

Timothy Gilbert
Damage Control

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September 1, 2002
Lansdale, Pennsylvania
8:15am

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The gasoline smell came alive as Joe walked closer to the kitchen, which was positioned behind the front staircase, so he took a few seconds to reset his concentration. The doorframe to

the kitchen entrance and the surrounding wall space had been torn to shreds, drawing Joe to run his fingers across the bullet entries. No small gun could have produced that kind of damage.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Faint laughter suddenly filled the house and the two officers looked at the detective. Another burst of laughter...from a woman... upstairs. They drew their guns, then fanned out.

Joe spotted the staircase in the kitchen leading to the back of the house and started his way up the stairs with his gun pointed upward to the second floor landing. The stairs led to a bedroom, bathroom and a closed door that Joe suspected was another bedroom. This part of the

house was above the garage. Another two steps up led into another empty bedroom. Joe walked through this bedroom only to find Officer Tom in the main upstairs hallway. Officer Tom had checked all other rooms upstairs, so they headed back down to the closed bedroom door.

Officer Tom aimed the gun at the door and Joe fired it open. Two people under a white bed sheet looked to be on top of one another. A college-age young man looked out from the bed sheet, his face radiating complete rage over the ecstasy interruption. The naked young man, excited sky high, climbed out of the bed and pulled a golf club from underneath. He completely ignored Joe's loud announcement of who he and Officer Tom were. The next thing Joe knew, this kid started charging him with the club, and he might have clobbered Joe over the head were it not for Officer Tom shooting the ceiling as a warning. The young man halted, dropped the club, and looked over at the bed where the woman he was with hid under the bed sheet.

"Who the hell are you?" he drunkenly slurred. The young man sported short, brown hair and looked around 5'11" and 170.

"Cool it son, I'm detective Joe Costa!" Joe shouted. "Do you live here?"

Sitting down on the bed, the young man looked sheepishly up at Joe. When he didn't say anything for a few seconds, Joe thought about asking the question again.

"Mom, we have company!" the young man suddenly shouted while reaching for his boxers.

Joe put his gun away, wondering why the boy had no problems shouting for his mother with a naked girl in his bed.

"This isn't friggin' happening," the deep voice said despairingly from under the bed sheet.

"Whoever is under the covers, please show yourself," Joe said not so firmly, thinking now that the voice didn't sound much like a woman.

Hands emerged and slowly pulled down the sheet to reveal a young man looking slightly younger than the other. He looked beet red.

Officer Rudy came running into the room. “Whoa! What is going on here...two boys?” he asked with a mild chuckle of astonishment. “Wait a minute, I know you...you’re Tom Rivers.”

Officer Rudy pointed at the newly revealed young man.

“Joe, this kid quarterbacks for Woodland High”, the officer said excitedly. “Who’s this other guy?”

Joe raised his eyes to the golf club swinging young man in a way to prompt an answer.

“Umm...Jimmy Linder...I’m their son.”

Jimmy Linder, 19 years old, had just completed his freshman year at Colgate University.

Joe walked over to Jimmy and thought about sitting down on the bed but changed his mind because the whole bed reeked of alcohol. Joe had a real good idea whose SUV was parked in the driveway.

“Son, where were you last night?” the detective asked. He looked over at Tom Rivers who was sitting in the bed with the bed sheet pulled up to his chest.

Jimmy stood up and headed to the door of the room. “Mom! Dad! Hello? You guys want to come up here please?”

The young man looked back at Joe and the officers. “I don’t know...I got piss drunk with a bunch of high school buddies...Tom and I didn’t get home ‘til maybe three this morning...are you here to arrest me for getting drunk?”

Certain this boy was still drunk, Joe decided not to answer Jimmy’s question.

“How did you get into the house this morning?” Joe asked.

Jimmy looked at Joe like it was a stupid question and scratched his ass. “Huh? I don’t know... we came in through the back door and walked upstairs... we spent the past month at a buddy’s house in the Hamptons.”

Tom started sobbing in the bed. Joe realized that these two could not be ruled out as suspects, though there was not a scratch on the young man - his mother had clearly scratched her attacker mightily – and somebody this drunk likely could not have pulled off a triple homicide.

“And you guys didn’t trip over anybody on the floor in the back hallway?” Rudy asked.

Jimmy was vividly trying to be serious, yet he burst into laughter and didn’t address the question.

Joe sat on the bed with Jimmy. “Son, we hate to break this news to you, but your parents are dead...”

Fifteen seconds of awkward silence ensued before Joe told Officer Rudy to stay with the young men while Joe and Officer Tom continued checking things around the house.

Joe walked downstairs with Officer Tom, desperately trying to remove the image of the two naked young men from his mind.

The ID on the body in the back hallway belonged to a Bill Walters. The bullet to the back of Bill’s head probably killed him instantly. Joe and Officer Tom walked into the garage to look at the sedan, which was sporting a fresh looking rear end smash along with a shattered driver side window. Joe then walked out to the awkwardly parked SUV, opened the door and spotted an open bottle of vodka on the front passenger seat.

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

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

Joe stretched out his arms and let out a long breath. Officer Tom looked at him strangely, before deciding to walk back into the house. Joe followed, wondering why he stayed up so late the night before.

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

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

Nobody said anything for a minute or so.

Officer Tom stepped forward. “But, why does this couple need a bodyguard? They must have been expecting the intruders.”

Joe patted Officer Tom on the back for his solid deduction, and pulled out his notepad to start writing down a list of things he would need to cover. The clue he needed to make sense of it all was in this house, somewhere.

- 1) Talk with neighbors – anybody hear anything?
- 2) SUV in the driveway – most likely Jimmy’s
- 3) Talk with medical peers
- 4) DNA underneath Mrs. Linder’s fingernails.
- 5) Who is Bill Walters?
- 6) Why wasn’t Mrs. Linder set ablaze?
- 7) Talk with relatives. Get list from Jimmy.
- 8) Dig into Dr. Linder’s financial history, phone records, email.

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

September 1, 2002
9:30 am
Peter Hansen

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

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

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

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

The just poured coffee hit my thighs and I sprang out of my chair, thighs stinging and my frontal lobe under assault.

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

I started to get dizzy, so I braced myself against the desk.

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

Collapsed back into the chair with my scalded thighs, I put my pounding head into my lap.

The Violas.

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

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

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

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

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

PLH’s profit: \$25.39 million.

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

By the end of 2001, PLH Capital was down 51% for the prior two years thanks to a huge downturn in the stock market over that time. My celebrity investors were told a different story, however, with the annual report going out to these clients in January 2002 showing a total loss of only 10% since the beginning of 2000. The dot com bubble burst in the spring of 2000, but thanks to the money laundering mercy of the Viola drug cartel deep from the heart of Mexico, I could afford to lie to my celebrity clients.

The Violas started laundering money through PLH capital in September, 2001.

Everything went fine until my firm lost a chunk of their money in a pharmaceutical stock that nosedived on bad news for one of its drugs. After that, things got much worse. Julio knew that my firm had lost a lot of his money over a stock bet on the outcome of an important heart drug study, so that is how he came up with this crazy inside information plan for these drug studies. How he found Dr. Linder I never knew, yet, asking too many questions was risky business. I

should never have bet on that drug study; maybe I was trying to show off to Julio my excellent stock picking skills, except, everything was made so much worse, instead. While the world of money laundering was stressful at first, it became way less shocking and disturbing over time. Nobody got hurt or even threatened – it took very little of my time. This drug study shakedown was a different story because it was 100% disturbing and nasty and people got killed over it.

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

Julio had only met me once, on a boating trip in August, 2001 that was hosted by the Lick Brothers of Miami Beach. The brothers were in the middle of building an all-glass luxury condo tower right on the ocean. The trip was on a Saturday and I was in Miami visiting a college buddy of mine, Carl Williams, an amazingly successful real estate agent for the \$1 million plus market and very good friends with Bruce and Jim Lick. Their boat was half a football field long and seemed to hold ninety to one hundred people easily. Only twenty of us were traveling on it that day, however. When the flame throwing stilt walkers came onto the boat for the early evening entertainment, I told Carl that he had outdone himself and reminded my old buddy that my celebrity friends never invited me anywhere.

