

# **DEADLY INFILTRATION**

Book two of  
**AGENTS IN HIS SERVICE**

By W. Richard Lawrence

Deadly Infiltration by  
W. Richard Lawrence  
<http://www.wrichardlawrence.com/>

Published by  
Boarding House Publishing  
Loveland, CO, 80538

ISBN: 978-0-9774432-1-5  
Copyright 2016 by W. Richard Lawrence

Cover design by Phil Lawrence:

Available in print from your local bookstore, online, or from the publisher at:  
[BoardingHousePublishing.com](http://BoardingHousePublishing.com)

For more information on this book and the author visit: [wrichardlawrence.com](http://wrichardlawrence.com)  
All rights reserved. Non-commercial interests may reproduce portions of this book without the express written permission of Boarding House Publishing provided the text does not exceed 500 words. When reproducing text from this book, include the following credit line: “Deadly Infiltration” written by W. Richard Lawrence, published by Boarding House Publishing. Used by permission.”

W. Richard Lawrence  
Deadly Infiltration / W. Richard Lawrence 1st ed.

Printed in the United States of America

“Scripture quotations are from the ESV® Bible (The Holy Bible, English Standard Version®), copyright 2001 by Crossway, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.”

Passages from the Qur’an are a compilation of several translations intended to give the same meaning as the original text.

# AGENTS IN HIS SERVICE

Book One

Fatal Transaction

Book two

Deadly Infiltration

This book is dedicated to  
Debbie, my loving wife,  
Elizabeth Lawrence,  
and Josh Franklin.

Whose input on this novel was invaluable.

### Jeremiah 29:11 ESV

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope.

### Romans 12:19-21 ESV

Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

### Qur'an (9:5)

When the sacred months are over, slay the polytheists whenever you find them, and confine them, and lie in wait for them at every place of ambush. If they repent, and perform the prayer, and pay the religious tax, then let them go their way; God is all-forgiving, All-compassionate.

### Qur'an (8:12)

"I am with you, so strengthen those who believed. I will cast terror into the hearts of those who disbelieve. Therefore; strike off their heads and strike off every fingertip of them"

# Prelude

2nd Tuesday in August  
7:50 AM

“You wait here, dear. I’ll just be a minute.” Senator Carl Henderson slipped out of the car and up the stairs to his house. His wife had forgotten her heart medicine and driving back from Colorado Springs was not what he had planned to do on their second day of vacation. *As a U.S. senator, you’d think the pharmacist would have cut us some slack and refilled her prescription.*

Abby lowered her car door window. “I’m sure I left it on the bathroom counter.”

He loved her as much as any man could love someone. But lately she was forgetting more and more. She blamed it on stress. He hoped the time away would help. “Don’t worry, I’ll find it.” He glanced back. He would be completely lost without her. She was his right arm, beside him through years of campaigning and work to get where he was today. He punched in the code for the front door but the green light did not flash, nor did the lock mechanism make the sounds he expected. He pushed down on the latch and shoved. The door opened.

*She forgot to lock the door. Well, I guess it’s good we came back after all.*

Stepping inside, he checked the alarm system. *Yep, she missed that too. Great. The best alarm money can buy and it’s not on.* He would make sure to arm it before he left.

He felt a presence before he heard the noise. He turned around. A man, several feet away, rushed him. Carl’s hand went to his side,

instinctively reaching for his subcompact Glock. All he felt was belt. The gun was in the car with Abby. He turned to warn her.

The man's fist smashed into his jaw, turning the warning into a cry of pain. Carl's head snapped back, smashing into the doorframe. Darkness engulfed his vision. He slumped in the doorway.

Slowly, his vision cleared to show the man standing over him. Carl struggled, grabbing at air, trying to get back to his feet. The man was about his size, six foot, how could he wheel so much power in one blow?

"Stay down." The smoothness in the man's movements as he pulled a gun, showed experience.

Carl stopped. The pain turned into a throbbing headache as the adrenalin subsided. Rubbing the back of his head, he checked for blood, but found only a very tender bump, growing in size. "What are you doing in my house?"

The man stepped over him and glanced out the door.

*Abby!* Carl pulled his foot up, preparing to thrust it into the man's knee.

The large man knelt down swiftly and pressed the cold barrel against Carl's forehead. "Don't even think about it."

Carl dropped his knee back down. The man wore nylon coveralls, rubber gloves, a hairnet and booties. *Why?*

Abby screamed, but it was quickly muffled. Carl leaned out the door to see a second man, dressed much like the first, with a hand covering her mouth, pulling her head tight against his shoulder, as he directed Abby up the steps of their home. His other hand held a gun to the side of her head. Before thrusting her inside, he scanned the mountainside that surrounded the Hendersons' home. On coming through the door, Abby tripped over Carl's legs and landed on the floor beside him.

Fear filled her eyes as she stared into his. "Who are these men? What do they want?" She had the same questions he did.

The smaller intruder looked at the larger man. "Get them up and bring them into the office."

Carl couldn't place the man's mild accent, but it did not sound American.

The first man kept his gun trained on Carl as he grabbed Abby

and yanked her to her feet. She let out a yelp. He pushed her deeper into the house before grabbing Carl.

Resistance was an exercise in futility. The man's fingers dug deep as he lifted Carl with only a little more effort than he had put into lifting Abby.

Carl stopped short of plowing Abby down. She was not moving. She looked completely lost and afraid. He needed to do something. But what?

"I'm a U.S. senator and breaking into my home and threatening my wife or me is a felony."

The large man shoved him again, this time into Abby. "Shut up and keep moving." They were herded down the hall to Carl's office in the rear of the house.

The smaller man already stood across the room, in front of the desk. "Senator Henderson, please come over here."

The large man released Carl and continued moving Abby toward the file cabinets across the room from the desk.

"I demand to know why you are in my home. This is a federal offense."

"Yes, we know. I have some questions for you." You would think the man was discussing dinner plans. His calm was unnatural. He was a criminal who had just been caught in the act. He should be concerned, but his actions resembled those more akin to a manager in a board meeting.

Carl glanced at his wife. Her face was pale, eyes wide and unblinking. "Let her go and I'll do as you ask."

"Senator Henderson, you will do as I ask now," the man casually leaned against the desk and nodded toward Abby, "or your wife will suffer."

Crossing his arms, Carl put on a front that had worked for him many times in the senate and he hoped it would here. "Until she is free, you will not get anything out of me."

The intruder shook his head slowly before glancing at the man holding Abby. "Show the senator what his defiance will cost him."

The other man brought his gun down, placing it against Abby's leg. Carl tried to rush him, to stop him, but her loud cry of pain filled the room as the explosive gunshot subsided. Her body began to fold.

Carl stopped. The barrel came into focus two inches from his face.

“Back off before I put the next one between your eyes.”

Raising his hands, he backed away. No amount of military training could have prepared him for this. “Okay, okay.” He backed off, watching Abby writhe in pain.

