

"The Collectors"

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In Two Parts

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"The Radio Murders"

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Prologue

"The smell of coco cutter is better than any erectile dysfunction drug ever made." That was the thought going through the chief's brain as he held off his own pleasure until just the right moment. Torsha, the spark that returned vigor to his life was drifting under him in blind ecstasy; her movements matched his as they navigated these frequently charted waters, well below the surface. That's the way the old submariner thought. That's the way he liked it.

"Run Silent, Run Deep." Another flash of distraction came to him, this time in scenes of the old movie skittered across his memory. Those nerves and muscles sent up a request once again; "hold steady, boys. Steady as she goes..." Deputy Chief Herman Jeffries smiled at the secret joke. Torsha opened her eyes, just a little, folded her lips inside perfect teeth let the pleasure and pain brush over her face. Jeffries breathed deeply the majesty of her African features; he took his time tracing the spray of her long dreads striking against the soft white of the pillow in the dim light.

"My great man, my loving man..." she whispered.

"My queen of body and spirit..." before he could say more she took his mouth in so fully that it was hard for him to know where he stopped and she began.

It had been more than an hour since they retired to her bed and the loving started. Jeffries was never completely comfortable staying in her home. Their jobs were as conflicted as their bodies were not. All the tragedy of the city he patrolled faded into a distant and unwanted sonar blip. Of course he had not been on street duty in his police career, ever. His was a political appointment to the Bureau of Investigative Services in the city of Chicago. Not unlike so many important jobs in this town, he thought, *here because of who I am, not what I know, not what I do* - more distraction that kept him firm and disciplined. No, he did not want pictures of him leaving Torsha's Division Street brownstone in the morning paper or on some junior TV scandal merchant's evening report. It was no secret that he was seeing the news director for the city's most influential talk radio station, no more than it was unknown that he spent many nights at some of the legal casinos just over the Indiana border or out in the regions laughably called *reservations*. But the chief liked his privacy and it was really more for her, he was certain of it, that their relationship was not a topic of civic conversation.

The movement became rhythm on the rise, he noticed, initiated by his partner who seemed in a trance. Jeffries summoned his fit, 60 year-old body into a higher gear, anchoring his knees and tightening his stomach for greater, smoother acceleration. He knew Torsha well, and he knew that she was nearing her *grand destination*.

"Damn!!" the sound from her was gruff, loud and angry. Jeffries was shocked and not really ready for this event. It was hard to slow, to stop. But she did, she was furious and though the curse was as bad as it got for her, he knew just how bad it was. Then he heard it. It was curious that he had not heard it before. Torsha's blackberry was buzzing on the nightstand. "I'm sorry Herman."

"Don't be." Jeffries gently slipped from her, took a deep breath and grabbed the phone for her.

"Yes." Her voice was deep and professional without a hint of breathlessness. She flipped the phone upside down, moving the microphone away so that she could take several deep breaths while still listening. "Yes, Miss Drabek, it's all right."

"Torsha! Is Chief Jeffries with you?"

"Is this important? It's very late..."

"Look, Torsha, I don't give a fuck if you two are handcuffed to a greased pole. Turn on the radio right now!" Dani Drabek was gone.

"What did that talk show troll want?" Jeffries rubbed the back of his head and sat up in the bed. It was difficult to contain his anger.

"She asked for you at first..."

"Why?" The word came out in a rumble.

"Then she said turn on the radio." Torsha leaned, reaching for the one modern thing in the bedroom, other than the cell phone: a sleek radio/iPod docking station. Jeffries looked at her upper body, her breast moving into

her reach effortlessly and invitingly. Then he breathed in the coco butter, the lotion with which she kept her late-fifties skin like that of a teenager, and the scent of their encounter lingering over the bed. Torsha looked at his renewed arousal, "hold that thought, exec," she smiled broadly and pressed the flush black button at the base of the component

Radio:

Coming up on the final minutes of the party here. Crash on KCI we've had a different show tonight, something I hope never to do again, frankly, it's not easy for a guy like me to open so many wounds and bleed all over my city. You might think it was more like crapping all over, whatever, fact is I've admitted I got a problem and if I help one person tonight, then I guess the dangerous practice of radio expiation was worth it. Benny, you're crashin', what's up, my brother?

Caller:

Crash, I can't believe what I'm hearing, you're my hero, man, and you're telling me you got, like, a drug problem and sh...

Crash:

Let's watch the language, Ben, my man, I'm close enough to being escorted from the building with a couple of gorillas on each arm, I don't need your help to end my career.

Caller:

Sorry, dude. No, I'm just saying, Drugs?

Crash:

Thanks for the call, whatever your name is. Crash got a flash from producer babe Dani "Tits" Drabek. What do you want, I was about to parboil that dumbass...what? From where? No flippin way! What line? Well bring it in, goddamn it! Can she hear me? Lani! For God's sake what's going on! What the hell is this Drabek! Another one of your sick stunts! I will kick your fine little ass...she's what? Turn your goddamn mic on for Christ sake!

Dani:

We got a call from a home in Hyde Park, apparently it sounds like there is a home invasion going on, and someone said your sister is there and she's armed.

Crash:

That's bull and you know it!

Dani:

Crash, she is a fugitive. You know that...

Crash:

She's sick, she needs help. Bring it up! Now!

"Do they know how close I am to locking up the bunch of them and shutting down that foul little sandbox?" Jeffries stood and pulled on his boxers.

That's the problem, Herman, they know full well that they have crossed too many lines already. This can't be a hoax." Torsha snatched the crumpled sheet from her legs, pulled on her short satin robe and began punching buttons on her blackberry.

"Find out where this is happening. I want that woman, that cop killing maniac in my brig by midnight!" Jeffries headed to the bathroom, mumbling colorful swears under his breath.

Home of Professor Everett Crenshaw

Elias Barbicas had little choice on this mission: kill everyone in the house and retrieve the Collector's property. "There is a complication," he whispered to himself. "One in the home who was not expendable. Perhaps two." Barbicas sucked in a breath, felt his hand tighten around the Beretta and dipped his head around the French door frame; assessing the situation. "One threat, one target."

He had chased the illusive woman across northern Indiana and into the heart of Chicago's Hyde Park. The path of death cut by Lani Janich to this point was astonishing, even for someone in the business.

Barbicas weighed his options once more: A single shot to the base of the skull would put her down before she could complete her threat. She had the family under control. Elias could see that Professor Crenshaw was tied to a recliner in the mahogany trimmed living room; something was wedged into his back and there was a sucking wound in his chest. Barbicas was not sure, but he did not think it was a gunshot, nor did he think the professor would last longer than a few minutes without help.

Lani was bouncing with agitation, her arm out stretched, aiming the semi automatic pistol toward the steps that led to the townhouse lower level. She was yelling at the top of her lungs, spewing vile invectives in English and Serbian toward someone on the landing. He could drop her where she stood, free the professor and whomever Lani was directing her anger. But that would not get him closer to the

prize. In fact, Elias thought, *they could be lost forever, and me 'long with them.*

The Collectors were many things but never indirect. *No witnesses, never, and the directive was never negotiated.* This was not so simple. One witness could mean the end of Barbicas' career. And there was one in this house who was far more than a witness. He was a member of that elite group to which Barbicas owed his allegiance. Yet in the message he received just hours before, the unbelievable message was also clear. He was to *retire* a Collector. This would be a first.