Julio began talking with me over the buffet dinner. He briefly described himself as a Mexican industrialist, but he seemed more interested in my investment firm and peppered me with questions about my asset size, number of investors and use of off shore accounts. The guy had a really annoying nasal whistle when he laughed, making me wonder how he got anywhere in

business with it. The night drew to a close and Julio told me that he wished to invest some of his money with my firm. I thought he was joking.

The following Monday, I found out just how serious he was. An acne-scarred, mustached man in a crazily expensive dark blue suit was waiting for me in our lobby when I came in that morning at 7 a.m., and he told me that he represented the Viola family. Judy, my receptionist, was sitting at her desk, typing madly on the computer. The mustached man didn't offer up his name, and quickly got to the point. \$70 million had been deposited overnight in a Swiss bank account, and, when the man told me how to move the money, it became clear that I was helping the Violas wash their cash. Basically, I was told to move the money around various European accounts before moving it on shore as a formal investment in my firm. A Belgian cement company, two French steel manufacturers and a Spanish vineyard were all involved in the transactions. I would have to coordinate nine different wire transactions that day.

The mustached man continued to talk and I began to panic because it looked like Julio Viola was involved with a large drug operation in Mexico, and I was now deep into it. Granted, my investment results thus far in 2001 were pretty bad, but I didn't need to descend to the dregs of money laundering for a Mexican drug lord.

"There must have been a misunderstanding with Mr. Viola on the boat on Saturday," I told the mustached man while springing up from my office chair. The twenty years I had spent building my firm were flashing right in front of me, like a sandcastle towering mightily just ahead of a crashing wave.

The man smiled, though not in a friendly way. "There has been no misunderstanding, you're wife's name is Claire and your sixteen year old son is Charlie, right?"

I looked at him, crossed my arms, and leaned over the desk. “What, so you’ll screw with my family if I don’t cooperate, is that it?” I yelled as softly as I could without being heard out in the hallway.

“Peter, I am just the messenger here,” the mustached man said while pulling out a satellite phone from his bag. He dialed a number and began speaking in Spanish to someone on the other end. After maybe twenty seconds, he handed the phone over to me.

“He wants to speak to you.”

Grabbing the phone, I had a pretty good idea who was on the other line.

“Hello?” I said into the satellite phone. There was a loud hissing sound on the line.

“What’s this about me screwing with your family?” the voice asked. “You whined to me Saturday night about the lousy stock market, your investment results and your need for new investors, so here I am helping you out.”

It struck me quickly that Julio Viola wasn’t somebody you yell at, so I tried to calm down. “Please, Julio, this is all too complicated for me and I’m only looking for much smaller sized investors right now.”

“Look, do as Martin tells you, and you won’t need to worry about anything,” Julio said firmly.

“There’s no changing your mind about this, is there?”

“No, Peter, but this is a good thing, a very good thing, just remember that, alright?”

“Okay,” I said. Taking a huge breath, I handed the phone back to Martin. He talked with Julio for another minute before hanging up.

By noon that day, we had completed all nine wire transactions.

September 1, 2002
Morristown, NJ
Nick Johnson

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

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

I looked up at her and gazed into her eyes.

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

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

Susan and I had been walking every night since late April - our conversations were helping us deal with things of the day. Patient illnesses...her problems with her brother Stanley...our son Tom - anything was fair game to discuss during these walks. We tried to push it for two miles.

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

Washing my cereal bowl in the sink, I found a place for it in the dishwasher. Susan handed me a banana for a mid morning snack. I started to look for my work shoes, only to find our seven-year old black lab, Zeke, lying on them. I gave him a nudge with my foot causing him

to whine as he got up because Zeke always spent most of the day outside, and he adored his time inside our home.

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

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

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

We lived in a white colonial at 57 Skyline Drive in Morristown, NJ. The house was built in 1931 and we were the third owners. Susan and I were pretty sure when we moved in 12 years ago that the only update that had been done over the years was the upstairs carpet, and we were afraid to fire up the ancient stove that stood in the middle of the kitchen, so we chose to gut the entire kitchen. In hindsight, I thought we should have done that before moving in. It was a really long six weeks of eating takeout on the floor of our dining room, particularly since Tommy was only five at the time.

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

“That’s my honey...now run off and save somebody from some nasty disease.”

Susan leaned in with a kiss.

“What time did Tom get home last night? Don’t forget to get his butt out of bed by 9:30. I want him running two miles before practice this afternoon,” I instructed my wife.

Tom’s friends on his team had been calling him lard ass, because the goalie didn’t have to run as hard as the other players. I learned this from his best friend Charlie this past Spring. I didn’t think Tom looked particularly heavy, but Susan and I agreed to set him up with a jogging schedule this summer.

“Don’t worry, if he gives me any grief, I’ll have him call you. I think he got in around 11pm...he was just at Charlie’s.”

Susan was a light sleeper and even though we were both sound asleep at 11 pm the prior evening, I was confident in her ability to awaken to Charlie’s arrival at our house.

I grabbed my keys and opened the garage door.

“Hey, Susan? Are we on for lunch?”

We tried our best to grab lunch together at least three times a week.

“No...remember? I gotta take Stanley to Christopher Larsky at 11:30 and who knows how long that’ll take.”

Christopher Larsky was Stanley’s podiatrist.

9:30am

“Stan, I have to cancel dinner Friday night?” Susan Johnson cautiously informed her brother over the phone.

She always called him Stan, but he was Stanley to everybody else. Stan was blind.

“You sure?” Stan asked with a slight quiver. He dined at Luigi’s nearly every Friday night and Susan joined him on occasion, though it had been close to two months since she last joined him.

“Hey, you know I love going to Luigi’s with you, but I’m gonna be at a soccer fundraiser until maybe eight.”

Stanley Walton was four years older than Susan, born in 1951. They grew up in Basking Ridge, NJ, a little more than an hour outside of Manhattan.

Stan began to chuckle. “That’s my gal... what in the world would I do without you, Susan?”

The truth was Susan wasn’t sure what she would do without her brother since her son, Tom, was in the blooming wonder of teenage hood and its entire splendor of independence and contempt for all that was family. Her mother, Jean, was no longer physically able to care for Stan, so a lot was resting on Susan’s shoulders. She loved every minute of it.

Stan wasn’t born blind. He graduated from high school in 1969 and enrolled at Hamilton College in upstate New York. The Vietnam War draft was in full roar during this time, forcing Stan and all his classmates to draw draft lottery numbers. The numbers ran from 1 to 365 - anybody with a number lower than 170 faced a real good chance of being drafted into the Vietnam War. It was only a matter of time for these numbers. After drawing the number 138, Stan was drafted in April 1971.

Fighting in the Vietnam jungle was horribly confusing at times, and, while Stan was in the forward most group, closest to the surging Vietcong troops, he saw a grenade fly over his head from behind him, strike a tree, and explode fifteen feet above his position.

With his head badly burned, Stan could only see out of his right eye and even that eye was quite blurry. When a U.S. medic found him early the next morning, he thought Stan was dead until he found a faint pulse on his neck.

Stan was honorably discharged to a VA hospital in New Jersey. Over the following few weeks, Stan grew increasingly blind due to the injuries to his head.

After about a week at the VA, Stan started to see spiritual images which sent him into a trance-like state. He was conscious during this series of visual episodes with the heavens, where a man wearing an all white suit and shoes, sporting short cropped, fire red hair and goatee, approached Stan.

This famous saint opened his mouth and out came a pitch that would collapse Fort Knox. He pointed to a moving light that looked more like a spotlight given the near complete darkness in the area. When the light came to where they were standing, Stan found himself at the foot of a throne with a baby seated in the middle. A sea of Angels and Saints surrounded the throne, singing heavenly songs and angelic worship to the throne from which the baby kept smiling gently at Stan but didn't make any noise.

“So, I'll pop by around 10:45 to help you out and maybe we can find your sandals,” Susan offered. “Did you sleep okay last night?”

“Oh yeah just fine, my foot doesn't bother me when I lie down, only when I'm on my feet for awhile.”

The appointment that morning was for Stan's podiatrist.

