

A nervous laugh left his mouth as he asked his priest friend this question. Father Michael moved in a little closer and looked around the empty room.

“William called me and told me about your plan,” he said. “Since I asked William to help you, he felt like he had to keep me posted with the latest details.”

“That’s okay, I know you guys will keep it quiet.”

Father Michael looked like he had a lot more to say. “Are these guys watching you all of the time?”

Nick thought for a second and decided not to tell him about the Czechs being at his house that very night because it would have freaked the priest out too much.

“Umm...not every night.”

William started whispering such that Nick needed to strain to hear him as the furnace had just kicked on, mixing with the noise of the party’s conversations in the other rooms of the house.

“You need to create your death scene at your office,” he said. “You have a lot more control there.”

Nick folded his arms. “Go on.”

“Well, what if they’re watching you that day and follow you to the office?” Father Michael cocked his head at an angle, knowing this was a hard one.

‘Man, he’s putting some thought into this – maybe even a few steps ahead - which could be handy’, Nick thought to himself.

“I hadn’t thought about that,” he told Father Michael in a normal voice. “They don’t consistently watch me, but I should plan on them watching me on that day.”

“You could park your car in the Red Robin lot across the street.”

Red Robin was a burger place that opened up last year. They seemed to be always busy during the weeknights and his car would be lost for a while in that lot.

He wondered why Father Michael was focusing on the parking situation. Where were the questions about pulling off a crime scene that pointed to the obvious conclusion that he’d been drug away either dead or barely alive? That was the hard sell here.

“What? I run across the street and hope that they don’t see me?”

“I need to think more about this.”

Nick didn’t know what had surprised him more this night: Oleg’s visit or Father Michael’s ‘how to fake your death’ game planning.

“I don’t know if they’ve ever followed me to the office.”

“That might be something that you want to figure out.”

Nick told Father Michael that he needed to mingle more and headed back into the kitchen. He definitely needed more planning on making sure Oleg didn’t see him getting away from the crime scene.

‘Wait a minute! Our parking garage – you can’t get into it without an ID’, he thought to himself.

The Czechs would have to watch every car coming out of that garage to keep tabs with him throughout the day, or they could walk into the garage and look for his car, but they’d have to be pretty suspicious to do that.

The medical building he was in was designed in a circle format, a kind of hub and spoke layout of the offices. He shared the building with two Urologists, three Radiologists and two Orthopedic surgeons who were on the second floor.

His office took up 1,290 square feet, enough for a small waiting room, patient check in space, two exam rooms, his office and a lunch/break area for the staff. Patients walked in from the center lobby of the building and checked in with Mary; you made a right turn down the hallway for the exam rooms, his office and the break room.

At the end of this hallway was the staff entrance, though all of the staff, including Nick, entered from the lobby of the building. The staff entrance required two keys to get in from the outside - they all just thought it easier to go through the lobby. The staff door faced Wilton Avenue and the Red Robin, leading away from the outdoor lot of the medical building. In daylight, someone sitting in the parking lot could see a person leaving through the staff door, but it would be difficult to get a good look at night, at least

that was what he hoped. There was an outdoor light above the staff door that he would have to disable. The outdoor lot was also rather treed which obstructed some views.

He was not quite sure why they had a two floored parking lot, given the decent size of the outdoor lot. There were no security cameras around the premises, but the landlord had thought about upgrading to cameras two years ago, and he didn't know what happened with those plans. Nick had ruled out the junkyard, fake car wreck plan owing partly to the likelihood of security cameras at the junkyard.

The landlord's management company was responsible for opening the building at 7:30am and locking the lobby entrance at 5:30pm. The main lobby doors were alarmed but they'd been told specifically that the staff doors were not alarmed. That was kinda strange. His office had a 'last one out locks the office door' policy – they never had a problem.

At 7 p.m. the party ended and Nick spent a good forty five minutes helping to clean up the downstairs. Upon finishing that task, he went into his office where his laptop was sitting on the desk. Nick pulled up the file called Oleg and started erasing it. The latest edition to the file was a death faking/disappearance check list:

- Blood and skin samples
- Hair follicles
- Latex gloves
- Cash
- Cell Phone
- Destination
- Transportation

It was hardly a complete list, yet it was going to have to go into his head and stay there. The more he thought about everything, the more he was convinced that Oleg had been in his house and would return. Why wouldn't he? Nick was surprised the Czechs hadn't taken the laptop already, but they could just as easily have zipped all of his files onto another device. He didn't think this had happened because they clearly would have seen that he was planning something. Oleg and his thug partner would have gone ballistic on him if that were the case.

Nick woke up in a cold sweat a few weeks ago over his life insurance, since he had \$1.5 million under him and he'd be committing insurance fraud if it paid out. Of course, the insurance would only pay out upon a declared death. Would the police ever declare a death without a body? Susan wouldn't need the money, especially since Joan had insisted on paying for Tom's college. Still, the whole thought of it was bothering him.

Saturday, December 7th

6:20 p.m.

Oleg Yashkov

Karel and Oleg were standing in the shadows, on the gravel of the Johnsons' one car parking area off to the side of their driveway. Dr. Johnson was back in his house, clearly confused over what was happening. It was quite the party the Johnsons were holding tonight, though they didn't live as well as the Linders lived. Oleg would have loved to have the chance to see the Linders host a party. The Linder house was easily 1,000 square feet larger than this house, so it was the largest suburban house he had ever visited and easily the largest they had ever killed people in. Their previous killing, nine months ago, took place in a 30 story office building in Miami. That was a challenge. They caught the bastard in the elevator shaft between the 23rd and 24th floors.

That bastard was Bruce Lick and it brought an end to a crazy assignment the Viola family asked them to do. In 2001, Julio Viola asked them to babysit Bruce and Jim Lick of Miami Beach who owned a south Florida real estate company that had bought a piece of beachfront land along Miami Beach in 2000.

They always took orders from Julio Viola directly, which they found to be weird given that Julio was way too high up in the organization to be dealing with two security monkeys like themselves. Plus, the guy had a funny nasal whistle that made it very hard not to laugh when talking with him, though laughing at this guy could easily get that person shot in the head.

As was told to them by Julio, the brothers planned to build a luxury condo building but needed a bank to help with the money. This was how the Viola family bank got involved, but how the Lick brothers got to know of the Viola family, he and Karel never heard. Drugs had to be part of the deal because the Licks partied on their yacht several times a week, bringing in flame throwing dancers, stilt walkers, and women for all of the men.

Once they started following the Licks around Miami Beach, it was clear to them that they had no clue who they were in bed with. When Oleg and Karel got there, the condo was about halfway done. The model unit they saw was amazing because all you saw was ocean when you walked in. Wall to wall glass, black marble floors and a balcony that wrapped around each corner of the building. All for a nifty price of \$3.8 million for each unit.

They had spent enough time in the Viola compound to know quality when they saw it, and this condo was quality. Of course, no drug lord in his right mind would base his compound right on the ocean.

About a month into their assignment, Oleg and Karel heard that the Lick Brothers had found a different bank to pay for the condo. They quickly got notice from the Viola family to take the Licks out. Bruce and Jim must have gotten advance warning that the Cartel was coming after them because they were already trying to escape when Oleg and

Karel attacked. Though they did end up finding Bruce and shooting him in the head a few times, his brother Jim got away.

It was colder out here than Oleg had planned due to the wind. Johnson son, Tom, had been coming out for more ice and wine. He seemed like a happy kid – it was gonna be too bad.

After their very unexpected meeting with Nick Johnson, Oleg needed to make a phone call.

“Go start the car – I’m going to give Mihail a ring.”

Karel ran off to get the car started. Oleg took his glove off to find his cell phone inside his jacket.

Mihail was their cleaner. He was not a cleaner in the traditional crime scene sense – he didn’t specialize in the removal of murdered bodies and the general mess left at a crime scene – he cleaned their mess, before the cops arrived. Specifically, he was excellent at removing any traces of them at a crime scene like hair, blood and clothing fibers mainly, some fingerprint removal if they were careless. At the Linder’s house, Karel got bloodied by the bullet and there was plenty of him lying on the kitchen floor as well as on the body of the security guy the Linders had hired. Mihail blamed Oleg and Karel for a messy job and general lack of preparedness because he expected them to know about the security guy.