And there was one more thing. Barbicas was not quite sure what he was hearing. The entire scene was amplified, echoed from the rafters of the elegant room. He tried to make it out, *did the professor have some enhanced audio system in place? Why?* Barbicas did not like any loose ends when he was about to kill. In his mind it was an art that required near perfection – more than any other. He needed to command the environment. Every molecule was either aligned to his purpose or predictably accounted for. This extra sound, this unknown element shook him almost enough to wait longer than his training knew was prudent; *this was becoming less artful.*

It was time. Unknown sonic mystery or not, to wait meant someone would die before his, or her time. Barbicas channeled his arousal away from his genitals and into the near surface muscles of his arms and legs. He became as he imagined a big cat becomes before revealing himself to his pray and ending the game. That odd and familiar numbness swept over his body, parts of him became almost inanimate, rigid, closer to stone than flesh. His hands and

feet collected the increased blood flow and readied to move like the precision parts of the weapon in his hands. His breathing slowed and ran deeply, flooding oxygen to his brain and the centers that keep him sharp, focused and deadly. Then he heard it. The shot that pounded the air, not down from the target, but up from the unknown location on the stairwell!

"Fuck! What the bloody hell?!" Barbicas moved through the French doors using the weapon as a head to his body's spear. The glass shattering echoed louder than the even Barbicas expected. It was the squeal, the feedback coming from the Bose sound system tucked in just the right places. Barbicas shifted on the balls of his feet, scanning faster than the light could reach his senses.

The professor was in a position Barbicas recognized as harsh and torturous: seated in the leather recliner; sheer strength kept what appeared to be a spike – a *golden* spike - from piercing his cervical spine delivering instant death. A handle of some sort was wedged between the professor and the headrest of the chair. He was gagged. His hands were cuffed beneath his knees and his eyes were oddly calm as they drifted to the telephone that was placed in speaker mode.

"What's happening! Lani! Lani are you all right?" the voice filled the room, but did not originate *from* the room! Barbicas knew the voice. It was the radio talk show host, Kradich, the brother of the woman who held the secret and until moments earlier, two hostages. "This is not a joke, not a stunt, Chicago. This is real, now and the shot you just heard means someone might be dead or hurt." The radio again filled with the sounds of the room.

Barbicas moved toward the professor without taking his eyes off the stairwell. He carefully pulled the spike from his neck and removed the gag.

"Anastasia..." the wounded man whispered. "She is immobile, but made the shot." The clear eyes of the older man beamed toward the stairs.

Barbicas gently moved Crenshaw's head into a more relaxed position. He took a moment, an instant really, to stroke his dark skin with the back of his fingers and place his hand on the older man's heart.

"Daddy! Are you okay! Are yo..." The woman's voice was chopped by a choke that erupted into muted agony. Barbicas was at the wall adjacent to the stairs in an instant. The sight was almost incomprehensible as he carefully snapped his view around the corner and back.

The professor's daughter, who Barbicas knew was a Chicago police captain, was in the death grip of Lani Janich. Blood was soaking into Lani's filthy running suit top and her face was distorted and ravaged with long, red welts. *Insect bites?* But what really puzzled Barbicas was the position of Janich: she was immobilized by what looked like surgical pins in Stacy Crenshaw's injured leg. Red, glistening steel had broken through Janich's chin. Bone and tattered flesh formed her monstrous smile and served as a base to a chilling fountain of slow maroon flow. Crenshaw was pounding on her but weakening, trying in vain to free the two-handed vice around her neck.

"This is not a joke, not a stunt! We are directly tied into a crime scene somewhere in Chicago," Kradich shouted into the charged air. "The police are on their way, but it might be too late..."

Barbicas heard the last words in sheets of infinite vibration, as though the time stretched to the very end of the woman detective's life. Then he heard the heavy accent, in a gurgle of slurred speech. It was the attacker's death rattle. "Not much blooh, 'ust as dey said."

Barbicas measured the shot to pierce the assailant's brain but not Crenshaw's casted leg.

Squeeze, explosion! The bullet flew and entered Lani's skull on the perfect diagonal; chipping an orange-half slice of her head away and throwing a small spray of blood and brain onto Stacy's stressed expression. The bullet scraped the marble floor of the foyer and dusted stone shards and spark but causing Stacy Crenshaw no more injury. Lani's life was over, but her reign of terror lived on: hands, dead yet determined hands stayed around Stacy's neck, muscle spasm in death made the weapons even more deadly. Barbicas took the six steps in one leap and tried to rip the dead woman's hands from the police captain's neck. He was shocked at the strength of the corpse. He could see the desperation in Stacy's eyes. Time was running out. Barbicas pulled a stiletto from his pocket and sliced hard into the threatening carpal tendon, releasing first one hand, then with the same hack, rendered the other harmless. Stacy began to cough and gasp for breath. She pushed the horrific body from her and looked at the man who had just saved her life.

"Who..." the coughing continued.

"F'get you saw me." His light English accent seemed out of place on the dark young man. He was clearly Mediterranean, or... Stacy looked into his eyes and tried to memorize the face.

"You have to stay...statement..." the coughing returned. Warbles of sirens pieced the moment and Kradich ranted on the air.

"Now what? Is it over? What Happened! Lani? Svetlana? Are you there...are you...alive." Kradich's voice trailed and weakened, as though he knew the answer without prompt.

"Murder, Mr. Kradich. And redemption." The professor spoke from his recliner. "And yes, it is over." The professor saw the gold spike that had moments earlier threatened to end his life, while his daughter struggled to save him. He narrowed his eyes and tried to read the faint relief of numbers still visible, darkened at the edges from the hasty mold. '933' was all he could make out. He dropped his head to the recliner and watched as Barbicas bolted for the balcony. He closed his eyes and slowly shook his head.

Barbicas noticed the spike and snatched it from the professor's lap. His eyes widened. "She didn't! She couldn't!" he screamed.

"It is just beginning, Elias." Professor Everett Crenshaw let free a long breath. "We are both expendable now."

Chapter One

<< Rewind

Torsha Lofton arrived at the KCI Radio in record time. She reluctantly rode in Chief Jeffries' unmarked, black Suburban, lights flashing as he headed in an "L" route south from her Division Street brownstone to the Hyde Park home of Captain Stacy Crenshaw and her father. Already Jeffries' investigators were in the large production suite listening to a playback of the drama most of the city heard live less than forty-five minutes earlier.

The news director nibbled her lip, realizing that she had forgotten to replace the moisturizing cream on her full mouth. Torsha was thankful that her mahogany complexion did not reveal the blush she felt remembering the intimate removal of the balm. It only took a second to return to the all-business information gatherer.

"Ms. Drabek." Torsha approached acting program director. Dani Drebeke folded one forearm under her breasts and dug into her cheek with her knuckle. Torsha recognized this stress body-motion. She was not surprised.

"Sorry I ruined you and the chief's middle-aged mombo." Dani barely moved her eyes from the men in wrinkled suits who had invaded her studios.

"You were correct to call. And I would not characterize your personal life in any way."

"Yeah, I get it, you ain't me." Drebek took a deep breath and looked at her watch. It was nearly midnight. "What the fuck is happening, Torsha? When did this place become a slaughterhouse?"

"Do we know what happened?"

"These geniuses wouldn't leak if I shanked 'em." Dani's short, black hair spiked as she moved tight fingers of both hands across her scalp. "All I know is my livelihood is about to go loose jell-o on me thinking his sister bought it tonight."

"His sister was a cold-blooded killer." Torsha looked at the young woman. Dani's boyish good looks and kick-boxing hardened body made her appear taller than her barely five-foot, one inch. "Some might sympathize with the detective who was..." Torsha caught herself.

"You suck, Lofton. And I mean that literally. You know what happened!"

"I'm a reporter. I ask the right questions."

"You fuck the guy who has all the answers." Dani struck a defiant pose. "Crash's sister is dead, isn't she?"

"Probably."

"Goddamnit!" Dani dropped her face into the palm of her hand. "A fugitive I can handle. A prisoner, even one on death row, I can deal. But dead! Crash will be unlistenable for weeks. Unstable for months." Dani spoke to no one, really.

"How did that episode get on the air, Miss Drebek?"

Dani looked at Torsha with mild shock. She grabbed her by the upper arm and pulled her away from the studio, and the police. "You don't know?"

"Know what?"

"That crazy bitch called before she assaulted Stacy's dad...before..." Dani's confident face suddenly crashed into tears.