“Jonas has eight more rounds in his gun, all hollow points. With your background, you know what that type of bullet does as it passes through tissue.”

Carl looked down at the bloody mess where Abby’s knee had once been.

“Jonas will put each round into a different part of your wife’s body until you do as I ask.”

Carl glanced at the emotionless man. Couldn’t he see what he was doing? “She needs a doctor.”

“You are right, and the sooner you comply the sooner she will receive treatment.”

Carl saw a chilling, uncaring cold emptiness in the man’s eyes. In that instant he realized one important fact. These men would kill them unless he could take them both out first. “What do you want?” Carl moved a few feet closer to the man by the desk.

“I want to know why a CIA agent sent you files.”

“What CIA agent? What are you talking about?”

“Shoot her in the other leg.”

“No!” Carl raised one hand toward the man holding his wife, the other toward the desk. “No, I’ll do whatever you want, just don’t hurt her anymore.”

A very evil smile formed. “Very good. We know about the files and the man who sent them to you. I need the decryption key. Where is it?”

*How much to tell? How much did they already know?* “The only encrypted files on my computer are to do with a sub-committee in the senate, not CIA anything.” Henderson hoped they would believe his lie. The files had shown up on his system four days ago.

The small man shook his head slightly before looking at Jonas. “Senator Henderson is either very slow to learn or he thinks we are stupid. Which do you believe to be true, Jonas?”

“We need to hurry.” Jonas glanced at the large digital clock on the wall. “You are wasting time letting him stall like this.”

Setting his pistol out of Abby’s reach, Jonas grabbed a pen off the file cabinet. He jabbed it into the bullet hole and yanked up hard. Abby screamed louder than before as the man’s hand became covered in her blood.

As Carl yelled for them to stop, the man pushed the pen down. Abby’s hands clawed at her assailant before her head lurched forward. She had passed out from the pain. The man stopped and stared into Carl’s eyes. “I can make her feel more pain than you can possibly imagine. Now, give us the key.”

Abby roused, lifting her head. Her eyes were rolled back. She couldn’t take any more.

Carl desperately needed to save his wife. “The key is in my desk. It’s in a hidden compartment that requires my finger prints.”

The smaller man watched as Carl walked around to the desk chair. Carl could feel every move he made being scrutinized.

“Hurry up.”

“Yes. — Just — give me a minute.” Carl sat at his desk. An open laptop sat on the work surface of the desk in front of him with a cable running down to his desktop system. It partially blocked their view of his hands.

The smaller man was moving around the desk. Carl didn’t have much time. “Hold up, it’s right here.” Carl dropped his hands below the top of the desk. He pushed back just enough to reach under and slide his hand over the fingerprint reader. A thin embedded case popped open. He pulled out a jump drive and tossed it toward the closest man, making sure it missed his hands. As all the eyes in the room momentarily followed the jump drive, Carl pulled out his handgun, a Walther P99 from the same box. He brought it up into a firing position, but before his finger touched the trigger, a loud sound filled the room and his left shoulder jerked backwards.

The pain brought to mind images of the Middle East. There he had expected this type of danger. It caught him off guard in his own home.

These men weren’t going to let him or his wife live and if he survived much longer he would tell them everything they wanted to

know. He had to prevent them from learning the other locations of the files.

The burning pain spread through the upper left side of his body. The hollow point had ripped through his muscles and was causing massive blood loss. He had only minutes to live. Dropping down, he concealed himself behind the laptop. He rested his gun arm on the desk to stop it from shaking.

Abby was vertical, held up by the arm around her neck. The large man holding her hid behind her, his gun pointed at the side of her head. The other man's arm and shoulder were just visible in the office doorway. He also held a gun.

"Your foolish actions will not save you." The voice came from the hall.

"Maybe not, but it will stop you from achieving your goals." It was over. Carl and his wife were dead. It was only a matter of time. His only options were how that end would come.

Abby screamed again. The man had his gun pressed deep into her temple, pushing her head to one side. "The next round will rip through her brain, tearing apart everything in its path."

Carl couldn't let that happen. He had to save her from the pain. As he steadied his hands, he aimed the pistol carefully. He looked into the terrified eyes of the only woman he had ever cared for and mouthed the words, "I love you."

He pulled the trigger twice. Both rounds hit the only pure heart in the room.

# 1

Tuesday

Sara Beckwith sat on the cold, sterile examination table facing the nurse. The antiseptic hospital smells filled the room. “Hasn’t the doctor taken enough of my blood? What is he, part vampire?” Her attempt at humor fell flat.

This was the fourth set of vials she had filled in the past two weeks. And the last two times had been five tubes each. Was she really so sick that they couldn’t figure it out?

A chill came over her thin body. Why hadn’t she let Derry come with her on this visit? Putting up a brave front had its cost.

She gave an involuntary shudder as she watched the male nurse tie a rubber strip around her upper arm. He then reached for the tubes and applied a label to each one. As the nurse brought the needle near her arm, Sara quickly looked away. She gave a short wince as the needle pierced the skin.

He pulled it back and stuck it in her arm again, searching for the vein. Each time she winced a little more. Were her veins that hard to find? She glanced down at her arm as he found his mark. The dark red fluid started to fill the tube.

*Gross.* She looked away. The door leading out of the room was four steps from where she sat. Only four short steps. She turned her head to peer out the window but remained seated.

“All done.” He placed a white pad on Sara’s arm and wrapped her elbow with a strip of adhesive. “We should have the results by the beginning of next week. Let me check with the doctor to see if we need to do anything else.”

“Sure.” *Take your time.*

Looking around, she saw the same images that she saw every time

she came, pictures of mothers nursing their babies. One day that would be her. She and Derry both wanted kids. Their only disagreement was how many.

The nurse's tap on the door interrupted her thoughts. "We are all done. You can go now. Just make sure you stop at the front desk to make your next appointment for the doctor to go over the results."

She slid off the table and started for the door, but only made it three steps. The room spun around her.

"You okay? Here, sit down for another minute. Let me get you some water."

Sara took the seat as she tried to focus on something, anything. "I'll be fine in a minute." As he stepped out, she mumbled to herself that she needed to get to work. Standing a second time, more slowly now, she picked up her bag and headed out of the room, passing a full length mirror on the wall. Her reflection gave her reason to pause.

Her weight had dropped ten pounds over the last two years. She looked more like a skeleton every day, and every drop of blood they took, she wanted back.

---

Jonas released the woman's body, letting it fall to the floor. She was needed no more. He glared at Dace as he reentered the office.

"That was a mistake." Dace was unreasonably calm.

"He left me no choice. He was shooting at me. What'd you want me to do? Get killed?"

"You were cowering behind a woman, you were safe. Now we have two dead bodies and nothing to show for it." Dace holstered his pistol as he walked over to Jonas. Reaching down, he pulled on Abby's arm to turn her over and expose her back. "His caliber was small. The bullets would never have made it through her overweight body."