They knew Mihail from the Lick Brother job in Miami Beach. That was how Fred ended up hiring him. Mihail must have thought he was allowed to complain about them all he damn well wanted. Still, Oleg was surprised that Fred never told them of Mihail’s complaints. Or, more important, warned them to improve their act. When their fee cleared through the bank, though, Oleg knew Fred was still cool with them. Their call to him shortly thereafter about another target, Dr. Nick Johnson, certainly didn’t hurt their standing.

Oleg dialed Mihail and was told by the wireless carrier that the number had been disconnected, which was not too surprising given that they were handed new cell phones every two weeks. He just thought he had the latest number. He looked up Fred’s number – he knew Fred didn’t keep changing his cell phone number.

“Hey, Fred, we need to talk,” he told his boss. “We just spoke with Nick Johnson and he told us about somebody trying to threaten him the way we’ve been doing.”

He heard a loud sigh. “Oleg, why are you bothering me with this?” Fred finally asked. “You’re perfectly able to handle a possible competitor. Find out who it is and eliminate them.”

The way Fred sounded completely annoyed by this conversation made him reasonably sure that Mihail had gone behind Fred’s back as well.

“And let me remind you, Oleg, that our network has deep pockets,” Fred continued. “Any competing network would have to find a similar cash source to fund the effort.”

“I think Mihail is behind all of this,” Oleg asserted.

“The cleaner? That guy can barely tie his own shoes!”

“Okay, Fred, we’ll talk later.” He couldn’t ask Fred for Mihail’s number given Fred’s lousy attitude. Plus, Oleg didn’t want to come off too weak.

They were back to square one and it felt like crap. Oleg glanced over to Karel who was sitting in the car. He looked pissed, but he’d better not be pissed at him. What Oleg really wanted to do at that moment was to barge into that fancy holiday party at the Johnson house and have a little talk with Susan. Scare a few folks...get a description of the guy she spoke with. One problem with that: he was pretty sure Nick had not told his wife about him and they learned their lesson with the Linders - don’t get the wife involved, they only confuse the situation.

Sunday, December 15th
Miami Beach, Florida

Jim Lick's cell phone buzzed just after teeing off on the 8th hole at the Miami Beach Dunes Club.

"Jim, it's Mihail, I used to work with your brother," Mihail blurted.

A long agonizing pause followed as Jim worked his brain and Mihail grew even more uncertain that his plan could get off the ground.

"Uh, vaguely, Mihail... where are you calling from?"

"What if I told you that Oleg and Karel are in New Jersey working a scam?"

"I'd say keep talking," Jim said, putting his 3 wood back in his bag.

Jim Lick took a deep breath, and could almost feel his connection with this Mihail guy blossom right then over the bad wireless connection.

"Well, I hear you're now in Boca, building Condos," Mihail asserted.

Jim coughed. "That's right, an outfit from Moscow is financing me this time around, and the Violas won't come after me with these Russians protecting me. Now you say that those assholes are in New Jersey?"

Jim and Bruce Lick were sitting in their conference room of their corporate headquarters in June, 2000, when they received a phone call from a woman friend telling them to get out of the building immediately. The Violas had ordered a hit and the attackers were on their way.

Jim and Bruce agreed to split up, with Bruce heading to the west wing of the building and Jim racing over to the east wing. As fate would have it, Karel and Oleg entered through the west wing of the building. Jim thought he heard faint gun shots behind him as he ran out of the servicing entrance. He hung out in Costa Rica until he was able to make contact with his Russian sponsors, who required Jim to give up 90% of the equity in the luxury condos they planned to build in Boca Raton, Florida.

"They're threatening doctors to give them inside information on drug trials that these doctors are working on," Mihail declared. "Then they work the stocks of the pharmaceutical companies running these trials to profit from the inside information."

Jim laughed. "Clever insider trading scam!" Jim shouted. "Can I get in on it?"

Mihail knew he needed a money man with muscle if he was going to take out Oleg and the Viola operations and proceed with the scam. He wasn't seriously thinking about doing this until he learned that Oleg was pissed at him and he realized that he had better get on the offensive. A pissed off Oleg usually ended up with somebody dying, but going on the offensive without a financial backer was just suicide.

Mihail had heard Oleg was convinced he was trying to compete with Fred's network, yet he had also heard that Oleg was pissed at him for complaining to Fred over the Linder mess. So, in Mihail's mind, this competition story was most likely being made up to get Fred's okay with the whacking of good 'ole Mihail.

"Can you back me financially and with some men to take over this scam and to take care of Oleg and Karel?" Mihail asked.

“I can put up \$10 million to fund the stock manipulation side of things but I could also send a couple of guys, sure,” Jim said excitedly. “Are they currently targeting any doctors?”

“Yeah, they’re pretty far along with one doctor, so we need to move kinda quickly.”

“Right, well, let me make a few phone calls, but I’m pretty certain I can send two guys to New Jersey in a week or two.”

“Sounds good, let’s talk tomorrow,” Mihail said.

“Okay, sir!”

Jim Lick put the phone back in his pocket and rejoined Boris Yakovlev and his cousins on the 8th fairway.

Saturday, December 21st

Peter Hansen

Nick Johnson walked through the lobby at the Eagle Eye Golf Club where his family belonged. Both Peter and Nick were being pretty thoroughly followed by thugs of the Viola Cartel - they agreed to arrive at the club with an hour between them. Peter didn't think the two crews watching them talked to each other, but they probably at least had met in the past and might have recognized each other in the parking lot. Especially if his talk with Nick was lengthy. So, Peter planned to keep their meeting short and hopefully sweet.

Peter arrived at the club at 11 a.m., hung at the bar watching college football, and waited for Nick to meet him a little past noon. Peter and his family belonged to Eagle Eye but hadn't been there in almost two years. Hopefully, the thugs following him didn't know that and they wouldn't grow suspicious even if they did.

Nick found him in the bar and they hopped into a booth. Nick looked good, well rested and groomed.

"So, did you see Oleg following you into the parking lot?" Peter asked.

Nick nodded and smiled. "Yeah, they're on me all of the time, mainly because I have them chasing their own tale."

Peter shot him a puzzled look before glancing around the bar to make sure no one was taking any particular interest in their conversation.

"I have them convinced that there's a competitor seeking the same drug inside information."

He laughed in disbelief. "How'd you pull that off?"

"It wasn't hard," Nick said. "I just told them that somebody came to our house asking Susan about me, and they went ballistic."

That Peter believed. No one sported paranoia like Julio's cartel and they would most certainly believe that some other outfit was after Nick's inside information. That he hadn't heard about this development with Nick didn't surprise him because Martin had disappeared. Julio's cousin, Jorge, was now dealing with him. Of course, the switch didn't happen right away - Julio loved keeping people twisting in the wind - and he didn't hear from anybody within the cartel until the first week in December when Julio called him to tell him about the switch to Jorge. He wanted to ask Julio what happened to Martin but good reason kept him from poking his nose where it didn't belong. Martin's cell phone had been disconnected since the third week in November as best he could tell because that was the first time he tried to call him after his angry discussion with him following his learning of what happened to Darryl. Sitting at Eagle Eye, he was not in good shape, and struggled to keep focused on Nick. He threw his neck out the previous week from all of the stress - ended up pumping four Advil a day for the pain - as Jorge offered him no ray of hope that Julio was with him for the long term.

"So that's why they're following you full time now?" he asked Nick.

“Right, and it’s going to make my fake death so much more believable,” Nick replied. “The plan is really coming together.”

He leaned across the table. “And, what’s the latest with the drug study?”

Nick smiled. “The final announcement isn’t expected for a few months now, so my mid January departure won’t be cutting it too close.”

After Nick walked him through how he was going to set up the crime scene, Peter ended up pretty impressed with his plan. And he didn’t know for sure if Julio would go after Susan and Tom, so maybe things could work out for the best here. After all, Julio had left Jamie Lyons alone after he pulled his assets from PLH.