"Captain Crenshaw is okay...so I'm told." Torsha watched as Dani buried her feelings as quickly as they surfaced. "I know you have feelings for her, Miss..."

"Will you cram that 'Miss' shit, and leave my feelings out of it. KCI is a news-talk station and we are in the middle of a news story. I hope I'm not the only one who sees a problem here, *Miss* fucking News Director."

"It crossed my mind." Torsha made sure the detectives were still occupied. "There is a difference between injecting a news organization into a story and being forced into one."

Dani stared into Torsha's clear, dark eyes with mild disbelief. "I gotta check on Crash. Tell the Gestapo that those audio files belong to KCI. I made them dubs, but the masters stay." Dani zipped down the long hallway to the collection of studios and offices reserved for the evening talk show host.

This was the second act in a series of events, Torsha thought. Herman Jefferies had a different kind of fondness for his commander, Captain Crenshaw, far different from Dani Drabek's affection for the wounded detective. Crenshaw was injured in the line of duty trying to save Lani Janich's children from tumbling over a quarry bridge.

Torsha had reported the story with the cold analytical eye of a news professional. But there was no getting around the human tragedy, the very nearness of the drama.

She walked slowly to the newsroom. The late hour, all the police activity and the sudden presence of the department head surprised the young crew. They instinctively tapped at their keyboards faster, harder. "No need to impress, I know the great job you do." She looked at the wall of awards that lined the long pool of work stations. "And so does the nation." She smiled just enough to express satisfaction. "Who's cutting the audio from tonight?" A young woman with a tiny body and wide smile raised her hand as though still an undergrad. "Good. It *leads* until I say otherwise." Torsha pulled a jangle of keys from her purse and inserted one of them into the knob of her office door. "And no one holds back the KCI angle."

"Miss Lofton? Should we mention Crash?" Another young woman asked without looking away from her quickly filling screen.

"What do you think?" She walked into the smallish office and closed the door behind her. The laptop seemed to scream Torsha's name. It was her constant companion, so it seemed, except for those brief moments when she is on the air at precisely the top and bottom of the hours between 10am and 4pm. The telephone and the computer, those were her tools of the trade. It was times like these when she envied her man, Herman Jeffries who had an entire city in his tool chest and his workspace. He used his guile, his command of the language, his knowledge of human nature and his administrative skills honed to a gleaming edge by The Fleet – The School of the Boat as he often called it.

Jeffries kept his men and women on track closing some of the most complex crimes in a very complicated city.

She opened the smooth top of the machine and called up "Newsroom 4.0," the main application that supplied her staff with news copy in teleprompter fashion along with the appropriate audio. KCI had a nearly a paperless news department. She highlighted the series of stories that began the ten days earlier. With two clicks of the keys the scripts from the opening of the episode appeared on her screen.

KCI HAS LEARNED THAT A HOME INVASION IN THE AFFLUENT TOWN OF HYATT, INDIANA HAS BEEN LINKED TO A BODY FOUND IN CALUMET PARK EARLY THIS MORNING. THE VICTIM HAS BEEN IDENTIFIED AS PETER JANICH, AN EXECUTIVE ON THE MERCANTILE EXCHANGE. JANICH SUFFERED A GUNSHOT TO THE NECK. POLICE BELIEVE HE WAS DUMPED IN THE SOUTHSIDE PARK.

(SOUND – BIS DEPUTY CHIEF HERMAN JEFFRIES)
JANICH'S WIFE SVETLANA, KNOWN AS LANI, WAS HOSPITALIZED AFTER BEING FOUND DISPENDENT IN THE HYATT TOWN SQUARE AROUND 2 IN THE MORNING. INVESTIGATORS ARE FOLLOWING UP ON REPORTS THAT THE COUPLE WAS FORCED FROM THEIR HOME.

Torsha placed the cursor on the yellow bar indicating accompanying audio and clicked play. The voice was distinct and measured. "At 4:05 we received a report that the victim was seen being forced from a SUV. The witness provided evidence that there were at least two others in the vehicle, one male and one female. Chicago Bureau of Investigation is continuing the follow-up." The relationship

between Herman Jeffries and Torsha was just getting serious when he provided the sound bite. It was an exclusive for KCI. Torsha smiled at the professional courtesy. That night, after that interview, they spent the night at a downtown hotel. Torsha stole a robe from the suite. Chief Jeffries threatened to "hook her up."

The update on the story reported in drive time provided more details. It was then that the report included a key revelation about Lani.

THE MURDER OF MERC TRADER PETER JANICH HAS A CONNECTION TO THE KCI FAMILY. TALK HOST BILL KRADICH IS THE BROTHER OF THE VICTIM'S WIFE. KRADICH TELLS KCI NEWS THAT HIS SISTER STILL HAS NO MEMORY OF THE EVENTS OF LAST NIGHT AND EARLY THIS MORNING. DOCTORS HAVE LANI JANICH UNDER OBSERVATION WHILE POLICE WAIT TO QUESTION HER.

POLICE ARE ALSO SEEKING INFORMATION ON A DARK SUV WITNESSES HAVE PLACED AT THE SCENE. A MALE DRIVER AND AT LEAST ONE OTHER, POSSIBLY A FEMALE WERE REPORTEDLY IN THE VEHICLE AT THE TIME JANICH WAS DUMPED IN THE PARK.

Torsha winced at the thought of Peter Janich's family. She imagined his young children, Sue, Britny and the youngest six-year-old Kyle and the terror they must have endured. It took the otherwise detached journalist several attempts before she finally reached the keyboard and opened the follow-up piece that put the whole ugly story into

perspective. There was real heroism that night on the nearly 300-foot overpass. The story was reported by one of her best young talents. Torsha decided to listen to the audio, rather than re-read the copy.

Radio:

Media outlets do everything they can to avoid the spotlight in a news story, especially one that involves murder and the potential threat to innocent children. But it wasn't long before it came clear that this radio station was at the center of the abduction and murder of Peter Janich of Hyatt Indiana.

Torsha stopped the audio file. She found her gaze fixed on the odd gift from the program director-turned-murderer Jerome Bennett: a coin commemorating the man attributed with inventing modern radio. It was a striking medallion encased in amber Lucite. Bennett had found it while on a vacation in the Mediterranean. He said it was a natural since Torsha had actually been nominated for the coveted award named for the Italian scientist, Marconi, given for radio excellence on an international scale.

The surprising generosity made the depth of Bennett's deconstruction even more difficult to comprehend. Countless thousands of stories had passed her eyes in her 30-year career. Still, this was hard to listen to. She pressed the space bar and the report continued.

...investigators were able to link Janich and his partner Howard Murad to KCI program director Jerome Bennett. In a classic case of long suppressed revenge, Bennett

believed that Janich and Murad were responsible for the death of his father more than thirty years ago. In a brazen act Bennett engaged unwitting coconspirators in his deadly plans. Staff members of KCI believed the abduction was a radio stunt. In yet another strange twist much of the crimes were actually caught on tape.

A tiny ring interrupted the monologue. Torsha jumped a little in her chair and pulled her phone from her pocket.

"Torsha? Herman."

"Herman, I was just replaying this mess."

"It is a mess. Stacy and her father the professor have been hospitalized. Stacy for a second time. Her leg may be hopeless..."

Torsha closed the audio program. "That's horrible, Herman. I assume Mrs. Janich is..."

"Dead. My men arrived after the shooter escaped."

"And the case?"

"We'll have to keep it open until we talk to Captain Crenshaw and get an ID on her..."

"Her hero, Herman?"

"There is such a thing as justifiable homicide, my love." Jeffries was silent for a few seconds. "There are still several loose ends."

"There are always loose ends following a blood bath."

"It's not that. You have done some fantastic reporting. Let me ask you, do you think that all this killing was just over a...vendetta?"

Torsha could hear the buzz of activity indicating Chief Jeffries had called from the crime scene. "I'm not sure, what have you found?"