“How’s your laundry situation?” Susan inquired. She had not done any of his laundry in five days and didn’t know what to make of this because this was one area she didn’t feel comfortable pressing Stan.

“Oh, I’m okay. I guess...but I’ll get some ready for you this morning if that’s alright.”

“Okay, darling, so I’ll see you a little before 11:00.”

“That’s fine...adios.”

Stan hung up the phone.

Nick Johnson

“Top of the morning, ladies,” I declared upon entering my practice.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Leon came into the after-hours clinic over the weekend, complaining about having a head cold for seven months. He wasn’t running a fever and wasn’t in any pain, just congested as all get out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Big garage sale?” I asked.

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

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

Mary’s brother was arrested last weekend over charges of serving alcohol to minors, after her brother and sister-in-law hosted a keg party for their high school senior daughter, Lindsay and her friends. One of these friends left the party before passing out on his own front lawn until the next morning when his parents called the police.

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

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

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

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

“Can you make meth in a basement?”

Mary pushed me with her good arm.

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

I shrugged my shoulders.

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

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

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

My nurse, Melanie, came into my office two minutes later.

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

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

We tried to have lunch every month and we were pretty good at keeping that schedule. Dave loved Italian food, so I tried to accommodate him on that end.

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

I walked out to the lobby and spotted Dave reading last week's Sports Illustrated. He looked up at me with a mighty smile.

"Interesting article on the Patriots...you should check it out," he remarked.

Dave knew that I was a huge New York Jets fan and couldn't stand the Patriots.

"Funny man! Good to see you, Dave...what brings you down here? I don't think you've ever set foot in this clinic."

Dave laughed and grabbed my arm. "Is your office back here?"

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

We walked down the hallway to my office, passing Mary who gave me a funny look.

"Have a seat," I said.

I closed the door to my office. "Okay, what's up?"

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

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

"I'm sure you're aware of the drug Zypitorin - it's the coronary drug that aims to be 40-50% more effective in artery plaque reduction," Dave started. "It stays in your system longer and spends more time in the arteries."

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why’s that?”

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

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

"When does the study end?" I inquired.

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

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

"I'll call you later this evening with more details," Dave told me. "I believe there is a meeting Thursday at 5:30, but I need to double check."

"That's fine," I said.

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

"You are not a high flying celebrity but, whatever," I replied. "Say hello for me."

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

"I will do, sir!" Dave said and then let himself out of my office.

I sat back in my chair, thrilled that he finally asked me. I never wanted to beg to be on one of his cool drug committees but this was an opportunity to break out of the funk I had found

myself in with my career. Was this a mid-life crisis, even though I had earned the same amount of money for ten years now? I couldn't see any more patients, meaning that I had hit the proverbial glass ceiling. Meeting with pharmaceutical big wigs or hobnobbing with the upper ranks of the medical community was out of my league. That opportunity that Dave gave me could open doors in my stagnant career. It was not about the money – it wasn't clear to me if committee members got paid for their service – yet I wanted to be looked at as somebody more than some Internal Medicine doctor in a small clinic.

I didn't want to get my hopes up too much and I was sure Susan would ask me just to be happy with whom I was. This caused me to cringe every time she said this. Why did everybody need to understand who they were and be happy with that? The ego is a complicated beast within us and it needs feeding. I shouldn't have needed somebody like David Clark to ride to my rescue but I kind of did need him. I wanted Susan to brag more about me to her friends, she needed that and I needed that.

Mary poked her head in my office and, with her hair already getting out of place, she was clearly getting frustrated.

“Mr. Kane is waiting in room 2. He's got a huge lump on his neck. He's really worried about it.”

“I'll be right in, Mary.”

She looked at me oddly, cocking her head to the right.

“Hey, are you alright? You look a bit flushed.”

“Mary, I'm okay...don't waste time talking to me...we have a busy day ahead of us!”

Standing up and stretching out my arms, time to be a doctor. I walked out into the hallway and almost ran into Melanie.

“Hey, how was your weekend?” she asked cheerfully.

“Not too shabby. The Bartlett’s had a barbeque on Saturday night. I thought Susan and I might see you and Tim there.”

Melanie, Susan and Lisa Bartlett were in our neighborhood book group. Melanie and her husband Tim lived up the street from us. Tim was an accountant for a hedge fund in the city, while Melanie had been with my group for twelve years now.

“Oh, we got together with the parents of Lucy’s boyfriend. We met them at the Summit Hotel. Nice folks...”

“Rick...right?” I jumped in. “That’s the boyfriend’s name?”

Lucy was the 22 year-old daughter of Melanie and Tim who had just graduated from Penn State. She wanted to be an actress.

“Nice boy! You have a great memory, Mr. Nick Johnson. Yes, Rick is a fine young man...and he’s an investment banker!”

“Sounds like a match made in heaven.”

I didn’t quite see what Rick being an investment banker had to do with it, because most of the investment bankers that I knew had been laid off in the past year. This seemed like a potentially lucrative but not so stable career path, while the path for an Internal Medicine doctor was the flip side of investment banking. Sure, the pay was better than most professions, yet I could never make over \$1 million in a single year like a banker on Wall Street could. The most patients my practice could see in a single day was sixteen, so my income was capped at the rate my practice charged for those sixteen patients. Granted, some patients underwent lab and X-Ray treatment which added to their bill, but for most intents and purposes, my income had a clear ceiling.

However, my career was very stable and I didn’t have to worry about getting laid off. Bill Arbor lived next door to me and was a banker in the city, up until six months ago. He was a

Senior Vice President in the Corporate Finance department until they gave him the axe one day out of the blue. Bill had just returned from a trip to a client who agreed to issue their next bond deal through Bill's firm. Even though his firm earned ten years of his salary on the bond deal he brought before being axed, they gave him only one month severance.

"Didn't you tell me that Rick and Lucy have been dating for over a year?" I asked
Melanie.

"Uh huh, he graduated a year before Lucy from Penn State and was living in Soho with a group of guys that work on Wall Street."

"What a life these young kids lead."

"Oh, did the Bartletts serve their rack of lamb? That dish is out of this world!" Melanie exclaimed.

Melanie and Lisa Bartlett shared recipes often and joked about launching a cooking show together or starting a catering service of some sort. Big dreamers, the both of them.

"No, this was kind of an ocean theme...lobster, shrimp...Lisa does make wonderful stuffed crabs... Okay, I'd better get in to see Mr. Kane."

**Monday, September 1st,
2:30pm
Peter Hansen**

The first phone call came just a few hours after learning of the Linder's fate. Aside from my lunch meeting with Steven Angle two hours earlier, I had gotten nothing done that day, and there was no problem with that mainly because there hadn't been much done at all with my clients' investments since my horrible mistake with Julio's money over that heart drug study. Nobody thought Drexel Pharmaceuticals would stop development of the heart drug over the study, but that's what they did and their stock got creamed for it.

I didn't know how Julio would respond upon learning the news, and, when I didn't hear from him or Martin for five days, I got really spooked. If they were going to whack me over my mistake, it surely would have happened within those five days. Two days into this torment, I started making plans to disappear, but the hurdle of leaving my family was far too large. Julio could just as easily kill them in retribution, so if I were to disappear, it would have to involve my whole family. Then there was the planning time problem. Such a plan would need at least a few weeks to pull off and we only had a few days.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No, I suppose not," I replied.

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

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

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

Judy rang me at 1pm to tell me to pick up line one.

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

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

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

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

“They’ll hang up eventually,” I told Judy firmly. “Is this the first time something like this has happened?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Judy, it’s okay,” I told her, squeezing out a chuckle. “I think it’s a college buddy of mine.”

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

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

“Done.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

I had gotten Angle-esq enthusiasm over my investment performance from a few clients recently. Yet, after listening to that recorded phone message, maybe one of my clients or maybe even a competitor didn't believe the numbers? I hadn't received any client liquidation requests in over two years, although that meant nothing after a phone call like that. Granted, this person had no proof without access to my bank records and even those would be difficult to transcribe. Still, if the authorities were made suspicious enough, it would be game over for me.

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

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

“Peter Hansen.”

“Did you get my message?”

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

“Who is this?” I demanded, shooting up from my chair.

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

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

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

“Who do you think it is?” Martin asked.