Saturday, January 4th

5:45 p.m.

Nick Johnson

Apparently, William Miler had a relative at the Screaming Eagle Resort in New Mexico, one of the top ski resorts out west where Nick had always wanted to vacation, but never found the chance. New Mexico was nice and far away from New Jersey. Plus, he highly doubted Oleg's criminal network had an outpost in this resort town. He had been researching this town since mid December, when William first suggested it. William's cousin's kid moved there two years ago. This was William's quid pro quo for his help. All William was asking was for Nick to move to this resort and check up on his cousin's kid. His cousin died suddenly last year and William must have felt terrible about that, though he was kinda cryptic about the whole thing.

"Don't tell him who you are exactly...actually, don't tell anybody who you are exactly," William said.

They were standing in his basement, a workman's dream...Nick had never seen toolsets like those William had. He was in the process of building some cabinets for one of his kids. They were going to have glass frames in the front, so Nick was guessing they were for the kitchen. William had one cabinet near completion with cherry finish, and had already ordered the custom glass front of the cabinets.

"That makes sense," Nick replied. "The plan is to leave for the resort in two or so weeks."

He decided a few weeks ago to move up the disappearance date for a number of reasons; first, Peter Hansen had strongly suggested it, and second, because the need to leave his medical building in the dark was becoming a key part of the plan. He had to keep his departure as close to 5 p.m. as he could. The ideal date was in late December, but there was no way he could arrange this in that short amount of time. The earliest he could do this was in mid January, during which the sun sets around 4:55 p.m. and it gets pretty dark by 5:40.

Perhaps the biggest reason for him moving up the date concerned the fictional 'other party' in competition with Oleg. His story about the guy talking with Susan at their house definitely hit a nerve with Oleg, enough so that he and his thug partner seemed like they were starting their hunt for this person that night of the holiday party. But, Nick didn't think he could keep creating this illusion for three or four months. At some point, they would figure out his game. So if he waited until mid February or early March, Oleg might have come to his senses by then.

His obsessively compulsive brain was now quite relieved that his last talk with Oleg happened the way it did – errors and brain farts included. By incorrectly stating that this person asking questions about the Zyptorin trial talked with Susan and not him, he had made it easier for him to avoid Oleg's wrath if he determined that there was no other guy. Nick could simply say that he didn't talk with this guy. So he couldn't confirm if the guy was threatening him or was there for another reason. Maybe he was a reporter, a

stock research analyst or even somebody on his committee. Granted, this fictional guy didn't leave his name, as most non criminals would, but Nick definitely thought he was in as good a spot here as anyone could possibly have expected him to be in at that point.

Still, the thing was, here they were in the first week of January, and this 'other guy' hadn't found him to threaten him yet? This was not realistic, so the next time he met with Oleg, he was going to have to up the ante and tell Oleg that this other guy put a gun in his back in the parking garage of his medical building. And threatened him in the same way Oleg and his thug partner did. They didn't have access to the garage – they would know that they couldn't have seen this from the outdoor parking lot. Also, he was going to tell Oleg that he didn't get a good look at the guy because he was told to get in his car and face forward.

He had yet to identify Oleg and his partner sitting in the outdoor parking lot though he was convinced they were watching him throughout the day. He thought he saw them last weekend on Skyline Drive and considered running up to their car. But he didn't because he didn't want them to think that he was looking over his shoulder. That might have made them quite suspicious. It was like Nick was a Ringling Brothers employee, walking an illusion tightrope.

Still, it would have been nice to know when the Czechs planned on visiting him again.

"I've arranged for the cash transfer like we discussed," he told William.

He was trying to mentally recall the long to do list that William gave him a few weeks ago. His offshore account in Belize recently posted a \$70,000 deposit via wire transfer. These were his living funds for his time at Screaming Valley. Susan and Tom would be fine. They would have plenty of cash reserves and Susan was still receiving her severance from Hallmark who essentially paid Susan to leave after Hunter's Mill was bought out by the greeting card company. Nick hoped the life insurance didn't pay out - that might be the one crime he ended up committing - but if it did, he would have to deal with that at some point down the road.

William had told him that New Jersey, and most states in the Union, require seven years to pass before a missing person can be officially declared dead. But given the crime scene that he was planning, the police might take a much quicker path. Enough time would have to pass to rule out kidnapping. Though, if no ransom was demanded, it could be declared a murder by the police in just a few months.

"Good. Have you looked into Greyhound?" William asked.

"Right...they don't require an ID for tickets bought in cash."

Once Nick disappeared, he needed to stop using anything that was traceable. Clearly, Susan and probably the police would notice a credit card transaction posting after the crime scene time – that would be totally stupid. A debit card from their bank would also be quickly detected, so, basically, he couldn't use anything in his wallet.

He thought about leaving his wallet at the crime scene but was leaning against this idea. No cold, hard reasoning for this leaning – maybe he needed to bring it with him for dire emergencies or even to give him an emotional salve – but that was okay he guessed.

The thing about this whole plan was that he knew he was going to make mistakes. He just hoped that these mistakes didn't bring harm to his family.

The greyhound route would require three days of travel in the bus, heading across the Midwest to Colorado and then down to New Mexico. Nick needed to pack light and pick things that he knew Susan wouldn't notice missing - a toiletry bag stuffed with his toothbrush, razor, shaving cream, deodorant and hairbrush would certainly be detected by his wife. Not that she would be suspicious if the police believed the crime scene. He had a ratty pair of sneakers that he would wear on the bus and would probably bring the work shoes that he would be wearing that day in the office. If he didn't have room for the work shoes, he could probably throw them away somewhere on route.

He had never met anybody who had ridden Greyhound though it didn't have the greatest reputation, with online reviews saying to ride up front as close to the driver as possible to ensure safety. But no one online had found trouble on the bus themselves. A fight did break out in the back of the bus, during the ride of one reviewer. It took the driver several minutes to stop the bus and resolve the problem. The driver wielded a heavy night stick, apparently.

The reviews did say to expect the bus to be highly crowded at all points during the route, and he didn't know how he was going to sleep - he had never been able to sleep in a car. Anyway, he was not expecting to be too functional when he did arrive at the resort, so a lack of sleep over a few days wasn't going to kill him. Screaming Eagle was 100 miles south of Sante Fe, and Greyhound actually didn't travel to the resort. A Daybreak Transports bus from the Sante Fe stop would carry him the final leg of his journey.

"So...how do you see this playing out at the end of two years?" William asked.

He had told William that he planned on being at the resort for two years, but there was nothing magical about this length of time other than needing to make sure the Oleg threat was gone for good. They could leave town the day they learned of his foul play ridden disappearance or they could poke around his neighborhood for a while to see if he turned up. He chose the latter as the most likely, though he had no idea how long this would take for the Czechs to give up. Given that their crime network had to be much larger than these two thugs, extra caution was necessary. Hence, the two years.

"I'm not sure Susan will ever speak to me again," Nick replied. "Tom will be close to graduation..."

William held his right index finger up. "So you plan to settle back into your life on Skyline Drive?"

"That's something I haven't figured out yet."

And that was the truth. He didn't know if he would ever get their life back. Let's say his family believed his story - he did have the audio tape for evidence - and they were willing to reconcile with him, how could he live in this town without looking over his shoulder every second? While he didn't know where Oleg and his network would move to next, he did know that most pharmaceutical companies were based in the New York metro area and also that most drug trials were coordinated here, so he didn't see Oleg moving to the West Coast. Were his operations based in New Jersey? The Linders were living in Philadelphia, so maybe Oleg was based there.

Of course, he'd have to start his practice all over again, after years of building it up; all of his patients over the next two years would have no choice but to find another physician. He suspected that, at his age, his only option would be to join a larger group of Internal Medicine docs. Not too difficult if he could get all his colleagues to realize that he was not some freak who had a mid-life meltdown.

"Yeah, I suppose you can afford to deal with that issue at some point down the road," William asserted.

"Well, I don't consider it to be a luxury of mine...it's more like I'm kickin' the can down the road."