"This is not an interview, Torsha, it is part of the investigation. You knew Jerome Bennett, you worked with him. Do you think his only motivation was a psychotic obsession with the man who indirectly caused his father's death?"

"As I understand it, chief, there was that and the desire to harm his children. So yes, he was capable of such cruelty." Jeffries was quiet again. "Herman, are you going to help me here? As it stands we have, *had* on payroll a murderer, a fugitive and still have a family member of a perpetrator of a sensational crime spree. If there is more, something that can use to distance my radio station from this horror, then I need to know."

"All I can tell you is that this new player has...complicated things."

"Do you have any idea who killed Lani? Who saved Captain Crenshaw?"

"He's a ghost, Torsha. And I suspect a professional."

"Professional what? Law enforcement? Killer?"

"I have to go. I'm sorry. I'll call you in the morning."

"Late morning, Herman." The line went dead. They never said goodbye, the shared notion is that the conversation never ends.

Chapter Two ^Ejection

Elias Barbicas sat in the large, reddish-gold lobby of the Sheraton Towers on North Water Street, his leather bag at his feet and the Trib draped across his lap. It was 5:15 on Tuesday morning. It was a time in a city this size when the night meets the day – the deviant meets normal – as it crosses paths to and from their unique worlds. Elias was not sure where he fit in the balance of sex workers and businessmen, gamblers and brokers, hunter and prey.

What he did know was the sting of failure. It did not matter that he saved more than he killed on this *outing*. It was never about the killing, it was about finishing. The Collectors gave him a task and completing it was not just accepted, it was a way of life; his life.

Elias thought about his arrival in the city three days earlier, about the young woman whom he met in the park and who gave him his final instructions. They had never met before and – as was often the case – she found him attractive enough to stray from the script the stranger had given her who knows when or where. It was always the phones, the pre-paid cell phones linked to an untraceable number that filled in the compartmentalized mission. Even Barbicas did not know what his task was, not completely, until the final step was taken. Her improvisation – Barbicas was certain – came at a price. She became a liability and expendable; another headless torso floating in a foul urban tributary, anonymous bone dust in an industrial incinerator, even unidentifiable filler in a packing house sausage. He had seen how easy it was for the nearly invisible to finally vanish. He had caused it himself as part

of his training. And they always used very common women for these late transfers; plucked from the background without disturbing the landscape.

So he sat, watched and waited. Yet there was something new that he could not shake: the look on the pretty captain's face when he cut the dead woman's claws from her throat. It was as though she had seen something she never thought she would see. Barbicas was glad he was there. There to see her, there to save her.

"Nice day for a flight." Barbicas was looking right at the young woman who stood in front of him, but did not see her – not really – until she spoke. He could tell she was still *on the clock*, and she was clearly relieved that it did not involve being penetrated by a stranger. Elias could smell the punch of sex, latex, Listerine and some sweet liquor. He suspected cheap brandy.

"Unless your name is Icarus." He said without much enthusiasm.

"Then, a night flight is more desirable." The woman was bored and, unlike the first contact of this job, had no interest in engaging Elias in anything other than what she was paid to do. She placed a small cell phone on the seat. "Just ask Daedalus." The woman turned on her spiked heels and scanned the lobby for one last job. She was young, too young to be so experienced, Elias thought.

"Ey. Wait." Elias stood. The woman stopped suddenly and came back to the spot, eager to please, perhaps thinking that a tip was in order. "You have family... 'ere?"

"What?" She placed her hands on her mini-skirted hips and spread dark lips into on a wide, contemptuous smile.

"In this city, do you 'ave family, anyone you care about?" Elias held his gaze.

"What business is it of yours?" Her tired eyes managed a slight flame as she crossed her arms, giving greater exaggeration to her pushed-up breast, jutted her head back to take in the whole of the man with a stare of disgust.

"I want to know." Elias held out two fifties, folded discreetly between two fingers.

"If they catch me here... This ain't no hooker friendly zone, ya' know."

"I just want to know, do you 'ave family here. Or if you leave, will anyone miss you?"

She stretched her mouth in disbelief. "Mister, in this life no one misses you. They just miss the money."

"Then leave. Get out 'a town. Today. 'Ere." Elias moved close and dropped a roll of bills in the woman's cocktail purse. He grabbed her by the shoulders and hugged her like a departing cousin. "You won't last the day. But if you leave, now... could save your life." He whispered.

The woman pulled away and looked at the stranger, perhaps for the first time, and she saw something she seldom saw: concern, genuine concern. "Look mister. I don't know who you are or what you're trying to say, all I know is some dude gave me a lot of money to have some weird-ass conversation and give you this phone. I don't even know what I was sayin'."

"Just listen to me. Please." Elias stood back and waited.

"Yeah, ah-ite, whatever. I guess I could go to..."

"Don't tell me, I don't want to know. Just leave, today."

The woman flipped through the bills without removing the wad from her purse. She glanced nervously around and snapped her eyes to Elias for just a second. Then she turned and hurried away, looking straight ahead and nearly stumbling on her heels.

Elias watched her leave. He also looked around to see if he was being watched. Nothing. The small phone was still on the seat. He picked it up and wondered if there would be consequences for what he had just done. *Not if, but what...and when.* Elias Barbicas was beyond caring.

"Dr. Gursahaney." The male voice, summoned by the touch of the *send* button, was direct.

"You have information on Crenshaw?"

"Yes, I was told you would call on this number. He is stable, but critical. Prognosis, I would say is favorable."

"Thank you, doctor."

"Might I ask?"

"Yes?"

"I was told you are family, but I know his daughter was also admitted..."

Elias waited a full three seconds before answering. "I...I am his son." The words nearly caught in his throat. On its face it was a mistake, but Elias seldom made calculated errors.

"Thank you. Should I tell him you called?"

"That is not necessary, doctor. He will know." He ended the call.

Barbicas pulled his leather bag from the floor and hung the strap on his muscular shoulder. Deceit was his

stock in trade, but for one of the few times in his life he was honest. The answer to the doctor's question was correct and the revelation went against all The Collectors stood for, all the training they had given him. It was not an error, but it was potentially no less fatal.

He made his way out of the hotel through the brightly flowered passageway leading to the river walk. The dawn was breaking over Lake Michigan and the irregular shadows of Navy Pier began to silhouette in the bright tan horizon, bleached pale blue on the water. Elias casually weaved through the joggers and power walkers and leaned on the iron fence that separated the path from the steel girded wall of the Chicago River. *Splloosh!* The small phone met the surface of the fast moving current, leaving only a fluid and quite temporary mark, never to be seen again.

Elias thought about the priceless nature of the items - objects of the failed mission - and could not help but contrast them with the expendable nature of the waterborne device, the young woman who delivered it and all the dimmed lives left in the wake. He pulled the spike from his carry-on bag and bounced it in his hand. *Ten ounces, easy,* he thought. *Just enough to fuck up the whole bloody thing.* It would have been hard to imagine someone doing something so foolish, so utterly wasteful. It would have been impossible to fathom had he not seen Lani Janich. The woman was mad, and the most efficient killer Elias Barbicas had ever seen among humans. "Like a hungry blue that one. And blues were always hungry." He looked at the dark outline, 933, once representing a ghost of a different kind; something that was not to be, never to be

except for a kink in history. Elias Barbicas tried to catch the eye of a young runner. The pretty girl looked back and managed a breathy smile. He watched her run east into the sunrise, noticing taught response of her butt to the pounding of the pavement. She looked back and the smile grew but only for an instant. *If only you knew what I am about to do.* *Splunk*, the solid gold ingot followed the cheap phone into the Chicago River.

He thought about adding a third splash to the drink, but he knew it would only ruin an expensive pair of boots and change nothing. It would take more than a deep running river to end him. It would take The Collectors and they controlled the clock.