“I don’t have a clue, but Judy is really scared.”

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

“Let me deal with them,” I responded. “I really appreciate this Martin.”

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

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

"Martin, thanks a lot."

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

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

Monday, September 1
5pm
Oleg Yashkov

“Five hundred thousand will be wired to your Swiss account on Thursday.” Martin’s voice was tired and deep.

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

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

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

“Yeah, I thought doctors were an easier mark but that guy in Philly surprised us,” I told Martin. “So...how exactly did you make this kind of money on the information we passed on?”

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

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

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

An 18 wheeler trucker blew his horn behind the sedan.

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

“I understand.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Monday, September 1st
5:45pm
Nick Johnson

I usually ran to the office a few times a week since my drive to work was under five minutes, especially if the first appointment slot wasn't filled. Sweating way more than the average human, I needed to shower off in the office on those days.

My car of choice was a Toyota Camry. My family had never owned vehicles larger than a four door sedan, though this was a bit of a hassle for Susan during the carpool years.

I stepped out of my car in the garage, looking around at the newfound space in the garage that was still catching me off guard, despite being a few weeks old. Susan, Tom and I used to ride our bikes in the summers when Tom was smaller, but not anymore. Susan got rid of them this past summer during a clearing out whirlwind she had going on for most of July throughout the house. We bought a shed for the backyard for my snow blower and lawn mower, which meant moving them out of the garage. Suddenly, people now could exit both vehicles on either side - it was a huge change in space.

I had been thinking about putting in a workstation where the bikes were but that would mean me actually doing some handy work around the house.

Susan was cooking something with a heavy beef odor – probably tacos or enchiladas; she was quite a good cook though she reserved her best for dinner parties.

I walked up behind her in the kitchen and she heard me coming.

“Hey hon, how was your day?” Susan inquired.

It was a beef noodle dish that she was stirring gently in the large spaghetti pot.

“Well, it started off with kind of a bang...guess who stopped by the office first thing this morning?”

Susan turned to me and smiled. She gave me a kiss and ran her hands through my hair. Susan loved wintergreen lifesavers and her breath was especially fresh.

Tom was at soccer practice and usually didn't return home until 6:30. We'd been trying to have more family dinners the past few months, so dinner was later than usual during the fall soccer season. We tried to go to all of his games, which meant eating out very late after the game and producing a number on my digestive track.

“Oohh...sounds exciting. Who was it?”

“Dave Clark stopped by and asked me to be on one of his drug study committees.”

Susan stopped smiling and turned back to the beef casserole before suddenly spinning back toward me.

“Are you sure this isn't one of his schemes to demean you once again?” she asked me.

I knew she would bring that up.

About ten years ago, when Tom was just learning how to ski, the Clarks and the Johnsons went on a ski trip to Vail. We had a decent week but, even back then, it was clear that Dave's stature was rising much faster than mine in the medical community.

The management company notified us mid week that the condo in which we were staying was being offered to us on a time share basis. We could buy two weeks a year. The price: \$8,500 per couple.

After we all thought about the deal, we finally agreed to give it a go. Dave said he would notify the management company to gather up all of the paperwork. The Clarks and Johnsons went out that evening to celebrate - it felt like we were in college again- and the laughter kept growing with every drink. The \$8,500 price was steep because the Johnsons were not used to spending that

kind of vacation money. I was still paying off medical school loans, but we had it lying around in our savings accounts and we figured we could swing it.

The next Monday, Dave called me and told me there'd been a change in plans. It turned out that the Clarks were angling for another higher end time share property right on the ski slopes. Dave offered me in on this deal as well, only now the price was \$22,500 per couple for the same two weeks a year. This was clearly far out of our price range and I suspected that Dave knew that.

“Nick, I didn't think you guys would be comfortable with this kind of money, but I wanted to at least give you a chance. The Jacobs – you know Paul Jacobs, right? – they are in if you guys pass, so don't feel like there's any pressure here.”

Dave had a way to defuse people's volatile reactions toward him. Paul Jacobs was a general surgeon who often worked with Dave.

Susan was quite pissed about the whole thing, fuming about for over a month, and we ended up not seeing the Clarks for almost nine months until a dinner party at the Wesleys. When Dave announced during dinner that the Clarks were traveling out to their Vail time share, Susan nearly choked on her salmon. I really thought she was going to offer up a tirade against Dave and his scheming antic.

“That was a long time ago, honey, and I really think he's being sincere here,” I replied.

“Nick, I just don't want you to get hurt here, that's all.”

“Look, this isn't middle school, Hon.”

Susan turned to exam the beef dish.

“I don't know what that means...but if you think trying to protect you is somehow immature...”

I had some backtracking here to do and quick.

“I didn’t mean it like that...it was ten years ago, though....and I do think I have a better read on the man after all of these years. I don’t let him push me around...”

The phone rang and Susan leaned over the stove to pick it up to find Stanley on the line. I knew this could be awhile so I walked into the family room and grabbed that day’s newspaper. The recession seemed to be getting worse - companies were lying to their investors everywhere we looked. The whole Enron fiasco was still all over the news.

I’d call Dave that night. I knew I shouldn’t get my hopes up, but he didn’t come all the way over to my office early that morning with a plan to purposely disappoint me by saying, at a later time, that the committee didn’t need me after all. That would be just twisted behavior, and I didn’t put David Clark in that category of folks.

Friday, September 5th
5:30pm
Nick Johnson

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir...”I stated.

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

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

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

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

Over the past two years, complaints had surfaced about Zyptorin’s claim as the superior drug for artery plaque reduction. Distal Pharmaceutical was funding the study of 2,050 heart patients receiving stents in the last year, with various doses being set for the study that extended to 10 cities across the U.S.

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

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

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

Dave Clark came over and patted me on the back.

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

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

A gentleman I didn’t know leaned over the table. “And they have covered all five dose classes across the patient sample?”

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

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

Dr. Watson grimaced while rubbing his chin.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Paul asked.

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

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

Dr. Watson checked his watch.

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

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

Dave Clark slammed his hands down on the table.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Friday, September 5th
5:30 p.m.

Every Friday night, for the past few years, Stanley ate at Luiggi's, an Italian restaurant in town. Luiggi's had started 30 years ago as a pizzeria and was just that up to nine years ago when Luiggi decided to add a sit down Italian restaurant next to the pizzeria. Luiggi's daughter, Vicki, was Stanley's chauffer those Friday nights.

6:30 p.m. was dinner time for Stanley every night and that night was no different. He went to bed around 11:30 each night, so eating at that hour wasn't too hard on the stomach. When Stanley stopped snacking after dinner a few years ago, he dropped five pounds in two weeks.

Vicki was married to Roger up until four years ago when they divorced. They didn't have any children and that was the key difficulty in their relationship because Vicki couldn't bear a child and Roger didn't want to adopt. He kept saying that he didn't want somebody else's baby, but that made no sense to Vicki. They fought about it for two years before deciding mutually to call it quits. Last Stanley heard, Roger had moved to Fort Lauderdale, though, he never asked Vicki about him and she no longer brought him up in conversation.

"Hey babe, you all ready?" Vicki asked Stanley, smacking her gum like a twelve year old.

Luiggi's, two miles away from Stanley's home, looked like a restaurant right out of the Godfather, with long and narrow white tile floors, small tables and no booths. There was an alcove in the front east corner for the bar, but it was a small bar that seated no more than ten people.

Vicki drove her Chevy Impala to Stanley's home every Friday to pick him up. Stanley usually ate at the bar, while chatting with Tom the bartender and fellow patrons if they wished.

Susan tagged along some Friday evenings and seemed surprised by her brother's chattiness - everyone in the place knew him.

"I am, my lady. Take me to your chariot," Stanley said flirtatiously.

Vicki giggled and took his hand.

"Uh, Stanley, you got that backwards....it's the lady who asks to be taken to the chariot...not the guy!"

"Well, excuse me...this is the 21st century and new rules are in place."

Vicki's Impala was a former police car for the town of Summit before Luigi bought it at an auction and gave it to Vicki.

It felt and smelled foggy outside - the air was eerily still. Stanley thought about reminding Vicki to drive more carefully given the foggy conditions, but he decided to bite his tongue instead.