Jonas glanced at her back. There were no exit wounds. "That's not important now." He started to move around the dead body, but Dace stopped him.

"You assured me the senator would be gone today. Now, because of your incompetence our plans could be in peril." He looked into Jonas' eyes.

A chill went down Jonas' back. He stepped around Abby's body and around Dace as he moved toward the desk. "He shouldn't have been

here. I checked his schedule. He was supposed to be on vacation touring the state. He's just another politician you can't trust."

"This is not something to make light of and your poor attempt at humor does not change the fact that you made a mistake."

The senator's body lay behind the desk in Jonas' way. "If you're done chewing me out, come over here and give me a hand."

Dace stepped toward the desk. "What are you planning to do with him?"

"He's in the way." Jonas grabbed the senator under the arms and lifted. The fifty year old was solidly built. "Get his feet."

The two carried him over next to his wife and laid them out side by side.

Dace, after dropping the victim's feet, looked down at the two. "I did not believe any American had enough dedication to kill his wife to hide a secret."

Jonas, a man trained and experienced in combat of all types, disagreed. "It wasn't dedication to his work, it was love for his wife." The senator was a noble man. Enemy or not, it was a shame he had to die.

Dace shrugged and went to work cleaning up any evidence that could identify them.

Jonas glanced at the clock. "We don't have much time. A security drive by is scheduled in twenty minutes."

"Then remove the hard drive and we will take it with us."

"Too risky. The senator's family background suggests he would have installed precautions against tampering on his computer. I won't risk it again." He instinctively rubbed his tender hand with the other. The CIA system they had worked on earlier had sprayed acid on him. It had burned through his gloves as it destroyed the hard drive he was trying to remove.

"He was just a U.S. senator. Blinder was CIA. I doubt the senator would have the same security measures as the CIA agent." Dace's tone was typically disrespectful.

"This house has state-of-the-art security and the senator is ex-Special Forces. So I am sure the computer has some form of protection on it. We have copies of what we need and I will make sure no one else can retrieve anything from the hard drive."

Dace stopped and turned. "How can you be sure? Your bullet

damaged your laptop.”

“Only the display is damaged. The data will be intact. All we need is the encryption key.”

Dace walked across the room and picked up the jump drive. “I believe you will find it on here.” He tossed it to Jonas.

## 2

Sam Freymen rubbed his face with both hands. Three flights in twelve hours with as many name changes was taxing. Sitting back on the bench, he reached for the newspaper lying next to him as he scanned the Suvarnabhumi Airport on the outskirts of Bangkok. His average height and build and brown hair let him blend in almost anywhere in the world.

Was his cover blown? That's what the coded message had said, but how? He was extremely careful and extremely good. The Middle East was his home. He had grown up in Israel, with both Jewish and Palestinian friends, something his Jewish mother had been in favor of before his sister was murdered. Unlike others in his field, he knew the culture. He lived the culture every day of his life. Now, he was returning to a house that was home in name only. *Is someone waiting there, hoping to kill me?* Others had tried, without success.

Standing, Sam took a walk toward security, stopping short of exiting the area. Looking out the window into the darkness, he checked the reflection. Not perfect, but clear enough to tell if anyone nearby was watching him. The foot traffic flowed behind him. *Good.* He rubbed the dark-brown beard that covered his face. It would be coming off soon.

He returned to a different seat in a different waiting area to await his next flight and a new alias. Two more hops and identity changes and he would be Sam again, and at his mountain home in the hills of Virginia.

---

Slamming the door to his car, Special Agent Lamar Stover marched his large muscular frame toward the FBI building. It was his day off and his and Mary's one-year wedding anniversary. They had plans today. He had talked Mary into finding someone else to watch the

youth home today. That in itself was a feat.

Special Agent Booker better have a good reason for ruining his day.

The receptionist's greeting fell flat on the floor as he flashed his badge and rushed past. He regretted his rudeness. The receptionist wasn't the one that had made him come in.

The ride up in the elevator was quiet as no one seemed inclined to talk once inside. Focusing on a spot on the doors, the large African-American worked to control his emotions. This was something he thought should be easy for a forty-three-year-old, but it wasn't.

Lisa Booker was his boss and the head of the Denver FBI branch. Booker's large office occupied the northwest corner of the fourth floor. The floor to ceiling windows gave her a panoramic view of the Rocky Mountains to the west. The room held her oversized desk, two comfortable brown leather chairs and a conference table that Lamar had never seen used.

Lamar's office, one-third the size, was a few doors down and faced north.

Tapping on her office entrance, he put on his stoic face.

"Come in."

He took three steps inside and stopped.

"Close the door."

Turning slightly, he pushed it shut.

She studied him for a minute before speaking. "I received a confidential report from the Department of Homeland Security this morning." She held a folder with red stripes along one edge. She glanced down at it.

"And?"

"It's to do with an internal leak within one of the federal law enforcement branches."

"We get an update on this, every week. What's in this one to warrant calling me in on my day off?"

Closing the folder, Lisa Booker rubbed her index finger and thumb along the edge. "They are making progress on finding the operatives within our government, namely the ones passing information to terrorist groups in the Middle East."

Her hesitation to come out with it spoke volumes. *Is she holding*

*back something? What?* “Do they have names? A list of suspects?”

“No.” Finally her eyes met his. “But they have a list of parameters.”

“Of parameters? You called me in to tell me they have a list of parameters?”

She locked eyes with him. “Yes, that is exactly what I called you in for.”

Was he on the list, or someone under him? Impossible.

“Sit down.” She nodded to her visitors’ chairs. “Please.”

He moved forward and took a seat, sitting up straight. He started to protest.

“Just listen before you speak.” She stood and looked at him with a piercing gaze.

He glared back but only for a moment. Now was not the time for defiance.

In most cases she was a stickler for the rules, disregarding all whom she ran over to enforce them. Recruited by the FBI right out of MIT, Lisa Booker was an attractive five-foot-four, thirty-seven year old blonde that still turned heads when she entered a room. But to think she got this post because of her gender or looks would be a grave mistake. Though she could be as gentle as a Fiji Island breeze, those who worked with her knew she could just as easily be as tough as a North Atlantic winter storm. Today looked stormy.

“The report lists several instances of information being gathered from multiple sources.” She moved around to the front of her desk.

“Are you going to get to the point?”

“This would require a person who is a computer expert. Like some of those in your department.”

Lamar headed up the Computer Analysis and Response Team or CART. There were twelve members working under Lamar, divided into three groups. His field group had two agents and one parolee, which left him short-handed. The second group had six members, all software jockeys running traces, compiling data, and more. The last three members worked in the computer investigation part of the electronics lab.

He started to stand, but Booker held up her hand, telling him to stay where he was. “Everybody at the bureau has access to a computer,”

he protested.

“But most do not have the skills we are talking about. The report is looking at those with the abilities, the timing and a motive.”