Chapter Three

□Format

"I want to know which one of your trigger-happy assassins dropped the hammer on my sister!" Bill "Crash" Kradich passed behind his desk. The large window poured morning sun onto Torsha Lofton, Dani Drebeke and a uniformed visitor.

"Sit down, Mr. Kradich." Herman Jeffries commanded. "This is not your show and your sister is...was a cop killer, a spree killer. Need I remind you, among other things." Jeffries stared unblinking into the sunlight and the bearded figure who tried to set the tone.

"What happened to due process, Herm? Why don't you ask your girlfriend Whoopie Cronkite over there, I'm sure she can give you a quick primer."

"Mr. Kradich, I know you and your family have suffered a great loss..."

"You don't know shit, Torsha. Don't pretend you do." Kradich spun his seat and plopped into it, combing through his beard with the tips of his fingers. "Shot down like a fuckin' dog. And don't think for a minute I buy this invisible man bullshit."

Jeffries stood suddenly, sending small shock waves through the air. "I'll not play this game, Kradich. I'll find out who sent your sister to her maker because God knows the state of Illinois would not. What I want to know is how it got on your sad excuse for a radio show and why."

"Tell him, Dani." Kradich waved a dismissive hand.

"You know how this works, Chief Jeffries?" Dani Drebeke sat back in her chair. "We plan for days to put on a good show, consider every contingency, every monkey

wrench and still our best shows are the ones that just happen. Sparked by a phone call, breaking news or just something out of the blue."

"Like the scheme that sent your lackey into the Janich home?" Jeffries shot back. "The accidental felon that conspired with that lunatic programmer who fancied himself a family annihilator?" Jeffries moved into Dani's space. "Funny thing about that pathology, Ms Drabek. It's usually the perpetrator's family he seeks to destroy, not someone else's." The tall man surveyed every face in the room, including the love of his life. "I repeat, this is not a game, people."

"We got the call, that's all." Dani demurred. "The light flashes, I pick up the phone and there's a murder on the other end. I'm *not* supposed to pipe it through?"

"You got a call from whom?" Torsha asked.

"Crenshaw, that butcher who shot Lani, somebody else, we don't know!" Kradich stood. Jeffries tilted his head with a slight grin. Bill Kradich looked up, feeling short, he sat back down. "Dani called the cops, then she called you, thinking you two might be together."

"How about your demented sister." Herman Jeffries folded his arms across his broad chest and began slowly. "I have been known to make a bet or two, I suppose it's no secret. Every day I make decisions that are a matter of life and death, have in this career and while commanding war boats for my country."

"Do I have to listen to this fascist bullshit." Kradich mumbled.

An art piece Kradich purchased in Dubrovnik exploded into a thousand pieces, hurled against the west

wall by the chief. "I do not take any of this or your complicity in these matters lightly... at... all, *Crash*."

"Son of a bitch! That'll cost you 40,000 kuna, asshole. That's about 10 grand in graft."

"Shut up, Kradich. Perhaps you aren't aware of the law." Jeffries leaned into the oversized desk. "You are still an accessory to the Janich kidnapping and murder. With one phone call I can have the feeb in here and even if you are as clean and a newborn's ass, which *you ain't*, it'll take them years to figure it out."

"Now wait a minute. We had nothing to do with that. Tell him, Torsha. It was Bennett. The man was insane."

"Who was at Captain Crenshaw's home? And why?" The tree faces in Crash's office dropped eye level by several degrees. Jeffries was not sure what to make of it. "In my business revenge is a perfectly good motive for murder most of the time. But there's something else going on here and I don't buy that your sister took it to her grave."

"Why don't you ask her?" Torsha spoke softly, but to Jeffries it was as good as a scream. "Stacy Crenshaw, I mean. She must have some idea of the identity of her savior."

"We intend to." Jeffries did not look at the news director but continued to examine the faces of the broadcasters.

"As far as Lani's secret, if there is one, the only one who knew anything about Peter's business is Howard Murad." Kradich offered.

"Yes, Mr. Murad. Another family caught in your sister's free kill zone."

"You don't know that." There was little conviction in Kradich's protest.

"Oh yeah, just another coincidence." Dani chided.

"Who's side are you on?"

"Certainly not on the side of a serial killer, or spree killer or whatever that crazy bitch was up to!"

"I've heard enough." Jeffries voice boomed. "We will hunt down Janich's killer, even though it will be tough not to pin a medal on him. And I don't want to hear that bit of twisted reality radio on the air again until we clear it."

"What, like an audio crime scene?" Dani wrinkled her brow and looked at Torsha and Kradich. "Hate to break it to you, colonel, but there's no such thing. We're protected by the First Amendment and we'll do whatever we see fit with that audio. It belongs to us."

"I'm afraid she's right, Herman. You have no jurisdiction regarding the use of that material."

"Is that so?" Jeffries tugged at the bottom of his uniform jacket, removing any hint of a crease or wrinkle. "You know how many ways I can mess you up?" The deputy chief stepped toward the door. "Just a little advice. Don't play with fire."

The three sat in stunned silence. It was Dani who broke the chill. "Did he just threaten us?"

"I would not take him lightly, Miss Drebek."

"Fuck him. Fuck all of 'em." Kradich pounded his desk. "I got half a mind to turn my show into nothing *but* playing that audio on a loop, back to back, over and over 'til Christmas!"

"Yeah, we'll call it Crash Kradich's *Radio Murders*." Dani puffed out a half chuckle, and then stopped, froze.

Her large blue eyes bounced once and locked on Bill Kradich. "What did I just say?"

Kradich was holding her gaze. "Yeah, what the hell are you thinking you brilliant little dyke?" Kradich grinned wide, sending chutes of hair in a ray-like pattern from his chin and jaw.

"The Radio Murders?" Torsha repeated. "You can't be serious."

"We have the audio from the Janich murder. You can get your niece, Sue to talk about what happened to her out on that expressway bridge! Hell, if Greta can make a career out of a dead teenager in Aruba, we can make a talk format out of a series of Chicagoland murders."

"Wow." Kradich's eyes darted from Dani to Torsha. "Wow, wow, wow! Not crazy about putting my niece in the middle of this, but..."

"Think of the play, Crash. A seventeen-year-old, just lost both parents. I mean, she is your ward now, isn't she?"

"Yeah, I'm the only family for the three of them."

"That is exactly my point! Talk about character mining. You have instant credibility, instant sympathy. Even the pugs who hate you will listen. They won't be able to shut us off!"

Torsha stood and shook her head. "I am having trouble listening to this now. Not at all sure you have thought this through, either one of you."

"This is not journalism, Torsha. It's show biz, it's compelling content. It's what we do." Dani pulled a legal pad from Crash's desk and started jotting down notes, story ideas and guests suggestions.

"I think you need to replay what Chief Jeffries said. You don't want to make an enemy out of him."

The two were steeped in an impromptu production meeting. Torsha looked at her watch. It was time she prepared her midday news cast. *This is not going to play well*, she thought, *not well at all*.

Chapter Four Render

The bananas were turning one by one, in the very order that Genevieve Murad had selected them five days earlier. Instead of the perfect ripeness for her adoring husband, they blackened and wasted hanging on the mahogany tree Howard found for her in a Nairobi market. The rotting fruit and so many other things, little things mostly, fueled Murad's endless tears. His world had gone from unimaginable luxury and leisure to pure hell in what seemed like an instant. But the importer knew better. Like the tropical tree that bore the yellow reminder of his loss, this took time to cultivate.

The Logan Square home still had the scent, sparkle and warmth of his beloved daughters and wife. The police seemed to treat their horrific murder as a sidebar to Lani Janich's more spectacular slaughters. She facilitated the death of her husband, her sister-in-law, two law enforcement officers and at least two others. *What was a drowning of three angels in a polluted river?* The thought brought more pain and more tears. His normally plastered

comb-over and was in shambles and his round middle jiggled with every wave of hysterics.