"Pick up any criminals on the way over?" Stanley joked while stepping into the front seat.

"Har har."

The smell of fish hit him right away.

"Wow! Did you drive the Impala at the bottom of the Atlantic today? What a stink!"

"What's with the jokes tonight, mister?" Vicki yelled. "I had to make an emergency run to the market for some shrimp this afternoon because our supplier missed an order so I had to find a quick solution."

"Okay, okay...I'll stop with the commentary. I wasn't trying to be funny....alright, just a little."

Vicki ignored Stanley and started to back out of his driveway. In addition to his driveway being too long, she usually complained about the two large rocks at the entrance to the driveway,

rocks that many a vehicle had run over trying to navigate the exit. Most of these problems had occurred at night. Vicki once dragged one of the rocks halfway down the street, severely damaging the undercarriage of her Impala. Luigi was not happy.

Stanley usually ordered the lasagna dinner with a few glasses of white wine and a heaping portion of bread, but he thought that night could be different. He didn't know why.

"So, how's Susan doing?" Vicki inquired.

"She's okay...my mom and her are having their usual power struggle issues. I just wish they'd cut it out..."

"What's her name...Joan, is it?"

Stanley laughed - he had no reason to at the moment - and it felt oddly good. Susan had said that Stanley had grown more jovial in the past year, but he didn't really know what she meant by that though it clearly made her uncomfortable. Stanley's mother, Joan, had said the same thing to him, so maybe there was some truth to the matter. Stanley had tried to talk to Nick about this perception of him that the ladies in the family shared, but that went nowhere fast.

"Yes, Joan is her name. I honestly don't think she wants her daughter to be happy. She's quickly becoming a lonely old widow and it's like she wants to bring her family down with her."

As Vicki chuckled, Stanley heard her put her gum in the wrapper and a fresh stick in her mouth.

"Okay then! You sure have put a lot of thought into this," she stated.

"Well I do spend a large part of my day sitting at home, just contemplating things."

Vicki sighed heavily.

"Yeah, I wish I could do that every now and then. My life is just too damn busy."

They pulled into the Luiggi parking lot and Vicki came around to help Stanley out of the car. He heard several vehicles in the lot and at least two couples talking as they walked through the parking lot. Stanley wondered if this Friday would be busier than usual.

Luiggi's didn't take reservations, so if you were not there by 6:45pm, you'd have an hour wait. In the summer time, a few cocktail tables were available on the back patio for people waiting to be seated.

Terry was the bartender at Luiggi's and had been at the restaurant for five years. He spent two years in Vietnam in the late 1960s. Terry served in the Navy, from which he had burn marks up and down his left leg after a boat fire caused by a river attack in the jungle. This injury sent Terry home.

Terry owned two failed restaurants in the 1980s. He then ran a lucrative catering business before selling it for a nice sum and joining Luiggi's.

Vicki held the door open for Stanley, so he headed inside.

"There here is...Mr. Fridaaaaay night....How are you, bub?" Terry asked Stanley. When Susan dined with him, they sat in the table section, but, otherwise, Stanley ate at the bar.

He thought there were three or four other people seated at the bar and at least one of them was eating the fried ravioli appetizer which was quite tasty.

"I, sir, am just fine. How's business tonight?"

"It's fillin' up, it's fillin' up. Last Saturday was so packed, I thought we would have to have folks waiting in their cars."

Two womanly hands covered Stanley's eyes from behind, hands that smelled like lemons.

"Hey beefcake, want to dance?"

“Betsy, is that you, darling?” Betsy was the head waitress here and best friends with Vicki since high school.

Betsy pecked Stanley on the cheek. “Gotta run and serve the masses...but you just let me know when you want to eat.”

“See you later.” Stanley turned to Terry. “Hey, Terry can I just get a Miller Light to start?”

Stanley had been on a beer thing lately, just to shake things up. The hard stuff would always play a beautiful part of his evenings, but for a few weeks lately, Stanley really needed to start off the evening with a domestic beer. It didn't matter what type of domestic – he kept a hearty stock of Bud, Miller and Rolling Rock at home – as long as it was lighter than the foreign beers. Some might have called him an alcoholic, but Stanley couldn't drive and he didn't have a marriage that he could ruin, so, it was a pretty benign alcoholism, he'd say. Just him and his liver.

“You got it mate,” Terry answered. “What's the latest with your foot?”

Stanley liked a bartender who listened to him - Terry's good memory was a plus - though Stanley was not sure when they last discussed his latest medical problem.

“He thinks I pulled my arch muscle. It sounds stupid, but it really hurts to walk on it. The sad thing is there's not much he can do for it aside from resting the dang thing.”

The bartender grunted and Stanley heard the cash register open.

“He gave you some drugs for it, right?”

Terry placed the beer bottle in Stanley's left hand. He loved the feeling of an ice cold beer touching his skin.

“Yeah, pain killers, but I'm not supposed to mix with alcohol – now how the hell am I going to do that?”

Terry laughed softly.

“What’d you decide for your Mom’s birthday?” Terry asked from the other side of the bar. “I thought I saw Susan downtown the other day, but I was zipping by in the car and I couldn’t be sure.”

Stanley heard Terry begin a champagne discussion with some folks at the end of the bar closest to the door. He waited for this party to finish its order.

“Susan is going to buy some jewelry, which should make the old bat happy, I guess.” Stanley trusted that Terry was listening.

“Yeah, gifts get so much harder and complicated as we get older, don’t they?” Terry responded.

Stanley thought he would start with the garlic cheese bread that Luiggi served with an artichoke dip that was out of this world.

“Stanley, it’s so good to see you...it’s the Whitney’s,” Meg Whitney’s voice rang out behind him.

The Whitney’s were old family friends. Stanley’s parents and the Whitney’s used to play bridge once a month with two other couples. This went on for twenty years.

“Will and Beverly, how are you tonight?”

While Stanley was usually terrible with names, these two he knew rather well. Stanley always thought the name William Whitney was a little odd, but it worked for him. He started a vending machine business forty years ago and now ran a family business that served nearly 2/3 of the vending machines in the tri-state area. The Whitney’s had two sons that handled most of the business affairs the past few years.

“We are splendid, indeed, Stanley! We have been traveling in Ireland and Scotland the past few weeks but it’s great to be home,” Beverly exclaimed.

Beverly had gone a little heavy on the perfume tonight, and Stanley couldn't tell if they were coming or going.

"Are you two just arriving?"

"No, no...we just finished a wonderful dinner. Hey, what's this I hear about Nick serving on a drug study committee? That's fantastic!"

Beverly and Joan talked all of the time, but Stanley was surprised that Susan would tell their mother about Nick's business. So much of what his sister told Stanley stopped with him. Stanley understood what the big fuss was with Nick being asked to be on the committee, since it seemed like an honor to him. While his sister was having trouble seeing it that way, Stanley felt like that real estate misunderstanding years ago with Nick's friend was something she should have let go a long time ago.

"Well, it's actually for a drug that's already out there...but I don't have a lot of the details...but it sounds like a pretty high profile study."

Will laughed. "Yeah, there's big dollars at stake with these damn studies."

"Hey how is your bridge game these days?" Stanley asked.

A hand was placed on Stanley's shoulder, and he thought it was Beverly's. She was a huggy kind of person.

"We all miss Dave so much...your mother is very lucky to have such loving children living nearby. We still play bridge a few times a year but it's not like it used to be."

Beverly planted a kiss on Stanley's cheek.

"Well, we will let you get back to your evening out. It's great to see you Stanley," Will stated.

"Likewise, guys. You have a good weekend now."

Stanley turned back to the bar.

“It sounds like your brother-in-law is moving up the doctor ranks, huh, Stanley,” Terry inquired.

“I think his first meeting is tonight.”

Susan kept apologizing all week to Stanley about canceling their Friday night plans even though her excuse was a good one in Stanley’s mind.

“Well, that’s cool...hey, you want to start ordering your food for the night?”

“Terry, I think I’m going with the garlic cheese bread with that awesome artichoke dip.”

Terry groaned a bit. “Those guys in the kitchen can’t make that dip fast enough during the weekend...oh, those guys over to your left offered you this glass of their champagne.”