“No one in my department would turn against their country. Everyone on my team is –”

“Above reproach? Not everyone working under you is here by choice.”

Now it became clear. “Sara? You’re saying Sara is a terrorist?” Clenching the armrest, he kept himself in the seat.

Sara was a self-taught computer genius who had been the engineer behind a clever credit card scam a little over two years ago. Lamar was credited with bringing her to justice even though she had been the one to come to him for help, to save the life of her future boyfriend. A change of heart was a powerful tool. With her cooperation, the authorities had been able to bring down the entire organization. Because of her help and at Lamar’s request, she was given a light sentence which included parole in which she helped the FBI investigate other computer crimes.

Lamar had taken Sara under his wing and the two had become close. He had seen huge changes in her over the past two years. He trusted her as much as any member of his team, maybe more than most. “You’ve been after her ever since I brought her on.”

Booker shook the folder at him. “This is not from me. Sara fits the profile. I am just letting you know about it as a courtesy.”

“Why would Sara be sending information to Muslims in the Middle East? She’s a Christian after all. She would never help those types of groups.”

“What does her claiming to be a Christian have to do with her greed? People say whatever they need to say to get out of trouble. You know that as well as I.”

How could Booker understand the effect God has on someone’s heart when she had never experienced it? “I know her. She’s like a daughter to me and her faith is real. Christians don’t help terrorists or Muslims.”

“Learn your history. Christians kill people all the time.”

She did not understand. He stood and with his arms hanging at his sides, fists rolled into balls, he took one step closer to her desk. At six-

foot-four and two-hundred-eighty-five pounds, Lamar could intimidate most people with just his presence, but not Booker.

“Sit back down.”

He was pushing her hard. If he didn't want a suspension, he needed to back off a little. He relaxed his hands. “I would rather stand if I, or anyone on my team is on trial.”

“This isn't a court of law and no one is on trial at this time. Now back off.”

With a huff, he backed off but couldn't sit down. Moving across the office, to the windows, he resolved to use a different approach, one maybe Booker could understand. He softened his tone, “Sara has been a valuable member of my team for two years, helping us solve numerous crimes.”

“Which shows us what? How smart she is? Her position is a perfect fit.”

Looking over his shoulder at her, he started to interrupt, but Booker cut him off.

“Sara's not the only one being investigated. All of the offices have been ordered to examine anyone who fits the parameters. There are many people across all the agencies being scrutinized.”

Placing his hands behind his back, Lamar turned back to the window to think. Sara was not guilty, she couldn't be. He needed to prove this to Booker. “Okay, I would like to see the list of parameters.”

“I couldn't show it to you if I wanted to, which I don't. Your clearance isn't high enough and the only reason you have for wanting to see it is to clear her name.”

“Absolutely right.” He turned, slowly. “She's —”

“...close to you. I know. That's why you aren't in the position to make this determination.” She stepped closer to him. “How long have you worked for me?”

“A little over four years.” He looked down at her.

“And in that time, have you ever seen my personal feelings about someone color my judgment?”

He had, but saying so now would only damage Sara's hopes of a future outside of prison.

Booker gave him ample time to answer before turning back to her desk. “I told you when you insisted on adding her to your team that

it was a risk that could cost you.”

“You’ve already found her guilty.”

“No.” She regarded Lamar for a few seconds before dropping her stare. “I will have the investigation conducted quietly, and if we find anything I will inform you before we move.”

“And who will you assign to conduct this unbiased investigation?”

“I have not decided yet and when I do, the name will remain under wraps. I am not about to have you trying to influence the outcome.”

“I would never do that.”

Her eyes flared. “Oh, stow it. I know how you work when it comes to one of your own. You believe your team can do no wrong, but you were wrong once and you could be wrong again.”

Booker was right. Tony, one of Lamar’s field agents, had covered up his brother’s embezzlement. Tony hid evidence important to the case. When the truth came out, Booker had come to Tony’s rescue and given him a second chance, letting him keep his job and avoid jail time. Lamar doubted she would do so for Sara. “Have there been any complaints about Sara’s work or behavior? Has she broken her parole in any way?”

“As I said, this is not a trial and I will not stand here and debate the merits of someone becoming a Christian.”

“It changes a person.”

“It can change a person, I know.” Booker paused, then in a purposefully measured tone, went on. “But her conversion happened at a very convenient time. It’s all a little hard to swallow.”

“She could have run.”

“To where? And her running would have given her up.”

This was nothing but a replay of an ongoing discussion. One he had not made any headway in for years. Lamar knew Christ changed people. Booker refused to believe it or see it. “So where does that put us?”

“What do you mean?”

“With Sara, are you suspending her?”

Booker hesitated, motionless for a few seconds. “The thought has crossed my mind, but no, not at this time. If I did, she would go back to jail. For now she will remain in her present position.”

Enough was enough. He regretted answering the phone this morning. He turned to leave.

“I’m not done.”

*Great.* “Yes?”

“This information is not to leave this room. If she is guilty, I don’t want her running.”

“And when you find her innocent?”

“If that happens, you will have my apology.”

“I’ll keep my mouth shut.” He walked out of Booker’s office as her phone rang.

### 3

Stopping just outside Booker's door, Lamar questioned why Sara couldn't get a break. The corridor was empty and no answer came. He started to leave in order to salvage what was left of this day. It was early and he and Mary could still make it to Breckenridge for a late lunch at his favorite hole-in-the-wall Italian restaurant. At least it would be easy to get a seat after two o'clock.

"Stover!"

*Now what?* The thought of not answering flashed through his mind. But Booker would just have security stop him before he left the building. He turned around and reentered Booker's office.

The mood in her office had changed. It was back to normal. She was on the phone using her business tone.

Since she had called him back, the conversation must have something to do with him. He tried listening in, but could only hear her side. He moved over to the large windows with his back toward Booker. The glass worked to amplify her voice.

He heard Senator Henderson's name. The media was all over his murder this morning. Lamar stared out at the Rockies as he waited. Clouds were forming in the high country, but Denver was clear and headed for another hot August day.

Booker gave some assurance and hung up. Lamar turned to face her.

"That was Agent Faircloth. He's at Senator Henderson's home."

"What does this have to do with me?" Faircloth had more years with the bureau than anyone in Denver and was close to retirement age. When he retired the agency would lose a good man.

"He needs someone from CART up there right away."

“Standard operating procedure is to pack up any electronics and bring it to the lab where we have the right equipment to work on it.”

“And in most cases that would work. But someone hacked into the senator’s home security system. It can’t be moved here and it can’t wait. I want Agent Jenkins on this.”

“Todd’s at Quantico, giving a class on the art of computer infiltration.”

“Where’s Tony?”

“Undercover in the Springs. We can send Sara.”

“She’s not an agent and with all that is going on I’m not sure we want her involved. If she’s found guilty of terrorist activities, every case she has worked on will be subject to review. What about someone from one of your other teams?”