If he got all worked up over what might happen two years from now, he might never have gathered the courage to pull off what he had to do in two weeks. He didn't want to tell William that because his question was a legitimate one and he was only trying to help.

"Do you think you can find physician work down there?" William began sorting his vast array of drill bits.

Nick laughed for a second. "No, I'd be crazy to try to re-apply for a New Mexico medical license under my own name and no place will touch me without a license."

Dr. Jake Mansen died last month in Albuquerque, New Mexico - he was 42 years old - having been killed in a car crash, and, for about a day in late December, Nick planned to use his name and medical license at the resort. The name would check out at the resort medical facilities - the Screaming Eagle Resort had two mountain side facilities for ski accidents - where he could work. Any standard check with the New Mexico medical board would show him, Dr. Jake Mansen, as a licensed doctor.

But, even if the board didn't catch the resurrected license on the first pass, they were bound to catch the deceit when the license went up for renewal. Nick didn't even have Dr. Mansen's medical license number. The bottom line was that he didn't need to work. Any half cocked ideas that could blow up the two year disappearance plan just had to be kicked out of his mind. Plain and simple.

His current NJ medical license was up for renewal next winter - he'd have to let it expire. That thought alone almost gave him a heart attack as the NJ medical board could be a real pain in the ass. He always had renewed his license three months in advance due to horror stories he had heard about doctors getting suspended or put under review by the medical board for silly mistakes as renewal failure. Of course, even if he only disappeared for two months, the board would still ask him some tough questions because they would surely find out about his leaving.

"How do you know if the Czechs aren't watching you during the day at you office?" William asked. "Have you thought about the possibility of them interrupting your crime scene?"

"Yeah...they can't park in the garage, so I'd have to give them a reason to be suspicious," he said. "The practice will be locked and dark. You can't see the light of my office from the window looking in from the lobby."

The plan was to draw the blinds and use a flashlight - Oleg could be looking through his office window for all he knew. If he had learned anything from the Czechs, it

was to expect the unexpected. He had no idea how to do that except to try to think like them as best he could.

“You should put the blood and flesh fragments on the fabric of the chair,” William asserted. “Like you just got stabbed and, after reaching for the wound, you put that hand on the chair as you fall to the ground.”

“What, and then leave a small blood trail on the carpet out to the exit?” Nick asked. He tried to imagine himself being dragged down the hallway. His office was eighteen feet from the staff door. He walked the length out yesterday.

He planned on disabling the outdoor light above the staff door next weekend during the day. If he waited until the night of the crime scene, he risked Oleg seeing him and getting suspicious, and he needed to keep the Czechs from waiting for him outside the staff door the night of his disappearance. If Oleg caught him next weekend, the cartel man could see that there was nothing suspicious going on in the practice – Nick was simply changing a light bulb.

William sat down on one of his work stools, then crossed his arms. “Let me think...put the blood on your hand and fingers and grab the doorframe from the inside, about a foot above the carpet.”

“Like I’m badly wounded and being dragged out of my office,” Nick said. “I reach for the doorframe to stop from being dragged any further.”

He hadn’t figured out if he was going to be shot or stabbed or both. He wanted to leave enough of a mystery for the CSI as to how he was wounded and just how badly, but, obviously, the flesh part of the plan pointed to a knife attack.

His latest thinking with the flesh sample from his body was to take a small piece from his upper left thigh, an area that most resembles the stomach area. William had told him to keep the flesh fragments really small and almost impossible to see with the naked eye. Sounded simple, yet he was not exactly looking forward to the moment when he cut out a piece, however small, out of his upper left thigh. The fine hair on his thighs was similar enough to those on his stomach. According to William, when a knife penetrates a body and is pulled out flesh fragments are left on the knife and the wound area. Nick was planning on two layers of stitching since the wound would need to be deep enough. Probably two stitches on the outer and deeper layers. He didn’t do a lot of stitching as a family physician; in fact, he removed way more stitches from patients than put in fresh ones.

“Then, also take that bloody hand and wipe it on the carpet leading out to the exit,” William revealed. “You should also spread some of it on the walkway outdoors.”

There was a little bit of snow on the ground. If it was still there in late January, he could smear some blood on the snow patch behind the building and away from the main parking area - like he was dragged toward Wilton Avenue.

“You need to be careful of any security cameras along Wilton,” William said.

“Right, I’m thinking the Red Robin might have a couple cameras,” he replied.

“There’s a walkway to another office building thirty yards behind his building... I thought I’ll head along that walkway.”

He certainly didn’t want to leave any footprints in the snow.

“Well, that other building might have cameras, so I wouldn’t plan to get picked up in their parking lot.”

The inside of Nick’s left eye started itching, and he wondered if it was the sawdust down there in the workshop. His other eye was okay, though, which was strange. The handy, but sometimes annoying asset of being a physician was the constant awareness of allergy inducing environments. This drove Susan up the wall at times, so he had learned to keep his findings mostly quiet.

“It should be hard to identify me because I plan to wear a hoodie sweatshirt underneath my down jacket,” he said. “The building behind us corners Wilton and Marsh, a much smaller street with apartments.”

“That sounds good,” William affirmed. He stood up from the stool. “You know, I could pick you up on Marsh Street.”

They heard some footsteps upstairs. Betsy was home, and she was singing. Nick smiled at his retired detective buddy. “That would be very helpful. Thank you, William.”

Monday, January 6th

11:15 a.m.

Peter Hansen

“Peter, there’s a Tim Murphy here to see you,” Judy informed him over the intercom.

He rose up from his chair and made his way down the hallway. Jorge had just given him over the phone some wire instructions to move more of the cartel’s money. This time Peter was told to move through several Asian companies and their banks. One thing was for sure, Julio wasn’t leaving any stone unturned if it could help him launder his assets.

The man in the lobby was wearing a cheap suit and old looking shoes – he definitely did not look like a potential client.

“Tom Murphy, Morristown detective,” he said while holding out his hand. “Can we talk in your office?”

Peter glanced over at Judy who looked like Mr. Murphy had not told her who he was exactly when he first entered the lobby.

“That’s fine,” Peter said after shaking his hand.

The walk down the short hallway seemed football field long as Peter’s mind raced through all of the reasons a Morristown detective was wanting to talk with him. Had this to do with Nick Johnson, or could someone have complained about the two guys watching his building from the parking lot? Maybe ‘pants on fire’ had decided to go to the police and tell everything, which wasn’t much at all anyway. Then there was the Jonathan issue.

They sat down in his office and Detective Murphy got right to the point.

“Peter, I want to talk with you about Darryl Ludsten,” he started. “His friend, Jonathan Walsh, has been nagging us for two months with his theories about Darryl’s death, and I gotta tell you Peter, it makes up a wild story.”

Detective Murphy was a bit crazy eyed when he said this, like he simply couldn’t wait to blurt out this wild story of Mr. Walsh. His hands were fidgeting in his lap and Peter wasn’t sure if he was going to sit or stand. Peter’s brain started hurrying around trying to find a way to cool this guy’s jets because this man was on a mission. Or at least it seemed that way.

“All right, shoot,” Peter replied.

“Well, Mr. Walsh believes that the deaths of Mr. Ludsten and Mr. Brad Dellan were connected so as to cover something up here at PLH,” he started. “But, as you know, no foul play has been found in either death, so we’ve been holding off Mr. Walsh and his desire for us to talk with you.”

He looked at the detective with a smirk. “Wow, sounds like something in the movies! But seriously, I had as much to do with their deaths as I did with JFK’s forty years ago.”

The detective let out a cough and it took him a few seconds to recover. “Well, it does seem odd that two people tied to PLH would die within a few days of one another.”

“I’d say tragic before I would call it odd, sir,” he said.

“Okay, fair enough,” the detective told him. “Do you know if United Enterprises had anything to do with these deaths?”

‘Boy, Jonathan was sure a busy boy with the police, not holding anything back’, Peter thought to himself.