He slid the glass over to Stanley.

“Really...cool...what are we celebrating?” He said loud enough so they could hear him.

Stanley turned to his left while saying this.

“A very successful business transaction,” the Eastern European voice stated.

Stanley heard glasses clinking together and words that weren’t in English were said among the group; still he didn’t have a clue how many folks were in their party.

“Well, hear, hear, guys...thanks for the bubbly,” Stanley said.

He didn’t really know his champagnes, but this sure tasted like one of Luiggi’s finest.

Stanley heard one of the gentlemen getting off his stool and a glass set down beside him.

“Stanley, right?”

He grabbed Stanley’s right hand and shook it.

“You got it...and you are?”

“Oleg.”

“Nice to meet you Oleg.”

Stanley wasn't far off with his thinking that his voice was Eastern European, maybe a little more east than that. Oleg sounded Russian.

"Stanley, we couldn't help but overhear you talking about your brother-in-law, the doctor – what's his name?"

"Oh, that's alright - didn't mean to talk so loud - Nick Johnson is his name. He's an Internal Medicine doctor here in town."

Oleg cleared his throat.

"Nick Johnson? Don't know him. I'm in pharmaceutical sales and thought I might have come across him."

Stanley felt around for the champagne glass and took a sip. He hadn't knocked over a glass in years - he liked to think it was his cat-like senses.

"So...you're out celebrating a large pharmaceutical sale tonight?"

"Not exactly. I'm involved in a real estate project on the side and I just got good news for a deal I'm working on. Stanley, if I might ask, what brings you out tonight?"

Stanley snickered, but actually it came out more like a sneer.

"Oh, I come here every Friday night, like it's my night out on the town, so to speak. Vicki, Luigi's daughter was so gracious to pick me up, what a sweetheart."

"That is nice...so, you live near here...alone?"

"I have a small house just up a few streets from here."

Stanley got a whiff of garlic and he sensed that his cheese bread appetizer had arrived.

"I put the bread and artichoke cup in front of you here, next to your beer," Terry informed Stanley, handing him a napkin.

Terry used to be so nervous around Stanley, afraid that he would confuse him or cause him to spill a drink, but Stanley had worked hard to keep Terry relaxed. People don't know how

to be around blind folks. Terry was fine now, however, and left Stanley alone to navigate the bar along with the things he had ordered.

“Well, Stanley, it was nice talking with you...enjoy your meal.”

Stanley said good bye to his ‘Russian’ friend, Oleg, and sank his teeth into the oozing cheese bread.

Friday, September 5th
Nick Johnson

I walked into the kitchen where Susan was looking through some bills at the kitchen table. The committee meeting had me doubting my knowledge of statistics and I definitely had some homework to do before the next meeting. This committee could open many doors for my career, so I had to keep pace with its members.

“Hey, how was the legendary Dave Clark tonight? That wasn’t a real long meeting.”

Susan took a glance at her watch which showed 7:40pm. Tom’s friend, Luke, was having a party to which Tom and Charlie could walk to Luke’s house. We figured the danger of drinking and driving could be a lot higher. Tom was upstairs on the phone.

“Well, it was pretty much a yawner, but I do need to brush up on my statistics knowledge.”

“And I suppose you can’t discuss the committee and all of the fun details, right?”

I sat down next to Susan on the couch, letting out a big exhale.

“Probably not a good idea, sweetie.”

“Did Dave behave himself?”

“Yeah, and he introduced to most of the committee. That is a group of powerful folks in the medical community, I’ll tell you. It’s just kinda weird, I’m just a run of the mill doctor and to be appointed to a committee of medical stars...it’s feels weird, you know?”

“I’ll bet – but don’t let them look down at you. You, sir, are a fine doctor. Don’t ever forget that.”

Tom came barreling down the stairs.

“Hey, Dad. What’s up? Uh, Mom? I’m going over to Charlie’s house before the party.”

He grabbed a Ho-Ho out from the kitchen closet and ran out of the house. Susan ran after him to remind him of the curfew – 11pm.

“I really don’t want that boy to get his license. Can’t he just stay sixteen forever?” Susan said as she walked back into the house,

“I hear they’re a lot nicer after college, though.”

That was what families with kids a few years older than Tom had told Susan and me.

The phone rang.

“Hello?” I answered.

“Oh hi, Mr. Johnson. This is Ashley. Is Tom there by any chance?”

“Ashley, I’m sorry...you just missed him.”

“Did he say where he was going?”

I wanted to ask her why she didn’t know this. High school parties tend to be well advertised among the cool kids and, as far as I was aware, Ashley was Tom’s girlfriend.

“A party at Luke’s house, but why...”

“Thanks, Mr. Johnson. Have a great night.”

Ashley hung up the phone and I grabbed the phone book.

Looking up the number for Luke’s house, I began dialing.

“Hello?” answered a female voice.

Luke had two brothers.

“Uh, Amy?”

Amy was Luke’s mother.

“Yes?”

“Hi, it’s Nick Johnson. Tom was heading over to your house with Charlie. Can you have Tom call me when he arrives?”

A pause on the line was interrupted by Amy shouting to her husband.

“Honey, where did Luke say he was going tonight?”

Amy returned to the line. “Hey, Nick, I think they’re pulling a fast one on all of us. Luke told us he was going to a hockey game.”

My pulse raced to unhealthy levels.

“Well, we were told there was a party over at your house tonight.”

“Oh, brother... we just gave Luke a cell phone, but I see it sitting on the counter.”

“Okay, Amy? We’ll let you know what we find out.”

I hung up the phone and ran upstairs to Susan.

“So...no party at Luke’s house, huh?” Susan was sitting on our bed filing through some paper work.

I sat on the bed with her, thinking it was time to wash our sheets. My pillow case was starting to stink a tad.

“Do we get in the car and start hunting them down?” I asked.

“I’ll get the torch and pitchforks.”

“Funny.”

“Alright...I’ll give Leslie a call and see if she can make any sense of all of this,” Susan asserted.

Leslie was Charlie’s mother.

“Why would he lie to us about what he was doing tonight?” I asked my wife. “We’re pretty flexible, aren’t we?”

“It’s that age, I think. We’re the enemy.”

I gave Susan a hug. “And you want to keep him at this age forever?”

Mrs. Yin and Mr. Yang - that was the label that I attached to my folks during my High School years in the early 1970’s.

“Be a fountain, not a drain.” This was a favorite expression of my mother, Janet.

To which my father, Lawrence, would always reply, “The world will kick you in the teeth if you think like your mother!”

Dad pissed off a multitude of human beings during his walk on this earth. This was true. It was also true that I loved the man dearly.

We lived in Chatham, N.J., in a stone Tudor on Washington Boulevard. Dad rose to the top of a prominent New York law firm and trampled many peers in the process. He specialized in corporate litigation and most who knew Dad regarded him to be a cold, calculating SOB. I chose to think of Dad as remarkably stoic, and so did my beautiful mother. Families have to stick together after all.

Susan and I met in 1981 and the first thing I noticed was her smile, how it seemed to be able to light up the darkest of life’s moments. Cynicism had dominated my family growing up and I wanted someone who saw the good in people; the bad, this person was aware of, but it wasn’t the focus. Susan was an intelligent, happy go-getter in her career and I knew after our first date that she was the one for me. She was tough when she had to be, and any women in business in those days needed this attribute every day in the office, but Susan saw the joy in being alive.

Friday, September 5th
Oleg Yashkov

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

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

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

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

I thought I was too loud just then, causing me to look around the restaurant to see if anyone was staring at us. Two men were talking with a woman and her teenage son, though none of them was paying us any attention.

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

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

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

Friday, September 5th
Peter Hansen

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

The truth was, though, I had slept like crap all week long, and, by Friday night, Claire could have put a fork in me. Martin’s security guy showed up in my office parking lot late Monday afternoon as promised. Judy and I had no problems leaving that night. I didn’t tell her about the second phone call on Monday. By Friday, I was kind of surprised that this ‘pants on fire’ guy hadn’t called back. Maybe he noticed Martin’s security guy arrive, then followed me home, or maybe he wasn’t watching me at all. He couldn’t have full appreciation of who he was dealing with if that was the deal. In any case, Martin’s man hung around my neighborhood, where I only had two neighbors on my heavily wooded street, and followed me wherever I went in my

car each day. Part of me hoped that ‘pants on fire’ did try something. That way he could find a bullet between the eyes.