“They’re not trained in this area and could slip up. If it’s that important, Sara’s your best bet. Besides, as you said, she’s only one of hundreds of possible people under investigation. Are they pulling everyone under suspicion from their work?”

Booker eyed him. “You don’t have anyone else that can do this? Or is this your way of getting even with my conclusion?”

“Everyone who has worked with her, including Tony and Todd, will testify she is one of the best programmers in the bureau. She has a natural ability to see things the rest of us miss. If she is found innocent and not used in this case it could come back on you.”

Booker stood and glared at Lamar before looking down at the folder on her desk. Opening it, she flipped through the top few pages.

He was winning.

She closed the folder. Crossing her arms, she moved to within three feet of him and looked up into his face. “You are playing a dangerous game with me, and if you are wrong, I’ll have your badge before I go down for it.”

He shrugged. “Sara will do the job and do it right. I guarantee it.”

Their eyes locked in an invisible tug-of-war.

Seconds passed before she broke the silence. “You better be right about her.”

“I am.” He turned toward the door.

“And Stover,”

“Yes?” He turned back toward her.

The anger was gone, along with her icy tone. “It is very important this is done right. The media will be all over it along with every nosy blogger, upstart reporter, and want-a-be politician in the state. Any mistakes will reflect on the whole Denver office.”

She was worried about her job.

“I’ll make sure it is done right.”

“Everything must be done by the book. I’ve heard Sara likes taking shortcuts, but not this time.”

Sara’s shortcuts were one of the things that made her so good. “I’ll let her know.” Lamar headed out the door before she changed her mind and added more stipulations. He should have stayed home, but then Sara would be without an advocate.

Stepping into his office, he shut the door. First things first. He called Mary and told her he wouldn’t be back until that night. She said it was fine, she wasn’t comfortable leaving the kids at her youth home anyway. He knew she was just making excuses to cover her disappointment. She was too good for him, another reason he loved her so much.

Next, he called Sara. It rang several times before she answered.

“Catch you in the middle of something?”

“I just got in. I had a doctor’s appointment this morning.”

“You hear about the murdered senator?”

“Who hasn’t?”

Lamar reached for the coffee sitting on his desk and took a sip. He quickly spat it back out. It was yesterday’s, cold and bitter. He tossed the cup into the trash. “Faircloth needs us up at the scene. Someone got around their military-spec alarm system and he wants to know how. Grab your stuff and let’s get moving. Meet me downstairs in five.”

## 4

*Why wouldn't the nurse look me in the eye?*

Sara could not get the images out of her mind as she stared out the window of the black FBI car.

*Maybe Derry's not the right person.*

*No, he's perfect for me.*

*Why would he want to marry me?*

*What if he's not who he says?*

*This is crazy. I'm just worrying about nothing.*

*Wedding jitters is all it is.*

*Could that be what is causing these stupid dizzy spells?*

*The doctor can't find anything wrong with me.*

*Or has he?*

She looked down at her bony hands.

*Why can't I gain weight?*

*I try, but half the time food upsets my stomach. I should track that.*

*Maybe I've developed some food allergies.*

The pine trees and aspens that lined the hillside brought images of the mountain retreat her church had hosted this past year. She wasn't sure how much closer it brought her to God, but it had brought her closer to Derry. She saw a quiet strength in him.

*How could anyone be that wholesome?*

*Will he really stay by my side no matter what?*

*No one else ever has. What makes him different?*

Pushing her hair out of her eyes, she turned toward Lamar. She was bad company today, wallowing in her own self-pity.

"We're almost there," he said without looking at her.

"Sorry I've been such poor company. It's just —" Just what?

Unfounded fears?

“Anything you want to talk about?” With that rich, deep voice of his, he could have been a singer.

“Not really.” Looking back out the window, she saw the cars and TV network vans parked along the narrow road.

“How are the wedding plans coming along?” Lamar maneuvered the SUV through the body of media surrounding the entrance to the senator’s mountain home.

“Fine, I guess.” She turned her attention toward him and away from those trying to see into the car.

A Deputy Sheriff stood in the middle of the drive, blocking all those trying to enter. Lamar pulled up and stopped. He lowered his window as a second deputy walked over. Lamar showed the man his badge, who signaled the other deputy to step aside.

“You don’t sound too excited.” Lamar turned his head toward Sara as they passed the deputy who had move aside.

“It’s not that.” How much should I say? Mary was helping with the wedding plans and anything she told Lamar would make it to Mary. “I went to the doctor this morning.”

“It’s not bad news, is it?”

“I don’t know yet. They haven’t gotten the results back.”

“Is this about what happened the other day when you passed out in the hall?”

“It’s not the first time that has happened. I started having dizzy spells occasionally about four years ago, but lately it’s been much worse. I’ve completely passed out twice in the past few weeks.”

“Why haven’t you said something before?” He pulled the car to a stop alongside another black FBI SUV.

“I hoped it would pass.” As she reached for the handle she felt Lamar’s large hand on her arm.

“You know Mary and I are praying for you. She thinks you’re too skinny. Have you been losing weight because of this?”

“You’ve noticed, huh?”

His smile was warm and sympathetic.

She returned a smile. “I’m having trouble keeping a lot of foods down. The doc’s not sure why.”

“If there is anything we can do, let us know.” He turned off

the engine.

Of all the agents she had met at the Denver office, she felt lucky to work for Lamar. “Sure.”

He opened his door. “Grab your bag and let’s hit it.”

---

Sara entered the living room with Lamar. Faircloth stood toward the center of the room, facing the large picture window that looked out onto the driveway. He glanced over at them. “I asked for Agent Jenkins. Where is he?”

Faircloth stood a couple inches shorter than Lamar, but was just as heavy. He had more salt than pepper in his hair, making him look well past retirement age. He was half American Indian, the other half no one knew, not even him. The Diet Coke he held clearly was not helping him lose any weight in his midsection. He took another sip as he waited for a response.

“He’s in Quantico. Sara can handle this.” Lamar barely slowed as he entered the room. “Where do you need us?”

Faircloth turned to the much shorter, redheaded, female Deputy Sheriff. “I’ll be just a minute.” Faircloth then took a couple steps toward Lamar as he pointed toward the dining room. “The security system’s in a small room off the kitchen and is supposed to be *unbreakable*, but obviously *it’s not*. Someone hacked in. I want to know how and I want to know today. Can you do that?” His rough tone fit the rumors about him. The word around the office was he had four failed marriages, with five kids in all. None of whom, ever came to see him.

“That depends on how—” Sara began.

“If you can’t do it, tell me now before you go screwing things up back there.”

She glanced at Lamar, who did nothing. She turned back to Faircloth. “If the information is in the system, absolutely. If not, I will have to track it down and that may take resources we don’t have here.” It came out sharper than she meant.

Faircloth glared at her. “Don’t get smart with me, young lady.”