The import business that Murad ran with his wife brought literally a daily truckload of money. In his grief he could not remember how he got involved in the business. And the proposition his old school friend Peter Janich brought to him exactly one year ago was also made of clouds.

Murad blew his nose and tried to focus. He wanted to live in a place before any of this happened; before he heard the story Peter so expertly told that August morning.

"The war, it was coming. FDR knew it." Peter told his friend.

"It was impossible, Janich." Murad retained the slight Turkish accent, even though he had lived in the US since his late teens. "No one knew. Most thought the Nazis were the savior of a broken Europe in 1933."

Peter scoffed. "That's the faulty history we are taught in schools, but Roosevelt knew differently. A Powerful Germany was always a threat. A *mechanized* German would gravitate to war. It was their nature." There was a confidence, a cockiness to Janich that made him only palatable in small doses. "Think of what was happening here at home. The economy was being held together with make-work projects and financial slight-of-hand. We were about to come off the gold standard, fiat money for the first time in history." Peter's excitement grew with every sentence. "Imagine that, Murad! We were about to base trade on a whim, a prayer and a promise. What would the world think? The great American dollar, as substantial as mayo sandwich against the mighty British Pound Sterling.

This was an incredible gamble, Murad. And FDR was no gambler, unless he held all the cards."

Murad came back to the present and unconsciously rubbed the black armband. "Janich gone. My beautiful Genevieve, gone." *It was a simple idea, Janich said. One that brought everything down.* The thought of his daughters, struggling at the bottom of the Calumet River while the filthy water flooded the Jaguar was too much to bear. Murad's sobs grew violent. He threw everything not nailed down from the perfectly appointed kitchen, breaking as much as he could without a thought of the meticulous purchases his wife and daughters made for *The Perfect Kitchen*. Time meant nothing. It was fatigue that finally ended the rage. Murad settled at the base of his wide, spiral stairs and began thinking the unthinkable. Echoes of Peter and the deadly starting gate returned.

"Now I can't tell you how I found out. Well I could, but I'd have to kill you." Peter paused with no hint of sarcasm. "When FDR removed the country from the gold standard, he also outlawed a right most Americans should have fought to retain. As of April of 1933 gold became contraband and the dollar dropped in value by nearly half. The country was in such desperate straits that almost no one noticed. The coin of the realm was no more."

It was a simple plan, a brilliant plan, and Murad had the perfect partners to facilitate the deal. He was not easily persuaded to bring the international financiers into the delicate business. The dealings he had with The Collectors were as big as they were dangerous. But he agreed to let them know what Peter had found. It was the first time he had every talked to a person, in person, and not a voice on a

phone. In the early days it was on graffiti coated payphones in neighborhoods surrounded by prostitutes and drug dealers. Later those same players brought The Collectors to him on untraceable mobile phones. Murad thought the mysterious *bankers* would say no, perhaps even laugh at the prospect brought by a glorified trinket dealer and his friend the pork belly speculator.

But they did not laugh. *He* did not laugh. Murad could not imagine Sinn Rìoghalachd – Sinn Re as he was known to a tiny few - ever laughing unless it was the humor only the evil could find as they inflicted pain on another. Murad had never felt such fear in the presence of another human being as he did on that night on that massive ship somewhere in the Mediterranean. He wanted to tell the First Collector that he had changed his mind, that it was all a misunderstanding. But he was certain that wasting Sinn Re's time was a capital offence in this isolated domain. So he outlined the plan Peter had envisioned. Murad was to take possession of the items in Turkey the next day, supplied with a case packed with The Collector's Euros. *So much intrigue*, he remembered thinking.

Though the importer had dealt with dark corners of his homeland in the early days of his business, this was different. Sinn Re assured him that *security was infallible*; which Murad also took to mean that The Collectors were watching him as well. There was only one stipulation, one deal-breaker insisted upon by the powerful Greek: the seals must be impervious to sunlight and not be broken in any way, "never broken, you hear me Murad? And I will know." Murad was made painfully aware that the condition of the items was critical to the health of the exchange and

that of the dealer. He was confident that compliance was guaranteed.

So it began and Howard Murad and Peter Janich blindly walked into a world of which they knew nothing. The payday was counted in tens of millions, according to Janich. But Murad knew that there must have been something else, some more The Collectors were bargaining for. Even hundreds of millions, billions did not matter to them. *I should have known nothing good would have come from this...nothing but pain.*

That morning was funeral day and all he could see was black; black clothes, black armbands and black curtains sheathing three caskets. There were no flowers; he would have none of it. There were many, many friends in attendance at the Catholic Church, his wife's devotion second only to her family; a church he never set foot in and to which one daughter gravitated while the other shunned. It did not matter now, they were all together; the three people he loved most in the world and the only women he ever trusted, side by side in expensive boxes. Murad spend most of the proceedings on his knees in the pew, sobbing softly as the priest and others sent meaningless words, he thought, into the arching and ornate space. Murad did not hear a single sound. When he tried to acknowledge the sympathy and concern, the words faded into a blubbing breakdown before any semblance of English or French or Turkish was understood. Howard Murad was fluent in all three and nearly so in Arabic, but on this day he truly was a Turkish Mute.

Home later; the house was filled with people, all with thick paper plates of some donated delicacy. Howard politely met them all. When his family was whole there were parties all the time. Genevieve Murad loved to entertain and his daughters were always popular. He looked around at the faces - all carefully held in somber expressions - and remembered some of the gatherings. Captains of business and collectors of finer things, film and television celebrities (on their way to either coast and in ascension or decline), minor politicians and sports figures all mingled with bishops and other religious leaders. The discussions ranged from the Murads' latest bit of history - available for a reasonable price - to the juiciest of gossip about well-known Chicagoans. Now there was no hostess, except for the accidental ones who tried to make sure every dish was accepted and made available to the other guests. Howard Murad would peek around the bodies from his large chair toward the rear of the great room, hoping, *knowing* he would see his beloved wife chatting up a cardinal, or his daughter button-holing a film producer, or his youngest flirting with a Chicago Cub. None of this existed anymore, and Murad sank into himself until the last guest had departed.

One of his neighbors lent her maid to help clean up. Murad thought the gesture vulgar in the extreme, but he paid the young woman handsomely and definitely needed the help. The pretty Jamaican immigrant did the dishes, straightened as best she could and sent a gentle goodnight to the man slumped at the kitchen table.

Murad chuckled a small, sad laugh seeing the place now, following his rampage. He wondered what the

borrowed domestic worker might have thought were she to walk in at that moment. He wanted her to walk in, to smile that bright island smile; it might have made him feel a little loved. The house was so quiet that it was difficult to tell if he, too, had not joined his family beyond the realm of the living. Then it came to him: that was exactly where he wanted to be. There was nothing in this world that mattered to him, nothing left to care for or work for. Murad was utterly defeated.

The small American Derringer, a dueling twin to the one he kept in his office, was cushioned in its velvet lined collector's box and locked in a cabinet in the bedroom. Murad began the climb to the upper quarters of his home, slowly taking each step as though his feet weighted barely the limit of his strength. The shadow that brushed past the landing went unnoticed; the noise did not.

"Hello! Is someone here?" Murad's call was dull and uninterested. If it were a burglar, so much the better, *let him do the deed*. A second shadow caught Murad in the corner of his eye, this time entering his daughter Irina's room. The notion that a stranger was desecrating his beloved child's private quarters infuriated Murad and he sprang up the final few steps. "Is someone there? You cannot be here, this is private! Now please come out and leave, it is late." Murad stood at the top landing, the chandelier throwing crystalline streaks across his face and the stripped-paper walls of the hall. He noticed how the light complimented the contrast of the wallpaper and thought, again, of his wife, *how clever she was*.