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

Over the next few months, I made sure to tape every conversation I had with Julio, which totaled five before year end. On the third conversation, I whined to him that the laundered money scheme would end up crashing down into my lap, and Julio assured me that he wouldn’t let that happen. Once I got that on tape, that was enough insurance. Thoughts about picking up my family and bolting town were gone, replaced by confidence that Julio didn’t have a reason to hurt us as long as the laundering relationship continued functioning and if authorities raided my firm one day, the tapes would point the blame directly at Julio.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I knew Father Mike tried to play three times a week in a recreational league that was pretty laid back. Nick Johnson was also in that league, and he'd been trying for years to get me to join. I went with him once to the courts, though it was a complete train wreck.

"Oh, how was your squash game?" Claire asked.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Friday, October 18th
2pm
Peter Hansen

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, I know him!” I shouted. “He lives in my neighborhood.” This was bad, really, really bad. I ran my hand through my hair, something I’ve been doing a lot lately. If I had opened up my chest and yanked my heart out just then, the sucker would have definitely jumped off my desk.

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

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

“No, that would take too much time,” Julio replied. “We’ve already spent a lot of time on this doctor Nick Johnson.”

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

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

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

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

It was one thing to bring this plague upon my family, but I was responsible for bringing it upon the Johnsons, and, since Oleg murdered the last doctor he was threatening, there was every reason to fear the worst for Nick, Susan and Tom. Oleg certainly would try his best in making Nick believe that he would leave him and his family alone if Nick did what they told him to do. But I had complained about the Linder murder to Julio on several occasions and this was the first time that he even intimated that he wouldn’t do it again. I was not sure I believed him, though, so Nick needed to know what I knew about who he was dealing with.

I wiped my mouth, spat some more into my waste basket and took a sip of my diet cola. It struck me while leaning back in my chair that Julio must have known that I knew Nick Johnson – he probably wanted to set me straight before they really put their plan into action – mainly because he didn’t need to keep me in the loop like that. They told me about the Linders way late into the process, and I only learned their name, fate, etc. from Martin, not Julio. It sure sounded from Julio that they were in the early stages of targeting Nick Johnson. Why did I tell Julio that

Nick and I were friends? I should have quickly realized that Julio wasn't going to change his mind, as it would have been nice to leave him a little confused by not saying anything. During the conversation, Julio didn't ask me at first if I knew Nick. If I had left it alone and steered the conversation away from such a question, Julio may have walked away flummoxed. That was the least that son-of-a-bitch deserved.

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

Crap. Just when I thought I had the money laundering thing under control, this damn drug trial scheme was starting to bite me in a new part of my ass.

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

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

The police would be no help at all, given that the real criminal was in the middle of Mexico, shielded from any authority. I had thought about turning over my taped phone conversations to the police last year, but quickly realized the futility of such an effort. Even if the

police arrested Martin or Oleg, Julio would quickly find replacements who would certainly teach me a lesson for talking to the police.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Friday, October 18th
5pm

“Julio, it’s Martin.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

Monday, October 21st
9am
Peter Hansen

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

I picked my office phone handset and dialed Martin's number.

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

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

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

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

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

"Boy, Julio is pretty organized, huh?"

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

"Alright, then," I said. "Talk to you later."

I hung up the phone and, sitting back in my chair, it dawned on me that I may just have to suck it up: Nick would be the first person I open up to about Julio's Cartel. Claire and Susan hadn't been speaking since our late August card game where Claire crossed the line in asserting that Susan was wasting her career away looking after very much independent Stanley. It was

surprising to hear a nurse say that kind of thing. Susan was really offended. We had seen each other at soccer games but hadn't really talked all season, and that's why I had no idea Nick was appointed to this drug trial committee. There had to be a way for Nick to believe this, convince him that I did not turn Oleg onto him.

“Good luck with that,” I told myself.

Martin refused to tell me how Julio's team found Nick, and that lack of knowledge was beginning to drive me nuts.

Tuesday, November 5
Nick Johnson

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

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

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

“Do you feel sick?”

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

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

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

This was a big game for Tom's team - they were ranked the #1 team in Morris County heading into the fall – which recently lost to Madison in the Morris County Tournament finals.

They had already beaten Madison in early September but they got stung in overtime in the tournament.

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

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

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

I tried to make a joke to Susan about the uptightness of all involved parties surrounding this game today, when Susan told me to be quiet. What was wrong with trying to lighten up the moment? The funnyman, though, wasn't any closer to understanding what was wrong with Susan despite running the past 24 hours around in my head over and over again.

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

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

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

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

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

Susan slammed the door, then walked off.

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

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

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

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

The voice recorder fell to the floor.

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

I reached to the center console where my wallet was sitting and lifted it up.

My throat was starting to sting... whoever was behind me ignored the wallet.

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

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

“You are Nick Johnson, yes?”

“Uh-huh.”

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

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

“Uh-huh.”

My stomach was starting to seize up, but I was too scared that my head might flinch and slice my throat.

“Please, can you loosen the knife, sir? You can have whatever you want!”

The man spoke to the knife holder in a foreign language and the knife was removed.

While taking a deep breath, I looked over at the man in the front seat, not daring to look behind me.

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

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

I shrunk my eyes, then shook my head in confusion.

“What?” I asked exasperatedly.

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

“Who are you?” I asked continually in my head.

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

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

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

My front passenger mate pressed the play button and the male in the video began to speak.

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

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

A man looking a lot like my front passenger mate emerged behind the doctor and placed tape over the doctor's mouth. Next, he yanked the doctor's hand up, held his arm from moving, and out came a huge knife. The man had black gloves on. As the doctor was now screaming, he began fighting the man with the big knife by trying to free his hand, but it was not helping him. The time on the video screen was 2:27am.

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

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

The man dropped the finger onto the tile floor.

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

My front passenger mate started speaking.

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

My front passenger mate was an inch or two from my left ear - I could feel his breath as he spoke to me.

The male behind me said something in his foreign language to my front passenger mate and started laughing through his nose. They exchanged a few thoughts, though it sure seemed like the conversation was less than pleasant.

“Okay, I got it!” I said firmly.

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

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

“Alright...no need for anybody to get hurt here.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

It wasn't clear to me if my front passenger mate told me when we were going to meet again - I couldn't seem to recall exactly what he said or didn't say because the past few minutes were a blur - but the voice recorder likely taped the whole conversation so I would make sure to listen to this later.

The car clock got my attention. 3:59pm.

"Wait," I said aloud. "You might not know when the trial results are released to the press... Crap! What if they didn't believe me if I told them I didn't know?"

The press release was established in conjunction with the pharmaceutical company. The more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that I wouldn't have such information. This worry was especially reasonable given that all signs of the trial up to this point were quite bad for

Distal Pharmaceutical, and the company may decide to delay the news release beyond the committee's knowledge.

I slammed my head against the head rest.

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

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

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

"You should have locked the car when Susan left, you idiot!" I said quietly to myself.

I realized that it didn't do me any good to focus on how these thugs found me, because the fact was, they did and I needed to move forward.

I started walking toward the stadium, hoping that no one we knew bumped into me. The bloodied napkin piece on my neck looked pretty stupid, especially at this time of day.

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

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

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

Susan leaned over and gave me a kiss on my cheek.

“We’ll talk later, sweetie,” she tells me.

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

I checked my neck casually with my index finger, noting that the bleeding seemed to have stopped.

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

Susan put her left hand over my two hands.

“Something wrong, Nick?”

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

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

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

While Susan and I embraced in a celebratory hug, she leaned in with a kiss. Whatever had her so peeved at me apparently was gone and I thought I may never find out just what ticked her off so much, but I'd learned not to press...just let it flow right on by.

"Hey Nick, how'd you bruise your neck?" the voice behind me rang out.

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

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

"What?" I asked Cheryl. Peter was sitting next to Cheryl, though not at all focused on our conversation.

"On the right side of your neck...it's a little bruised."

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

"I got mugged on the way over here?"