“Look, he already talked to me about United,” he said, with less patience than he had told himself to show. “United is a client for whom I don’t directly manage their money. It’s a very indirect relationship compared to my other clients. United had nothing to do with these deaths, nor did anybody. One was an accident, the other a heart attack. As far as I knew, Darryl and Brad lived in completely different worlds.”

Suddenly, Detective Murphy stood up from his chair while staring intently at him. “And, you don’t have any other clients that you suspect could be involved with these two deaths? It’s all too weird, something’s...not right here. Mr. Ludsten finds out about United Enterprises and ends up dead shortly thereafter.” The detective kept staring right at him.

“Detective Murphy, my clients are Hollywood stars. They’re not angels by any means but c’mon, that’s crazy.” He looked at his watch. “I have a conference call to hop onto if you don’t mind.”

Peter shook the detective’s hand and led him out to the lobby. It was a scary good thing Julio knew a good assassin for the two jobs. Anyway, the cartel had already set up a good looking shell company for United Enterprises. So when Detective Murphy looked under the hood, he would see what looked like a real company making real products. In the end, though, this guy suspected something. That was clear. Damn.

Tuesday, January 7th

2:30 p.m.

“Joseph, still no sign of them?” Mihail asked over the cell phone.

“Hey, I can’t explain it, maybe they bolted town when they heard we were coming.”

Mihail laughed uncomfortably. “Oh, I don’t think so. They’ll be back and we’ll be ready for them.”

Mihail heard Joseph’s partner, James, talking in the car and thought about asking if James was on his cell phone but decided against it. These were Jim Lick’s guys after all so Mihail knew he had to tread carefully.

“So, we just sit tight?” Joseph asked Mihail.

“No, plan on moving in when this doctor leaves for the evening,” Mihail ordered. “Wait for him in the garage.”

James and Joseph had arrived that past Sunday. There had been no sign of Oleg and his partner at the doctor’s house or office.

“You got it and I’ll make sure he understands there’s a new sheriff in town.”

“Very funny, just stick to the plan and don’t rough him up too much,” Mihail said.

Tuesday, January 7th

5:35 p.m.

Nick Johnson

Nick turned out the hallway and waiting area lights and locked the practice door behind him. Mary and Melanie left about ten minutes ago. Flu season always left him exhausted at the end of the day - it was days like that which always made him consider bringing in another physician.

The door to the parking ramp opened automatically, and he walked through to the garage.

"Hello, Doctor Johnson," the voice declared behind him. It didn't sound like Oleg.

Nick swung around to find a bald headed, portly guy, about 5'10" standing just behind him.

"What's this about?" he asked, looking around the garage to find it practically empty.

"We're your new boss here concerning the Zyptorin information," the man said firmly. "Oleg and his partner have been removed from their position and my partner and I have taken over."

"So, you know where I live?" he asked, trying to figure out how these guys managed to take out the Czechs. The irony of Nick meeting in person his fictional 'other criminal network' that he laid out for Oleg and his pony tail partner was staring right at him.

"Of course, doctor. We know about Susan, Tom, Stanley and the two grandmothers," the man said proudly.

"So, how do we do this?" he asked.

"Don't play coy with us doctor," the bald man said, sticking his finger into his chest. "You'll have the final results from the Zyptorin trial in about two months and we want that information."

"Okay...can I go now?"

"Sure, run along."

As he drove off toward the exit ramp, he saw the man standing where they talked and it looked like he was on a cell phone. The man didn't seem happy.

Nick didn't know what to make of all of this. Did he no longer need to go ahead with his crime scene and disappearance plan? Surely, these guys played by the standard blackmail rules and they'd leave his family alone if he gave them the inside information.

Tuesday, January 7th

5:38 p.m.

Oleg Yashkov

Did Jim Lick think he could send two punks - who were scratching their heads over Oleg and Karel being nowhere in sight - up here to take them out of the picture? He and Karel had been driving separate cars the past few days and they were stalking these two jokers, not the other way around.

The fat bald one stepped out of the back door to the garage, swearing at his cell phone. Maybe he was upset that his partner wasn't picking up.

"This is a gun in your back, let's take a walk to my car," Oleg said.

"Dude, you don't know what mess you're getting yourself into here," the fat bald one said.

"You're about to learn that your partner has been shot in the head and we're going for a drive - I'd say you're the one with the mess right about now."

Karel came around the corner, gave Oleg a confident nod and whispered in his ear that the dead guy was in his trunk - they didn't want police crawling around after all. His car was pulled around to the building. They guided the fat bald one into the back seat after removing any weapons and giving him a nasty sedative. It's amazing how a grown man can cry when he sees a needle with a night long interrogation at the end of it. He and Karel had rented a storage unit that would serve nicely for an interrogation, but they weren't sure how long before the sedative would wear off.

Oleg's cell started to buzz. "Yeah?"

"You idiot, now you have the Viola family on your ass. Congratulations."

"Mihail, did you set all of this up?" he asked mockingly. "Hey let's meet for dinner, just the two of us."

Mihail hung up.

"He must've been watching us," he told Karel. "How else would he have known so fast what happened to his Florida guys?"

Karel whipped his head around, frantically trying to locate Mihail's car but to no avail. "Let's drive around the block and see if we can spot him."

"No, he's gone for the night," Oleg said. "He's not stupid."

Tuesday, January 7th

8:10 p.m.

Jim Lick's cell phone buzzed and he flipped it open. "Jim, it's Mihail, we have a problem."

"What happened?" Jim fired into the phone.

"Your guys are dead because Oleg knew when they were coming. You have a leak somewhere and you must find it."

"Oh, that guy is getting an army up his ass!"

"Good," Mihail asserted.

"It'll take me a bit to put it all together, but, this time, it won't matter if Oleg knows when we're coming!"

"All right, I'll call you on Friday," Mihail said.

Wednesday, January 8th

2:30 p.m.

Oleg Yashkov

“Sir, we have no more appointments open for today,” Mary told Oleg as he walked through the waiting area.

How did she know that he didn’t already have an appointment? Did she know all the patients that well to know a stranger when she saw one? Dr. Johnson’s practice was a lot smaller than he had thought.

The apple cinnamon smell from the scented candle on her desk was mixing curiously with the odor of medical cleansers.

“I’m sorry, but I need a few minutes of Dr. Johnson’s time,” he told her. “My name is Oleg...he’ll want to see me.”

He left Karel in the car – two men wanting to see Dr. Johnson would be too weird.

Mary looked at him as if to say, “Good luck with that!” She got up from her desk and walked down the hallway. Not thirty seconds later, she came back.

“Dr. Johnson will see you now.” Mary looked to be in shock. “His office is the last room down the hallway on the left.”

He walked down the hallway catching the sight of a really heavy man with his shirt off in the exam room. Man boobs. Being a doctor must suck.

His knuckles rapped on the door. “Knock, knock, Dr. Johnson.” Oleg walked into the office and closed the door. It was a heavy wood door, good to keep sounds inside the room and away from listening office staff ears. Oleg could just see Mary running down the hallway to hear what they were saying.

Nick looked like he’d been kicked in the stomach. “Where’s your partner?”

“I left him in the car,” Oleg said.

“Well, can you have him check the building’s garage?” Nick asked. “Some guy threatened me last night demanding the same information that you want, telling me that you guys were dead.”

Nick looked right into his eyes.

“Did you get a good look at him?” he asked. He didn’t know why he asked this, because he damn well knew who Nick talked to and that guy was a whole lot more dead than Oleg was.

“He looked kinda portly, 5’10-ish, shaved head,” Nick told him. “How’d this guy find me? Am I in the ‘friggin yellow pages or something?”

Oleg couldn’t tell if Mihail was trying to throw him off by mentioning the Viola family. Mihail was way over his head if he was stupid enough to bring them into the picture. Still, if he had done that, Fred’s days were numbered, and whoever was providing the big money here was about to get wacked - if they hadn’t gotten already. Lenny, who called last week to warn Oleg about Jim Lick’s plans, told him that Jim Lick was back working with the Violas, which Oleg had a hard time believing. He and Karel

both agreed last night to expect to see more guys from Florida within a week to challenge them even if the Violas were involved.