Then, with heavy, foul air and a deafening plunge, the darkness came. Murad struggled against the canvass bag

that pressed against his face and the powerful arm that held his chest immobile. He was locked against his own body and he felt the elastic binding wrap and squeeze his elbows to his soft sides. Then something took his feet from the ground and the fight was against an unseen and confusing lack of stability; against gravity itself. The metallic bar was dull against his mouth, but the shattering of his forward teeth and the warm flow from his inner mouth led to intense pain and dizzying weakness. Then something else. Murad could not tell, but it first lessened the pain, and then everything faded. Sleep finally came to the wounded man. It was not death, but for an instant his suffering ended.

The two men finished binding the large package and moved down the stairs to the rear of the house. The panel truck was already running. WestEnd Catering in bold, black letters on the sides, served as stealth advantage in the neighborhood accustomed to such services. Murad was placed in a box fitted for shipment of a living creature and the lid was nailed shut. The stenciled label, 'DANGEROUS - EXOTIC REPTILE - SEDATED' adorned the sides of the box, and it would receive careful treatment on its freight flight to the eastern Mediterranean.

Chapter Five Family

Bill Kradich was secretly uncomfortable around his nieces and nephew. He was especially ill at ease when the kids were in his Lake Shore Drive apartment. For a guy who talked for a living he just never knew what to say to kids.

The thought that these children had no one but him to depend upon, tightened his sphincter; that was exactly how he put it to Sue.

The seventeen-year-old looked up from her sadness and gave her uncle a heavy-breath. "That is so lame, Bill, I'm not..." the young voice trailed off. It was so uncharacteristic that Crash Kradich felt even more helpless.

"This is about as bad as it can get, Sue. We need to stick together."

"When you come up with something other than clichés let me know." Sue looked up at her uncle. She could see her chiding hurt him. "I'm sorry, Uncle Billy. I lost my mom and dad, but you lost the closest person to you all in one really bad week."

"Lani was sick. I just can't believe it happened so fast. I'm still not convinced she was responsible for all..." Kradich thought better of reminding his niece of the depths of her mother's psychosis.

"Carnage. The word is carnage, Billy. Don't forget she was the one who lured us into the car that went over that bridge. If it wasn't for that brave cop we'd be dead for sure." Sue straightened, as though standing against the awful memory. "She killed a bunch of people. I'm *not* okay with that, but I know it happened." Sue looked down at her body. Her uncle had a tasteless framed nude in the kitchen and it made her feel inadequate.

"Did you fuck her?" Sue sniffed throwing her chin toward the photograph.

"What?" Kradich followed her eyes to the piece. "Actually, I'm the one who got screwed. On the price. Thing cost me 10k."

"Jesus! You did get screwed." Sue managed a coy smile. She looked through the wide entry at her younger sister and brother reading to each other in Kradich's leather and chrome living room. "Sometimes I wish I was a little kid again. They seem to get over things." She flashed her green eyes and flipped her strawberry blond hair in two fingers. "I mean they're hurtin', no doubt, but they know someone will be there for them."

"They know you will be there, Sue." Kradich stared at his niece. She was growing up so fast and the events actually made her look worn out. There were rings under her eyes from lack of sleep and she was jumpy from being in the middle of this ugly drama from the start. Still she was pretty, much like he remembered his sister as they were growing up on the farms and in the tiny villages of central Serbia.

"They don't know anything, Billy. Britny knows mom and dad are gone. She's too smart for her own good sometimes. Kylie, I don't know what's going to happen with him. He needs a father figure." Kradich perked up for a second, combed the back of three fingers into his beard and lowered his eyes. He knew she was right. Crash was no example for anyone, certainly not an impressionable six-year-old. "I'm sorry, Uncle Billy."

"No. You're right. You know my act. You can see right through it."

"So. I know she, y'know, was asking for it, but do they know who killed mom?"

"No. Bumbling cops couldn't find their own ass with a flashlight and a Garman. We might never know who did it."

"I don't think I'd of been able to visit her in prison, but at least she'd be alive. Maybe they could have cured her, I mean if she was mentally ill."

"Yeah." Kradich wanted to be careful about the next subject. "Sue. You know Dani Drebek, my producer? She's up for the programmer job."

"That's good, isn't it?"

"Yeah. No, I'm glad for her. But you know that someone at that last stop for Lani, someone called the radio station and..."

"I heard. Honestly it sucked to know my mom's murder was on the radio. On your show made it ten times worst."

Kradich could not help but wonder if Sue was talking about the murder Lani Janich was attempting or the one that was prevented by the stranger. "Right. But we did air it, and, well. Let me just level with you, Sue. My business is changing. A lot. I need an angle, a hook to keep audience. It's like, did you ever hear that Rolling Stones song, It's Only Rock and Roll?" He was losing Sue but it was too late to turn back. "Jagger sings about sticking a knife in his throat, blood all over the stage. Would that get you excited...the audience, I mean. Something like that."

"What are you talking about, Billy?" Sue dropped her arms and weaved her fingers between her knees. "Are you telling me you are going to put that horrible night on the radio again?"

"Might have to."

"Bullshit! You don't have to do anything. Didn't you tell me you are the top talk guy in Chicago?"

"I am! But this is a business of 'what have you done lately.'"

"I have no idea what that means."

"I'm on top today, tomorrow I could be picking quarters out of Buckingham fountain. It's all about the last show. And my last show was a doozie."

"It was also the sound track to my mother's death. Listen, Billy. I heard that show. Don't ask me why, but it was on and..." Sue closed her eyes, her bottom lip poked out and trembled. "I heard mom....I heard her last words. It was awful. Now you tell me that we have to go through that again?"

"Go through what again?" Britny stood at the kitchen door. Kyle was holding onto her hand and edging behind the small body of the twelve-year-old.

"Suzy, I'm hungry." Kyle said in a faint voice.

"Oh, yeah!" Kradich clapped his hands and stood with a broad grin. "How about pizza?" Kyle looked at his uncle and managed a small smile. He was as unaccustomed to his mother's brother as Kradich was to instant fatherhood. The holidays when Kradich was exposed to the children he usually spent with his brother-in-law drinking expensive scotch and smoking cigars at the edge of the Crawford Estates two acres.

"Fine." Sue stood and put an arm around her sister. "But we're not done with this *Uncle Billy*." She turned and guided the children back into the living room. "Everything but anchovies."

"Hey! I like anchovies. I live for anchovies!" Kradich tried to lighten the mood. It was like a guest on his show

hanging up on him. "No way not to sound stupid," he mumbled.

Monday, Wednesday and Thursday afternoons, following the noon news, Torsha Lofton departed radio station KCI and headed to Kensington Care Center in Evanston just north of Chicago. The facility was one of the better nursing homes in spite of the relative distance from Wicker Park. When it became clear that her mother could no longer stay alone, the engaging staff and pleasant surroundings made the difficult choice a little easier. The elder Lofton had lived with her daughter for eight years before becoming increasingly disabled with Parkinson's disease. Even for the eight to ten hours when Torsha was busy, Mary Lofton could not care for herself as the weakening and instability of the condition closed in. But with a perpetually positive attitude and pride in her daughter, Mary took the move and the initial difficulties of being institutionalized in stride and always made her daughter feel that it was the right thing to do.

The three-times weekly, and once on Sunday visits were both devotion and a chore, but there was also a renewal exchanged by the two women as they laughed, and sometimes cried, while discussing the week's activities. Torsha's mother, widowed more than fifteen years earlier, was "doing ninety the best I can," as she would say. Kensington took great pride in the cleanliness of the living quarters and the diligence of the staff, but like most similar facilities, the individual attention often depended on the nature of the resident. If one were engaging and positive, the aides and nurses would make a point of seeing about

him or her. Mary Lofton was as engaging as a person in her condition would allow and always had people with her. As the director of nursing once told Torsha, "she's fun to be around."