Lamar stepped in. “She wasn’t. You asked her a question and she answered.” He nodded for her to go.

After one short glance at Faircloth, Sara headed to the rear of the house. The security panel was easy to locate in a large walk-in pantry off

the far end of the massive kitchen. Moving one box to the floor gave her room for her computer. She slipped her bag off her shoulder, and retrieved her computer and a small tool kit. Setting them on the open area she had just made, she opened her laptop. Turning to the security control panel, she examined the cover closely before opening it. There were no signs of forced opening. The brand was common enough, but this model was top of the line, used primarily by the military, not private citizens.

*Wonder what he was hiding to need this?*

After unscrewing the cover, she located its USB ports. She grabbed a cable out of her bag and connected her computer to the control panel. Bringing up the port access, it asked for a verification code.

“You don’t miss a trick, do you?”

“You always talk to the equipment?” It was Lamar.

“Only when it gives me trouble,” she answered without looking up.

“What’cha got?” Lamar hovered just outside the doorway.

“Nothing, I just got started. I need to call in and— oh, wait a second.” She found the numbers on a tag next to the system. “I got it. Just give me a minute.” After entering the code, she brought up the menu. It displayed the status of several dozen motion sensors. At the bottom of the list were the window and door sensors. “This is crazy.”

“What’s crazy?” Lamar took a step closer.

She didn’t realize her comment was audible until Lamar had asked his question. She stepped back and leaned against the wall as she gave him a rundown of the sensors. “This place has better security than most banks.”

“Any idea how the intruders got past it?”

“I have some ideas.”

“I’m listening.”

She stepped up to the control box and pointed out the parts of the system as she talked. “As with many security systems today, what gives them the ability to do what you want also adds weaknesses. This one has three different forms of communication— phone, internet, and its own two-way radio. Having all three makes it nearly impossible to block an alarm going out. If you tamper with any one of them, an alert will be immediately sent to the security company via the other two

communication routes.”

“And how does that work against them?”

“It also gives you three ways to tap in.”

“Is that what they did?” Lamar stepped over to where he could see her screen.

“Maybe, I don’t know yet.” She stopped working for a second and turned to Lamar. “Why did the Hendersons need this much security? I mean, even for a senator this is overkill.”

“Apparently not.”

“Did he have any enemies that we know of?”

“Maybe. His father was pretty high up in the CIA and his wife’s family has lots of money. Oil people from Texas.”

“Well, Faircloth was half right. This system is close to unbeatable. Whoever killed the senator was a computer expert.”

“Okay. So tell me how they did it.” Lamar’s phone began to ring. He stepped out and pulled his phone out of his pocket.

Sara needed more information on this unit. She contacted the security company.

The operator on the other end of the line had been expecting a call from the FBI. Bad news travels fast and they were more than willing to help. Something like this pointed to a hole in their system and they wanted to know what it was.

They gave her a temporary login and password to the senator’s directory within their network. They also told her about a hidden directory within each system that was not in any documentation. It was there mainly for maintenance and catastrophic failures.

“Anything yet?” Lamar was back.

“Shouldn’t you be off somewhere else, bugging somebody else?”

“I wish I could, but that was the director. She wants everything computer related double checked, two agents verifying each part.”

“You think you can keep up with me?” Sara gave him a smile.

“Not for a second, and I’m not going to slow you down by having you explain everything. But in case anyone asks, I was right here with you all the time.”

“You’re not really needed, you know.” She smiled down at her keyboard.

“Yeah, maybe, but we haven’t had a U.S. senator murdered since

Robert Kennedy.”

“Who?”

“Robert Kennedy, the senator –”

She continued to work. She knew who he was, but it had happened way before she was born so she thought she would tease Lamar.

“Anyway, this is big news and every base needs to be covered.”

Lamar turned and caught the attention of the Deputy Sheriff who was cutting through the kitchen. He went to talk with her, giving Sara time to work.

He returned with new information. “The senator and his wife were not supposed to be here. The killers may have known that.”

“I’ll put my money on it. The security company was notified that the Hendersons would be gone for a week starting yesterday.” Sara read the data off her screen.

“Does it also say how the system was bypassed?”

“It wasn’t. Someone entered the master passcode. It gave them complete access to the whole system except for the hidden file.”

“Hidden file? Good. What does that show?”

“Don’t know yet. There is only one of me.”

“And all my questions are slowing you down.”

She knew he was only trying to help. “I will be going through the hidden file next, but it could take a while. It’s a record of the status of the system, including any changes. To keep it a manageable size it’s coded and compressed.”

“Can you decompress it here?”

Sara made a face as she twisted a little to see him better. “Maybe. I need to see how big it is.”

“Let’s do it back at the office. Do you need anything else while we are here?”

“Yes, the documentation says each control panel has its own backup files. There is one by each door. I need to download the files from each one.”

“I’ll let Faircloth’s team know.”

“Know what?” Faircloth stepped into the kitchen. Lamar filled him in.

“We knew they must have had the code to the system. That’s not new information.” His comments weren’t directed to Lamar but Sara.

“They tried to erase everything, but the system has a hidden compressed backup.”

“What does it tell you?”

Lamar stepped between Sara and Faircloth. “My team will go over it in Denver. We will let you know as soon as we have something.”

Lamar stood with his back to her, blocking her view of Faircloth. The room was quiet and she could only imagine the face-off between them.

Faircloth blinked first. “Have her check the computer while you’re here. It was warm when we arrived.”

---

Entering the murder scene, the smell of blood mixed with an array of forensic chemicals hit Sara. Her pulse raced as the world spun for a few seconds. Oblivious, Lamar pushed past her. Once everything came back into focus, she scanned the room for a clear path to the desk. Both bodies were laid out side by side next to the filing cabinets.

The coroner knelt next to one of the corpses. He looked to be in his own little world as agents and forensic experts stepped over and around him. He shifted and the bloody bodies came into view.

Sara looked away.

Agent Elle Bosh was directing the activities of the room like a shop foreman. She was about Lamar’s age, forty-ish, and looked part Asian. She was short and stocky.

Kent, one of Faircloth’s men, sprayed something on the filing cabinets while Chris stood holding a light next to them. It showed something splattered across the front. Blood most likely. She had seen the two around the office a lot and even though Chris was of average height and size for a male, he looked short and heavy when walking next to Kent’s skinny six foot four body.

Everywhere she looked, they were finding evidence of what had happened here. Sara stared at the desk as she moved forward.

“Hold up.” It was Elle.

“I’m here to work on the computer.” Sara avoided turning to see the bodies again. The smell was stronger the farther she went into the room.

“I know who you are.” They’d worked on the same cases, but never really talked with each other. The other members of Lamar’s team

were the ones who usually interfaced with others in the bureau. “We are done with this area.” The agent used both hands to mark out a space in which Sara could work. Try to stay in these bounds.”