“We have it under control, doctor,” he said. “How’s the Zyptorin trial going?” He decided not to let their doctor know about their killing of the two guys last night. It might have sent him over the edge, and they needed Dr. Johnson to be clear headed about everything.

Nick sat back down in his chair. “It looks like it’s going to wrap up in late March or early April.”

“Did this guy ask about the trial?” he asked.

“Yeah, I told him what I know about the timing of the information flow from the trial,” Nick replied. He cleared his throat.

Oleg walked a little closer to the doctor. “Well, if you get harassed again by some people, just tell them you’ll cooperate, okay.”

“All right, but I thought you said you had it under control. Is the bald portly guy coming back?”

“When is your next meeting?”

“February 5th, but he didn’t ask me about that.”

Oleg had been holding off from talking with Fred because he couldn’t help them and may have decided to pull the plug on everything way too early. Jim Lick and the Viola clan was too big a match for Fred and his money guy, but that’s assuming Jim and the Violas could find these two guys. Oleg and Karel were easy to find because Mihail knew who they were and where they were going to be. Fred and the money guy were a lot more behind the scenes and Mihail had never met either of them in person. Maybe Fred and the money guy weren’t that close to getting whacked after all.

One thing was for sure, if Oleg and Karel were going to sit in their car watching the good doctor each day from the parking lot, they were going to have to be very careful. Oleg thought he’d give Lenny a call again - see what’s up. Also, they needed to find Mihail to take him out, hopefully before the Calvary arrived from Florida. What a mess! That Jim Lick was still alive was a huge mistake on their part and it was definitely coming back to bite Oleg and Karel in the ass.

“Well, you keep doing business as usual and this will all be over before you know it,” Oleg replied.

Nick looked at the clock above his desk. The office was sparkly clean and orderly.

Melanie poked her head into the office before looking strangely at Oleg. “Dr. Johnson, Mr. Montane is ready to see you. He’s looking like he has strep, so I’ll get the swab ready just in case.”

“I’ll be right in, Melanie,” Nick said.

Nick stood up and stretched out his right hand like he wanted to shake Oleg’s hand.

“We’re not friends, Dr. Johnson,” Oleg said coolly.

“What the hell was that? Was this guy cracking up on me?” Oleg asked himself.

Nick smiled strangely and quickly put his hand down. “Yeah, I suppose not.”

“But don’t worry, Doctor, we’re now watching your office from the parking lot,” he said. “Maybe we can catch this guy stalking you.” He picked up a pen on the desk to examine it. It was from a resort in Las Vegas.

Oleg didn’t know if the doctor believed they were already watching from the parking lot or not, but he thought it wise to act like he didn’t purposely let these bozos from Florida meet with him in the garage yesterday afternoon. Even worse, he didn’t want the doctor to view him and Karel as failing to notice the guy harassing him in the garage. So, they weren’t there watching him yesterday, end of story.

Oleg put the pen down and left Nick to see his patient. Melanie raised her eyebrows at Oleg as he walked by on the way out of the practice.

“Have a great afternoon, Honey!” Oleg yelled out to her.

“Next time, can you please call?” she shouted back.

He walked out into the lobby of the building and headed back to their car. It would have been nice if they could park in the garage, yet he saw a card scanner activated gate. Oleg decided that they were parked too far away from the garage to keep a good watch on things. The lot was not even half full, but it was late on a Friday. He hoped they could find a spot close to the garage starting Monday morning. They knew the bozos from Florida were lurking around the garage yesterday because they had gotten a heads up about them from Lenny. The next wave of heavies, though, might come without such a nice heads up. And they didn’t want anybody harassing Dr. Johnson without them controlling the situation.

“Bud, we need to find out where Mihail is staying,” he told Karel while climbing into the passenger seat.

“I just heard he’s in the city for the weekend.”

Oleg lit up a cigarette. “Move us closer to the garage,” he ordered. “What kind of guns do you have in the trunk?”

“Pretty much what we had in Philadelphia – haven’t I been telling you we need an Uzi?”

“Man, you drive around with one of those and you’re begging for a cop to pull you over and nail you for holding one of those suckers,” Oleg told his fire power friendly partner. “We didn’t need big firepower to take out those two yahoos yesterday, but that axe sure was handy in the storage unit.”

What they did need was a pair of binoculars to see better into that garage. If they were to be surprised by a new crew the next week - that was a big if because Oleg planned on avoiding being surprised - they would probably need to hang out in the garage during the late afternoon waiting for Dr. Johnson like that idiot did yesterday. They would have no way to tell someone apart if they walked into the building, but if someone walked into that garage, they would be ready to rumble. Another possible thing – Oleg should have told Dr. Johnson this - was for the doctor to park out in the parking lot and avoid the garage all together. The more Oleg thought about it, that was probably what he would do.

Karel was smiling. “You know, I don’t like the idea of us splitting up in unprotected cars. Why can’t we do that yellow page and foam thing with the right windows in one of the cars and sit together?”

He was referring to bulletproofing a car by stuffing yellow pages in the side panels of the car, filling the tires with insulation foam and replacing the glass windows with laminated glass. They had done this a few times while working for the Violas when they needed to quickly bulletproof a car. While the laminated glass is pricey, the other stuff isn’t and this technique will let the car escape a spray of bullets with the passengers safe inside. Oleg remembered one of the cousins in the Viola family making the two of them sit in the quickly bulletproofed car while he shot a round of gunfire into the car. That was real fun.

“You know, buddy, I like that idea,” Oleg said, slapping Karel on the back. They figured they wouldn’t need to do this if Lenny came through yet again with his Miami tip for the next crew of guys coming. Still, this was good preparation in case they weren’t able to get advance warning for next week. And anything was possible.

“I guess we have some shopping to do tomorrow,” Karel said.

“You bet.”

It occurred to Oleg just then that the storage unit was a good place to do the work on one of the cars. Good thing they got a double wide unit.

Saturday, January 11th

7:15 a.m.

Oleg Yashkov

“I hear you’re looking for me,” the voice said calmly over the phone. It belonged to Mihail.

“Yeah, we have,” Oleg said with a clenched fist. “Somebody else has been talking to our doctor friend about doing the same kind of deal.”

“We’re talking about Dr. Nick Johnson, right?”

Now Mihail knew he was a threat, how else would he know the doctor’s name?

“How do you know his name?” he asked trying to keep his voice calm.

“What, am I stupid?” Mihail asked. “After the Philly mess, I told Fred that I wanted in on whatever the hell you guys were working and he agreed. I think maybe he thought I’d run to the cops, who knows...”

Funny how Oleg didn’t hear that from Fred.

“You think what happened to those people in Philly can’t happen to you?” he screamed into the cell phone.

“What are you talking about, you crazy asshole?” Mihail asked with a mocking tone. “We’re on the same team here...wait a minute, you think that I’m involved with this other group talking to Dr. Johnson?”

“You’re a dead man,” he told Mihail. “If I see you anywhere around the doctor again, I’ll take you out.”

“Listen, for the last time, we’re on the same side,” Mihail yelled. “Talk to Fred.” Oleg hung up the phone and shook Karel who was sleeping in the front seat.

Thursday, January 16th

Nick Johnson

“Hey, Melanie, hope you’re having a good morning,” Nick said as cheerfully as possible while walking through his practice’s main door.

Melanie put down a stack of papers. “Hey, Nick. It’s a full house today,” she warned. “Folks are not happy we’re closing a little early - Oh! I forgot! Greg Smith spent the night in the ER and they think it’s the gallbladder.”

He started walking down the hallway. “All right, have Julie call Radiology and set up an ultrasound this morning.”

If Melanie noticed the duffel bag he was carrying she didn’t say anything. It was a little trickier sneaking it out of the house 15 minutes ago because Susan was walking around the first floor talking on her cell phone. That meant sneaking it downstairs when she was in the kitchen and out into the garage when she was in the living room. He went back into the house and waited for Susan to end the call; it sounded like lunch plans with one of Susan’s girlfriends.