Walking into the center was like entering the home of old friends. Big smiles and a chorus of hellos from residents and staff followed the news director through the halls all the way to her mother's room. Torsha made a point of knowing the names of the residents who were able to carry on a conversation and she always had a smile and a pat on the shoulder for those who could not.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Cermanak, did you have a good lunch today? How are you Mr. Williams, I see you have on your special bowling shirt. Isn't that the one you were wearing when you bowled that perfect game? Miss Eddy, how chipper you look, must have had a visit from that precious little great grand baby this week." And on it went. With her gray-black dread-locks pulled neatly into a bunch at the top of her straight back, Torsha stepped lively down the hall until she reached her destination. Mary Lofton was always dressed in colorful, perfectly coordinated outfits, her long hair was beautifully braided and coiled to fill in the balding top of her head.

"Oh, thank the Lord!" Mary held out thin, shaking hands to greet her daughter. Her eyes were closed tightly and her head vibrated slowly.

"Oh, mamma, you know when to except me." Torsha set down her bags and moved to the geriatric recliner. She gave her mother a tender hug and kissed her on her smooth forehead. "They got you looking pretty today Mrs. Lofton, must of known you'd have a visitor."

"My boyfriend was here earlier. You just missed him." Mary smiled widely, showing remnants of mechanically softened lunch in her ill fitting dentures.

Torsha gave her a mock scolding look. "They got your denture pads in today, mom?"

"I don't know. They feel a little loose." The uppers slipped slightly on the sibilant 's' that ended her comment.

"Let me fix them for you. I'll rinse them off, too. Still got your lunch stuck in there." Torsha disappeared through the wide washroom door and snapped on latex-free surgical gloves.

"I can do that myself." Mary Lofton pouted. "Let me up outta here, I can take care of my own things." The words were backed up with only a feeble effort at placing her lobster-clawed hands on the arms of the chair. It was just not possible and they both knew it.

"You just relax, Mrs. Lofton. I'll help you this time. Do you have to go to the bathroom?"

"They just took care of that a little while ago. I think I'm all right. So what has my pretty girl been up to?"

"You know, momma, just keeping the folks informed." The water ran into a kidney shaped plastic bowl while Torsha prepared the thick seaweed based adhesive pad that helped her mother's teeth stay in place.

"They tell me there was mighty bad trouble with your radio. You didn't get mixed up in anything, did ya?"

Torsha came out of the bathroom and bent slightly at the waist. "Open up, mom. Let me get those teeth taken care of. I have to show them again just how you like this done." The top plate came out, followed by webs of saliva

and the oozing properties of the sealing pad. "They always cut these things too small to do any good."

"J'you hear what I said?" Mary asked through collapsing lips.

"I heard you, momma. Nothing to do with me. Just one of the hosts had some family problems."

"They say some people were killed. That this boy's sister went crazy and killed people. Is that what happened? Lord have mercy! How does someone take another life like that? Can't imagine."

"That's mostly true, momma. But it still has nothing to do with me." Denture paste was squeezed onto a brush and she scrubbed the teeth, carefully rinsing and scrubbing some more.

"The nurse said one of the killings was on the radio! Right there, folks listening as that poor woman was getting killed. Said she heard the whole thing." Mary Lofton looked around the room, her expression was as though she was seeing the family portraits and greeting cards, flowers and stuffed animals for the first time.

Torsha returned to her mother with a small, blue corrugated cup. "Take a big mouthful and rinse it real good." She held the curved dish just below her mother's trembling chin. The older woman squeezed her mouth almost into her nasal cavity and moved her jaw from side to side. Small flecks of beige and brown flowed with the liquid that she spat into the dish. "That's my girl. Okay, one more time." Mary drank from the cup again with some difficulty, but she repeated the request and managed to clear most of the debris from her mouth. Torsha took the

dish back to the bathroom and dumped the contents into the toilet.

"Where were you when all this killing was going on?" The string – and drama - of the conversation snapped back into Mary's mind.

"I was home. Listening. Like everybody else."

"Then it's true, there really was all that stuff on the radio. Just like they said it was?"

Torsha came out of the bathroom with her mother's upper plate, the moist and expanding pad in place. "Open up, real wide now." She wedged the denture onto her mother's gums and, using her two index fingers, pressed until she heard the squish of the pad sealing with the roof of Mary Lofton's mouth. She gave her mother a kiss on the lips and smiled. "There, that feels better, doesn't it?"

Mary smiled, blinked and opened her eyes as wide as she could. "Thank you, 'ol sweet thing, you." She brought a compressed hand to Torsha's cheek and tried to separate the fingers. Torsha took the hand and gently freed them from the cramping lock. She kissed the palm of Mary's hand and held on.

"Mom, I was no where near the trouble. I just report the news, I don't make it."

"I know, dear. I'm so proud of you. So was your father. You were everything to him."

"I know. I miss him, too. Now," Torsha straightened and went to her bag. "I brought a new book to read to you. Toni Morrison. Supposed to have some pretty steamy parts to it." Her voice rose in anticipation. She pulled an arm chair close to her mother's recliner.

"Oh good." Mary's eyes widened again, the infectious smile seemed to light the room.

Torsha started reading from the hardback brown covered book with the word *Love* scripted across the front. The vision of Up Beach made her mother gasp with recognition. Torsha read with her most expressive radio voice, but could barely get through the first few pages without tears forming in both their eyes.

Chapter Six Play

Jeffries sat at the borrowed desk of Stacy Crenshaw. He took over her command and the difficult case that had the attention of the entire bureau – the entire region for more than two weeks. *There is danger in being so high up in rank and so close to the rank and file*, he thought. But this was no time worry about individual feelings. When he could, he kept the wide vertical blinds to the detective pool closed, not so much for his privacy, but for the benefit of the men and woman investigators working the phones and following up leads in the seventies vintage work space.

Phone calls were another constant in the day of a chief administrator for the crime solving section of the Chicago Police. So when the cell buzzed in his pocket, it should not have given the chief a second thought to punch the device

and answer it in his usual *all business* manner. He did not. There was tightness in the pit of his stomach, the same kind that would nearly push his bowels free when an opponent, one who bumped him down to the felt, would muck his hand while the chief was holding spikes. The chief had started to think that way, too. The poker-speak was coexisting with the odd terms and colorful twists of the language learned on many undersea missions in his twenty-five years in the fleet. It was there, on those months at sea with little or no contact with the outside world, that he mastered the game. It was now, years later, that the game was mastering him.

"Jeffries." The spit-shine baritone returned to his ear in the receiver.

"Chief? I heard you run in fast company these days." The chief could not recognize the voice. He pulled the cell phone from his face and saw the call listed as *number unknown*. But the subject was no stranger.

"Who is this?"

"A deputy chief of police, even the *chief of dicks* should not play at Goulash Joints, I don't care how live the action is."

"I'm hanging up now, and you should know that it's a crime..."

"It's a crime the run you're having, Herm. My friends are holding a hefty little note on you. And honestly, they're starting to worry."

"This is not the time..."

"It was time when you *marked up*, deputy superintendent, and the number is well into six figures. Now how's a man on a military pension and a city job

gonna cover that? Sure as hell don't look like it'll be in the cards, now does it chief?"

"I always cover my bets." Jeffries demurred, though remained indignant.

"We're beginning to doubt that, chief. But we are not unreasonable people." The caller chuckled. "Could give a whole new meaning to case money, eh chief? We'll be in touch." The line went dead. The phone nearly slipped from the chief's hand, loosened by the sweat on his palms. The tacit threat was not taken lightly. The chief had run into some bad luck and was moving from the *carpet rooms* of the legal casinos to the backrooms – goulash joints – that have dotted the city since the days of Capone. Herman Jeffries was not one to panic. He had seen action in the fleet that would melt most men into a quivering mass. But the thought of complete humiliation, before Torsha, the woman he loved and who trusted him, and the city – the men and women under sworn duty – was more than he could manage. The chief was looking for one more pot, one big hand that would bring him back. He knew that such motivations were the beginning of a criminal mindset, *but that won't happen, that can't happen*. He rubbed the skin that tightened around his clinched jaw and managed to become convinced, with surprising ease, that he could *play out* these troubles.