Elle turned back toward the bodies. “I hope you find something. We’re sure not finding much.” Stopping, she looked back and addressed Sara. “If you need a chair, you’ll have to get one from another room. The desk chair’s been bagged and tagged. I think the senator was shot in it.”

Sara did not want to think about that. She glanced at the area behind the desk. The wall was covered with dark red spots. “I can stand.”

“That would be better.” Elle grabbed Kent by the arm, giving him more instructions.

Sara checked the surface of the desk for missed evidence, like blood. Finding the area clean, she pulled out her laptop and set it down. Connecting the two computers with a LAN cable, she slipped a jump drive into a USB port in the senator’s system.

Turning on the senator’s computer, she brought up the bios and had it load from the jump drive. The senator’s computer was now a slave to hers, giving her complete access to all the files on his hard drive and bypassing most security.

Sara dug through the directories and files, checking access dates and times. A lot of activity had taken place that morning, too much for a normal work day. Someone was definitely hiding something. She ran a program looking for partial files, or file fragments. Several files and one directory had been erased that morning. The activities spanned a ninety-two minute window.

She looked for Lamar. He was kneeling next to the coroner, talking. She called to him and he walked over. “Got something?”

“Does the coroner have the time of death?”

“He’s placing their deaths at the same time, around 8:10, give or take.”

She glanced at the two bodies on the floor. Someone was finally putting them into bags. “The file system shows activities starting at 7:04 this morning and lasting ‘til 8:36.”

“What were they after?”

“I can’t say. They erased and copied over much of the hard drive. It’s going to take more time and equipment than I brought with me to figure this all out.”

Faircloth stepped into the room, tossed his empty can into an FBI trash bag and looked at Sara. “What do you have for me?”

*This man seems to know when to show up for a repeat, every single time.* “Not much.” She gave him the same details she had given Lamar.

“So, nothing here either.” Disappointment was evident. “Pack it up and take it back to Denver.” He looked at Lamar. “When will Todd get back?”

“He’s coming in late tonight.”

“Good. Have him take this over.”

## 5

‘Core dump’ again.

Derry Conway could not figure out what he was doing wrong. The program was due tomorrow and it had worked until he added the last function. Removing it fixed the core dump problem, but the function was needed to complete the assignment. His instructor had told the class this task was tricky. No kidding.

Leaning back in his chair, Derry stretched his 5’8” body, as he asked himself why he let Sara talk him into this summer class. She had far more confidence in his abilities than he did.

Well, his 4.0 GPA would soon become a thing of the past.

His phone sang the old TV show ‘Dragnet’ theme song. It was Lamar. He answered, “What expert advice does the FBI need today?”

“Very funny. Are you going to be around tonight?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a killer program due tomorrow and I’ll be working on it most of the night. Why?”

“I just wanted to make sure you would be around for Sara. She’s going to need you tonight. It’s been a rough day.”

“Is she involved with that murdered senator?” The senator’s murder had been all across the web today. It was big news. The media was mixed on whether it had been a home break-in or a murder-suicide.

“You know about that, huh? She went to the scene today and it really shook her up. Just be there for her.”

“Absolutely. Thanks for the heads up.”

“Good man.” Lamar ended the call.

Here he was, worried about a computer program while Sara was working on the biggest murder case in recent Colorado history. Derry had been trained in martial arts from the time he was small. He was only

a hundred and forty-five pounds, but his training had taught him how to use every ounce in a fight. He would do anything and everything to keep Sara safe. He would even lay down his life or her. But when it came to helping Sara with her emotions he often felt lost. He whispered a quick prayer for wisdom and determined to listen more than he talked tonight.

He glanced at the time. If Lamar didn't keep her late, Sara should be home anytime. A couple of years ago Derry had rented his converted garage to Sara. But now that she was on probation she was living next door with their mutual friends Kevin and Natalie Knight. The two rooms they rented to her were small so she spent most evenings at Derry's house. Tonight would be no exception as he was sure she would need his company. Picking up his phone again, he put in a call to a local pizza place for a delivery, and tried to go back to work. Every sound had him looking toward the front door.

Standing, he moved toward the living room as he heard the familiar creak of his front screen door. Sara was here.

Heading for the door, he glanced at his laptop on the dining table. He closed it as he walked by. The last thing she needed tonight was him bugging her for help with his homework.

She pushed on the stuck front door. The 1920's home, with its off plumb walls and doorways, along with the uneven floors, gave the home character, he was told. If that meant more work for him, then yes, this home had tons of character.

He grabbed the handle and yanked the door open. She fell through but caught herself.

"Sorry." He reached out for her.

"You could have warned me." She pushed past him and dropped her bag on the floor next to the couch. Sinking into one corner, her arms reached out to engulf one of the throw pillows. She sat silently.

Moving in behind her, he gently rubbed her bony shoulders. "You okay?"

"That feels good, but," Sara twisted her shoulders out of his hands, "I just don't want to be touched right now."

He moved around to the front of the couch and sat close to her. "You sure you're okay?" He studied her with his grayish-blue eyes, a color she said she found interesting, but which he felt was dull and boring.

Her gaze was on the floor. "After a terrible start this morning, I

spent the rest of the day around dead bodies and blood.” She gave a shiver and hugged the pillow tighter.

“Anything you want to talk about?”

She peered over at him. “You know I can’t say anything about an open case.”

“Okay, but I thought you didn’t go to— ah.”

“Murder scenes?” She cut him off quickly.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t or shouldn’t, but everyone else that could do it is out of town. That left me.”

“I heard they think the senator killed his wife.”

Sara gave him a sharp look. “Can we change the subject?”

“Sure. Sorry. How’d the doctor’s visit go? I know I should have gone with you, but we had a big meeting at work.” Derry was an account manager for a local accounting firm. Since meeting Sara his interest in computers had grown. When his boss saw how good he was with computers he encouraged Derry to go back to school to get a computer science degree. So he was busy juggling his job and school and still trying to find time to spend with Sara. He felt bad about missing the appointment. He would make up for it by totally focusing on her tonight.

Her gaze flickered toward him, then back to some invisible spot on the floor in front of her. “He just wanted more blood and a hair sample.” She reached up, took a few strands of her dark-brown locks, and peeked at them. “Maybe I should give them some for your hair next time.” She peeked at him.

“Hair sample? Really? But you can’t use mine, it’s too light of brown to pass for yours.” Derry placed his hand on the side of her neck as he ran it along her straight hair.

“Yeah, and yours is too wavy.” She released her strands, tossing them back in place. “And they wouldn’t say why they wanted my hair.”

“I’m sure it’s nothing serious.” He dropped his hand off her shoulder.

Her eyes shifted away, toward the floor. “You sound just like Lamar.”

“Is that a good thing or a bad thing?” Derry smiled at her as he stood to answer a knock at the door.

“Whoever it is, tell them to go away.” Her voice was muffled by the pillow in which she hid her face.

“Can’t. I called them. It’s dinner.”

“I’m not hungry, but you can eat.”