Tom was in the kitchen hovered over a bowl of Cheerios. He grabbed Susan’s hands, led her over to Tom, hugged the two of them and told them he loved them. That was the best he could do. He tried not to think during that moment that this was the last time he was going to see them for two years – he might have melted down right there in the kitchen – so he made it quick.

Nick and Susan had been walking inside the Morris County Mall the past few nights. Susan had been mulling over a recent offer from Hallmark to come back as a consultant. She was leaning hard toward taking that deal for a host of reasons, but Susan brought up one that Nick hadn’t considered: Joan, her mother, was driving Susan crazy and she felt like she needed something else to keep her focus. That made sense.

Two years was a long time and he kept wondering if maybe a shorter timeframe made more sense. A dream haunted him a few weeks back where he returned to Skyline Drive after two years only to find Susan re-married. He let that thought rattle around in his head for a day or two before he concluded that this was pretty unlikely. He couldn’t see her doing that until Tom was settled in college and he would still be in high school in two years.

There was the chance that the health of his mother or Joan deteriorated over the next two years, yet they appeared to be reasonably healthy today. Sure, parts of this plan of his were as steady as a house of cards, built on incorrect assumptions of the risks, but Oleg had a way of forcing the issue.

He didn’t see Oleg all weekend – he could count on one hand the number of times the Czechs had been visible on Skyline Drive - and he was starting to worry that he hadn’t sold the idea of a competitor to Oleg as well as previously thought. On Monday morning, however, there Oleg and his partner were, just up the street and ready to follow him to work. Maybe they didn’t think that this new guy would bother him at home. Except Nick had already told Oleg that some strange guy had talked with Susan at their front door, so that kind of thinking didn’t add up.

The Czechs had visibly followed him to work all week, in the same front row spot closest to the parking ramp. He made sure to locate them in the lot as he walked through the garage each morning. On Thursday, they were right on schedule.

Each day this week, Oleg and his partner left the parking lot to go somewhere at 11:50am and returned at 12:20pm. He presumed this was their lunch break. Whatever the reason, they were consistently gone during this time and Thursday was no different.

This was great to see. There were two inches of snow on the ground. William warned him about snow tracks because he told Nick that one set of tracks in the snow, coming out of the staff entrance and heading to the office complex on Marsh Street, would look suspicious. Especially given the crime scene that Nick was planning to create.

But how was he going to create two or more tracks in the snow with Oleg watching the building? If he left through the staff door in broad daylight, there was a decent chance of him being spotted, thus ruining everything. The lunch schedule for the Czechs was great news, indeed.

The weather forecast called for a high of low 20s and dry all week, meaning the snow on the ground was six days old by Thursday. Mary and Melanie always went out to lunch on Thursdays and Fridays, usually out of the office from 12-1pm.

At 11:58 a.m. Thursday, Nick hurried into a snow suit and boots three sizes too big, knowing he had fifteen minutes to run to the office complex on Marsh Street and get back to the office. He wanted to simulate somebody 15 pounds heavier, so he put a bowling ball in a back pack. All morning, he had stayed focused enough to talk with Greg Smith, for whom they were able to schedule surgery. Now, it was go time.

The snow was crunchy and challenging to run through. He planned on falling to the ground to the side of his tracks, to simulate a body being carried and dropped. With the back pack held against his stomach, he did a roll in the snow for a few seconds. For a brief moment, he was a carefree kid again. He got back up, put the back pack back on and continued running, realizing at that moment that he was not in as great shape as previously thought.

The return trip to his building was via a side street, so no snow tracks to be concerned with. He decided to use the back pedestrian entrance to the garage and walk through the garage to get inside his building. No sign of the Czechs from the garage at 12:14 p.m. but they were back in their spot by the time he had changed at 12:20.

He didn't want any tough cases that afternoon, correctly predicting that his focus would be having a horrible time. By 3pm, Nick was operating on autopilot. His last two appointments were annual physicals of two patients in their late 30s. His day was over by 4:35 p.m.

A goodbye needed to be said to the girls. Melanie was cleaning up her work station.

"Hey, good job today!" He patted Melanie on the back. She gave him a funny look as if he never told her that, which was so not true. Mary was upfront at the patient check in counter - if he told her good job and patted her on the back, she would certainly know something was up. Nick walked up to Mary's work area.

"Got evening plans?" He smiled forcibly.

“Oh, nothing special...it’s pasta night at our house,” Mary said. “You got plans?”

“Nope – I got a phone call to make but I should be a few minutes behind you.”

Slapping the counter, he walked back down the hallway, thinking there was everything needed for tonight in his office: two vials of his blood, anesthetic, hand-wipes for his hands and the stitching tray. The two vials of his blood would need to be carried out with him. He leaned out the office door and told Mary to leave when Melanie did.

Who would find the crime scene first? Susan would probably call the police after a few hours of frantically trying to reach him, yet he didn’t know what the police would say. She could also call Mary and they could come down here to the office. Or Susan could just go to bed only to wake up in a panic tomorrow morning. If the police or one of the girls found the crime scene that was fine, anybody but Susan.

Sitting in his cloth desk chair, he gazed out the window, amazed for a second just how clear the sky was. The girls met up at Mary’s area. They started laughing, followed by the noise of the front door opening and closing. They were gone. It was 4:57 p.m. He hung up the phone that he was using to fake the phone call he told Mary he had to make.

Five minutes later, Nick pulled out the anesthetic kit from a clear plastic bag that he had brought, took his slacks off and injected the anesthetic into his upper left thigh. It took about two minutes to kick in. He had practiced with the hand wipes and they did an okay job of getting the blood off his hands. Still, one could still see the stain if they looked closely, but he didn’t expect to be holding out his right palm any time soon.

He brought the blood vials over to his desk, sprang up to the exam table, and got the knife ready. He held his left leg out to start digging in the knife. Two tiny flesh pieces meant for forensics to catch were pulled out; they stayed on the knife which was now lying on the stitching tray. Nick stitched in three stitches just to be sure. In two hours, the soreness would be incredible, but he planned to be on the bus by then. He gave the wound a few minutes to settle down. Still, it was not a really deep wound, so the blood was manageable. He checked the white paper that he had been sitting on, and there was no sign of blood; it got tossed into his clear trash bag anyway. The clock read 5:17 p.m. - it would be pretty dark outside in another twenty minutes.

He needed to make sure no blood was spilled on the carpet while putting the blood on his right hand, because a huge blood spot would look suspicious, according to William. An eye dropper worked great to spread out the blood smoothly on his hand.

The cell phone that Susan knew of was on his desk. He dialed the numbers 9 and 1, then dropped the phone on the floor with its face wide open, using the heel of his shoe to smash the phone. The thinking here was that he attempted to dial 9-1-1 while being attacked, but couldn’t execute the task.

Nick moved over the desk chair with his left hand and squeezed the eye dropper to place the blood on his right hand. This hand grabbed the top of the desk chair, tipping it over onto the floor. He took the knife off the stitching tray and placed the flesh pieces on the top of the desk chair in the finger part of the handprint.

The blood vial was a little over half filled. After scooching on his butt over to the door and refilling his right hand with the blood, he left a handprint on the carpet in his office, on the office door frame and on one of the hallway walls. He then stood up,

without his right hand touching anything else, and walked back into his office. He pulled out a few hand-wipes from the pack that was going into the clear plastic bag along with the knife, blood vials, white medical paper and eye dropper. His right hand was wiped and the stitching tray was placed back inside the medical cabinet. Nothing else was visible, yet he took a few moments anyway to scan the office. The clock read 5:31 p.m. He continued wiping his right hand.

His travel outfit was lying on his desk, so he grabbed it, moved into the hallway and changed clothes. His wallet was sitting inside his work coat pocket with \$57 in cash plus all credit cards inside. He pulled the bus ticket from the duffel bag and put it in the front pocket of his jeans. \$500 was the figure settled on for travel emergency cash, with most of this ending up being tucked inside his right foot tube sock. It felt strange but safe down there. The clock: 5:38 p.m.

The nice thing about a prepaid cell phone was the cash payment option, requiring no ID which was hugely important for his next move. Nick pulled this prepaid phone from his front pocket and dialed 9-1-1, getting his best lady voice ready.

“9-1-1 what’s the emergency?” the operator asked.

“I’m hearing gun shots from the parking lot of Colonial Medical Center,” he yelled into the phone. “Please hurry!”

“There are six officers at that location right now, maam,” the operator said coolly.

Nick ran to the lobby window to look outside. Three police cars had surrounded Oleg’s car and he could see Oleg’s partner being led away in handcuffs. No sign of Oleg, though.

Instead of trying to put on his really poor lady voice one last time, he simply hung up the phone and kept staring outside. Who had called the police because the last time he checked, it wasn’t a crime to sit in a parked car? No one had any proof against the crimes Oleg and his gang committed but him, and he thought it to be rather fitting that he was sitting in the complete darkness of his lobby. As Nick wondered if he should go talk with one of the police officers, a sharp rap on the lobby door made him jump. It was one of the officers.

“Hello, officer,” he said after opening the lobby door. “What’s going on outside?”

The officer took a step inside the lobby. “Are you Nick Johnson?”

“Yes?”

“I’ve been instructed to inform you that Peter Hansen and his family were placed in the Federal Witness Protection program this afternoon,” the officer announced. “Three hours ago, Julio Viola was arrested along with several members of his organization, and this is the last roundup.”

Nick’s head was spinning madly as he tried to soak all of this in. He was just a little cog in this vast criminal network, so little that it took the Feds several hours after Julio’s arrest to deal with his small problem, namely Oleg and his partner. He didn’t know what Peter had on the cartel, but it had to be good, damn good.

“So you arrested the two guys in the parking lot?” he asked.

The officer shot him a puzzled look. “No, just the one that was in the car.”

Thursday, January 16th

8:00 p.m.

Peter Hansen

Peter started planning the federal protection idea the day after Darryl was killed back in the middle of November. Between the two taped phone conversations with Julio and six traceable money laundering efforts, the feds thought that they had enough to put Julio away on U.S. soil.

Martin had him do a total of nine money laundering wire transactions while under the cartel's control. Peter had a complete record of the account numbers, each wire transaction, and, most importantly, the point of origin for the money. With the feds documenting these transactions, they found proof of the cartel's laundering efforts. His testimony was to focus on how Julio and Martin took over his firm plus information on the Linder murders and the Nick Johnson shakedown.

Upon discovery in the third week of November that Martin's cell phone had been disconnected, Peter simply freaked. Two days later, his first meeting with the feds took place. Jorge hadn't moved into the PLH office yet but it was only a matter of time. Somebody else was laundering money for the cartel before Julio came to Peter, and he never had the nerve to ask Martin what happened to them. It couldn't have been pretty, though. He knew way too much about Julio's money, so his family didn't have a chance.

In mid December, he decided to tell his wife, Claire, everything. She didn't get too upset until he told her about the witness protection program. They were sitting in their family room - the kids were at separate sleepovers. There was no way he was going to drop the bomb on her at a restaurant and risk a mighty scene in public. Claire was ordinarily a very easy going person but this was no ordinary problem. And it was too much to ask anyone to take in while sitting in a quiet, public setting like a restaurant. That said, by now, he was convinced that their home was bugged, so they spent most of the night whispering in each other's ears.

He broke up the information and made sure to tell his wife each piece slowly so as not to lose her. He made sure to highlight Detective Murphy's suspicious visit to his office less than two weeks ago. Their world was crashing mightily down on them and they had to act aggressively to survive. In his mind, he pictured Claire getting so freaked out about Julio, that the idea of federal protection would practically come from her. It didn't quite work out that way.

"The feds can just arrest Julio when he meets with you in January," Claire said. "Then you won't have to deal with him again and none of your clients will ever know the difference."

Julio wanted to have lunch at Todd's steakhouse on January 16th and firmly requested his family's attendance.

"The Viola cartel is more than Julio, so they'll come after us right away," he told his wife. "Believe that, honey. These are the same people who killed Darryl over the very

weak potential of him stirring up trouble for me, and I can only imagine what they have done with poor Martin.”

Claire ran her fingers through her hair before bursting into tears. “We have attachments here that we cannot walk away from...this will destroy us...the kids!”

He pulled Claire’s fingers from her hair and held them out in front of her. “That may be so, but I’d so much prefer that we manage the destruction than the Viola drug cartel.”

For the remainder of the night, he kept pounding away at the idea that testifying against Julio and his cartel was near suicide. Their only hope was to accept witness protection. There was no rosy exit from this problem - either he or Julio was going to prison for a long time - but they’d all be dead within 24 hours of his testimony in the courtroom if they didn’t let the feds protect them.

Detective Murphy’s visit with him offered a clear affirmation of his decision to open up to the feds. Jonathan and his accusations weren’t going away, plus Peter knew that it wouldn’t take too long for Julio to learn of this accelerating problem. A big part of him expected Jonathan to be taken out already, despite the convincing heat that would rain down on PHL from all authorities if, suddenly, a third person tied to his firm died tragically.

The feds spent weeks planning the logistics surrounding the arrest of Julio. Even though Peter had met Julio in the past, it was well over a year ago and it was a struggle to give the feds a solid enough description of his physical features. They were certain that the lunch would be moved to an unknown location because Julio had to know that he was a wanted man. He would not let the whole world know where he was dining. The big problem with this was his wish to meet Claire and the kids. The feds thought about replacing Claire with a female agent in case they were driven to a new lunch location, but Peter told them that Julio must have gotten a picture of his whole family from the cartel’s watching his house for several months.

What they all did know was that somebody from the cartel was going to meet them at Todd’s, though whether Julio would be in the car that person arrived in was anybody’s guess. So, the feds couldn’t just take the vehicle that pulled up to the restaurant.

In the end, it was decided that every member of his family would be outfitted with a tiny GPS locator in the likely event that the lunch location was moved from Todd’s. Even so, Peter insisted that Claire and the kids wait inside the restaurant – why involve them if he didn’t need to – because, let’s say he met the cartel car outside of Todd’s and he got told to get in the car. If his whole family was together, inside or outside of the restaurant, they all got into that car.

At 11:40 this morning, Peter waited outside of the restaurant, fully expecting a black town car to pull up and whisk him away to a new location. He planned on telling Julio that his family was in the restaurant and he had no idea they were not eating at Todd’s. At least ten fed vehicles were in the area, waiting to move to wherever the GPS took them.

“Peter, why are you standing out here?” the voice asked him from behind.

He turned to find Julio holding open the door to the restaurant.

“Julio, what a surprise,” Peter said, knowing that the feds were listening to every word. “Have you met my family?”

Julio lowered his eyebrow. “Of course, how else would I know you were waiting for...”

The bullets whisked by his left ear and struck Julio right there in the doorway to Todd’s. Peter hit the ground while, at the same time, spinning around to the street to see who was shooting. A red sports car sped away from the scene, but not before revealing the shooter in the front passenger seat. It was Martin.

Julio’s security guards began firing shots at the sports car far down the street. Moments later, an army of feds screamed in. After a short gun battle with Julio’s security team, the feds were able to secure the area and send proper medical attention to Julio.

The cartel head was lucky. Struck three times, twice in the right shoulder and once in the right ear, Julio was going to live but the feds had him in custody.

Claire and the kids were crying when Peter walked back into Todd’s. The team of witness protection personnel surrounding them was making it perfectly clear that the Hansen family would soon be no longer. Peter’s family had talked about it endlessly, drafted every kind of scenario for how all of this was going to shake out. Yet the moment was here and no preparation could check the flood of emotions. They all leaned in for a family hug, at which point Peter began to cry. The past eighteen months were filled with countless ‘if only’s’ – if only he hadn’t gone on that damn party boat while in Miami, if only he hadn’t bet Julio’s money on that heart drug, if only Nick Johnson had kept clear of the Zyptorin study, if only Darryl hadn’t talked with Brad Dellan, if only Brad didn’t have new money to send his way – but it was what it was. His family desperately needed him to stay focused on the future, no matter how crappy things looked.

At least they had a future.

Please check out the sequel to Damage Control at <http://timgilbertsite.com>