He returned with a pizza along with two plates and a can of Coke for himself and one of Pepsi for her. He placed them on the coffee table.

She took a whiff. “Okay, maybe one slice.” She grabbed a plate and opened the box to retrieve a piece. “I have a follow-up appointment next week.” Sliding back into her corner, she bit into the warm pizza.

“More tests?” *She’s eating, that’s a good sign.* Sara loved pizza and he knew it. It was her comfort food.

She shrugged. “I sure hope not.” She wiped her mouth with a napkin. “I just hope they can find whatever’s wrong before our wedding. I’d hate to disappoint you on our honeymoon.” She gave an impish smile.

“Just don’t think about putting off the wedding.”

She reached over and patted Derry’s cheek. “I wouldn’t do that to you.” Her face held a dramatized sad look.

“Better not.”

The smile disappeared. “I just hope I can get my mother to come.”

“Have you told her yet?”

“I thought you said you wanted to be there when I told her so she could meet you. You’re not backing out are you?” She took another bite.

“Of course not. After what you told me, I’m looking forward to meeting her.” He gave a huge grin.

“Liar.” Sara shifted her gaze out the back window, as she set her half-eaten slice of pizza down. “You may get out of it yet.” Her words were soft.

“Still no luck getting ahold of her?”

“I’ve gone by her apartment three times in the last two weeks. Nothing, no sign of her.” She took another sip before she rose and walked to the rear sliding glass door. “That place she lives in is a real rat trap. It stinks of booze and who knows what.” She nodded toward the converted garage in the backyard. “You find a new renter?”

“I think so. He said he’d move in this weekend.”

“If he doesn’t work out,” she turned and gave a soft smile, “could I rent the place?”

“You miss the place that much?” He smiled at his own humor. She was the reason he had fixed the place up to begin with. Sara had come into his life when she was on the run. She had betrayed her corrupt boss and he had tried to have her killed. God intervened and allowed Derry to rescue Sara. While she was recovering from her injuries he had fixed up the garage then rented it to her.

“No, you know I can’t move back in. I was thinking for my mom.”

He should have thought of this before. “Of course.”

“I really want her out of that slum.” Sara’s gaze fell as the slight smile faded. “That lifestyle is killing her. I need to get her someplace where I can take care of her. Get her off—” she didn’t finish her thought.

This was not the cold woman he had met more than two years ago. God had worked a miracle in Sara’s heart and Derry wanted to help any way he could. “I’ll call the guy and tell him something has come up and I can’t rent it to him.” He took a bite before setting his plate down and joining her at the rear door. He slipped both arms around her. “Family comes first.”

She snuggled into his well-defined arms. “Family’, I like that.” Pulling back, she looked up into his eyes. “Thank you.”

He stared over her, at the garage, her old home. “It looks a lot better with the new siding and roof.”

She spun around in his arms and faced the glass door. “And it only took you two years.” Breaking free of his arms, she moved back to the couch and took a piece of pepperoni off his plate. She stuck it in her mouth and licked her fingers. “The last time I visited my mom, she didn’t even know who I was. She told me to get out.” Sara regained her seat. “Her mind is going.”

Sara had been twelve when the courts took her, her two brothers, and two sisters away from their mother. After a few years alone, her mother had started drinking and slowly spiraled into alcoholism. Six months ago Sara had reconnected with her mother after using the FBI database to locate her. Her mom lived in a rundown apartment off East Colfax, in one of the least desirable locations in the Denver area.

“I’m sure it is temporary. Good food and getting off the booze

will help.” Derry took one last look out the back. *How would it be to have an alcoholic living there? She was going to be his mother-in-law but would that make it any easier? Would he have to spend his days and nights keeping an eye on her?* He turned toward his love. For Sara he would do whatever it took to give her mother a good life. “Tell your mom about this place and how it’s next door to your home.” Derry moved back to the couch and took a drink of his Coke.

“If she’s there.”

“This weekend we’ll both go to her apartment. If she won’t listen to you, maybe I can convince her.”

Sara hesitated, “You think she’ll listen to a perfect stranger before she listens to me, her daughter?”

“Well, I wouldn’t go as far as to say I’m perfect, but if you believe that—”

“You know what I mean.” She gently kicked him with her toes.

He shrugged and smiled. He knew it had been a rough day for her and it was nice to see her smile.

She snatched another slice of his pepperoni.

“Hey, give that back.” He reached for her hand.

She shoved the pepperoni into her mouth. “You weren’t eating it.”

“I was going to, you little thief.”

Sara smiled. “That’s why you’re marrying me isn’t it?”

Derry moved his plate out of her reach. “Nope, I’m marrying you for your body.”

“You are one desperate man. You sure it’s not for my brains, my genius IQ?”

She was the smartest person he’d ever known and she had never set one foot inside a college classroom. “If only you would use your powers for good instead of evil.”

“Now where’s the fun in that?”

---

Picking up the sheet of paper, Nasir scarcely glanced at it. It didn’t matter what was on it. It gave his hands something to do as he waited. He tossed it back. The paper floated off the back of the makeshift desk. He let it fall to the floor of the small room.

He stood and walked five paces to the window. Looking out onto

one of the many dirt alleys of Puerto Palomas, Mexico, he longed for this task to come to an end. In the dim light, he could see the dirt that covered every building and car in sight. The view reminded him of home, but the taste in the air was different.

He glanced at his watch.

11:57 PM

The shipment the truck was carrying needed to get across the border soon, before some over-zealous Mexican Federal Policeman started to wonder about a truck sitting on the side of the road within sight of the U.S. checkpoint.

He glanced at the young man sitting across the room. “Anything?”

Mekka listened to the radio transmission, holding the headphones up to one ear. They were monitoring the U.S. Border Patrol’s communications. He shifted his gaze toward Nasir and shook his head. “Nothing so far.”

*Where was Ortiz?*

*Had he been caught? Backed out? He’d better not.* Nasir was paying him good money for his simple part in this operation.

He walked back to his desk and checked the time again.

12:00 AM

They had maybe a half hour at the most. A cancellation tonight would cost him only money. The chemicals in the back of the truck, could be purchased on the open market but not in the quantities they needed without a licensed manufacturer being involved.

Mekka suddenly sat up.

“Are we ready?”

Mekka laid the headset on the table. “Agent Ortiz has rotated into position.”

“It took him long enough. He better not be having second thoughts or his wife and daughter will pay with their lives.”

“He gave the code word,” Mekka confirmed.

“Call Rukanah and send him across. I want to know the minute he clears customs. Also, remind him to change his plates once he is ten miles across the border. Have him call me once he is back on the road. I will give him the rendezvous location at that time.”

Mekka pulled out a burn-phone and relayed the message.

Nasir took a five gallon can of diesel fuel and poured it around the inside edges of the tiny room. The fire would most likely spread to the surrounding buildings. He said a short prayer for the children who would die tonight as he tossed the match and walked out.