I laughed while a said this and Cheryl got the joke, Susan didn't find it so funny, though.

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

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

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

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

This was the first of many lies to come.

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

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

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

I weaved through the people in front of me and walked around the stands.

“Hey Nick! Wait up!”

Turning around, I saw Dick Tesser chasing after me, nearly kneeing a woman in the first row of the stands in the head as he stumbled down to the field. Dick’s son Ryan played forward for the team.

Dick was on the unfortunate end of a car accident twelve or so years ago that practically crushed his right leg. His leg required a year-long rehab, and Dick still walks with a noticeable limp today. That man should never climb the stands at games but he always does. It was like he had something to prove to everybody. Finally finding the field, Dick waved at me.

What did he want? I didn’t want to talk with him right then! I wanted to just crawl up in a hole and ignore the world. The more I talked with people going forward, the more lies would fly out of my mouth, creating an increasingly miserable situation for me.

“How’s it going?”

Dick walked up to me and shook my hand. Dick was an insurance agent, a pretty good one at that, only not my insurance agent. There was no particular reason, he just wasn't.

"Fine, Dick."

I started walking but he annoyingly kept up.

"Susan told me last week that you're working on some drug trial."

Dick's words felt like they were stabbing me in the stomach.

"It's no big deal...long boring meetings, that's all."

The trial actually was growing more depressing each week. Even with the different dosages given to the remaining 10% of patients, Zyptorin was proving to be no more than 10% more effective than Balentor. The trial had a few more months to go, but the writing was on the wall, and Distal Pharmaceuticals was not going to like it, nor would its shareholders.

Dave Clark was still pretty much too pompous for his own good, especially after a few months together on the Committee. I was still not clear why he asked me to be on the Committee, and now, of course, I sure as hell wished that he hadn't.

"Well, she said it's a big artery drug, sorry I can't remember its name, but everybody wants to avoid a heart attack, you know?"

What was I, an idiot? He didn't need to tell me that. People were always discussing health issues with me outside of the office. I had my limits, and, tonight, I was simply tapped out.

"Of course, Dick....I just can't talk about the trial. Sorry. I know you're interested."

Dick put his arm around me, which always made me queasy when a guy did that.

"Uh, Nick? Jill and I are separating. We told Ryan last night."

I looked at him and tried to put on my compassionate face. Something like having a knife against my throat had made my whole face real numb, so this was difficult.

"Oh, Dick, I'm really sorry...anything Susan and I can do..."

Dick looked down at the ground and kicked at the grass.

“Ryan’s taking it real hard. I wasn’t sure he was going to show up for tonight’s game.”

I looked over at the field, pointing at his son.

“He looks good out there,” I stated.

Dick smiled and I could tell he appreciated me telling him that.

“This team deserves to win this stupid game,” he said.

“Here, here.” I tried to crack a smile but it was too painful.

Dick and I spent a lot of time together during our sons’ cub scout years – late night beers by the campfire, archery practice in 100 degree heat, five mile hikes in the Delaware Water Gap – and those were fond memories. Yet, as was typical, our boys lost interest in scouting, which meant that Dick and I had little other reason to see each other. I hadn’t had more than a twenty second conversation with Dick in the past four or five years.

I took a deep breath and wanted so desperately to dump my problem on to Dick’s lap. That only seemed fair...Quid pro quo. While talking with Dick, one question hovered over my mind: How in the world could all of this be kept from Susan and Tom?

A roar erupted from the Morristown side and we saw our team celebrating. It looked like Max Stanford had scored his second goal of the night. Good for Mr. Stanford.

Patting Dick on the back, I started walking back to the stands. I looked back at him and saw that he was still standing there, looking lost. Maybe this was fate’s reminder that my problem with the two thugs wasn’t so bad after all, but, I begged to differ.

“What was that all about?” Susan asked me as I sat down next to her, sensing something was wrong.

My sweet wife put her arm around me.

“Dick and Jill Tesser are separating...I didn’t know what to say to him...it was really awkward,” I whispered in Susan’s ear.

She looked at me and didn’t say anything for a bit. She kept nodding her head. I was afraid she was going to start crying because Susan was not afraid to shed tears in public.

“Poor Ryan and Jill,” Susan muttered.

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

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

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

“Hey, Nick,” Peter shouted back to me. “Can we talk for a second?”

I nodded my head and made my way down to him at the bottom part of the stands.

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

I looked at him curiously because it sounded important. We walked around the stands and he started talking.

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

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

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

I exploded into Peter and grabbed his collar with both hands. “You asshole! You sent those guys to me! How could you do that?” I was right up into his face which made me feel like head butting him, but I had never done that before to anybody. Peter didn’t respond right away and, since there wasn’t a lot of oxygen in between our bodies, his bloodshot eyes looked huge. The disturbingly angry moment passed. I quickly realized that we were in a very public place, so I let go of his shirt.

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

“Uh huh, keep talking,” I said.

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

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

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

I turned around, glancing at those near us to see if anybody had seen me grab Peter. We were at the back corner of the stands and I couldn’t spot anybody staring at us, so that was good.

Timothy Gilbert
Damage Control

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Maybe the only good thing in this screwed up evening. I thought Peter made some sense about how him talking to me proved that he didn't send the thugs after me.

Peter and I didn't say anything else to each other during our climb back into the stands.

Tuesday, November 5
Peter Hansen

“Huh, that went about as I expected, though I really did think he would throw a punch,” I thought to myself.

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

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

“Honey, you okay?” Claire asked me as I sat down next to her. We were no longer sitting near the Johnsons.

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

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

“Alright, alright!” I interrupted. “How's the game going”

Timothy Gilbert
Damage Control

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Morristown was up 3-1.

Tuesday, November 5
Oleg Yashkov

If I didn't need him, I would have shot Karel in the head. We didn't talk on our walk back to our car - he knew how I felt, though - and when we pulled away from the curb, I laid into him.

"What the hell was that? Why are you talking and making jokes during our meeting with Dr. Nick? You're supposed to be the nasty bad guy here, but instead you're laughing after he sees a video that is meant to shock him?"

"Oleg, I'm sorry. I know I'm supposed to let you do all the talking. It won't happen again, I promise."

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

Yet, I meant what I told him in Nick's car after he started with the jokes: if he kept doing that, the doctor wouldn't be the only one dead in a few months.

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

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

"Okay, okay!"

"Good."

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

“Let’s grab some dinner,” I told Karel.

“Sounds good. I’ll buy.”

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

Clearly tired of talking to Karel at that moment, I picked up my cell phone and dialed Fred’s cell number. Fred would be happy by our progress with Dr. Johnson.

“It’s me,” I told Fred. “It’s all set...we scared the crap out of the good doctor. You had a good idea of showing the Linder video to him.”

“Alright, then,” Fred said. “Oh, I guess you need to know that Mihail has been whining about you guys.”

“Oh, screw him!” I shouted.

“Don’t worry, he’s not terribly valuable.”

Nick Johnson

“It smells like smoke in here,” Susan whined as she sat down in the front seat of my Camry.

She took a couple of big whiffs and sported an appalled look on her face.

“Well it wasn’t me! But I smell it too so maybe it’s something with the engine. I’ll have to get this checked out.”

Susan grabbed my hand.

“Maybe somebody broke into your car and smoked a few drags while we were at the game.”

“Har har...” I really didn’t feel up to driving. Instead, I just wanted to stop everything and focus on the same question pounding away inside my head: how the hell did Peter Hansen get involved with a Mexican drug cartel? This was sleepy New Jersey, for Pete’s sake, things like that just didn’t happen.

My wife opened the window and ran the exterior fan on full blast, while I drove the car off. Susan was sitting right where the asshole threatening our family had sat nearly two hours prior.

Morristown won the game 3-1 and I thought Tom got fouled pretty obviously while giving up the one goal. He was so pissed, he had to be restrained by his defensemen from going after the offender. That was my boy.

“So, what should we do for dinner,” I asked Susan. It was nearing 8pm and I was starved.

“I’ve prepared some beef stew that’s simmering on low. If you ask nicely, I could whip up a nice salad and Italian bread to go with it.”

My stomach growled fiercely.

Tom was hitching a ride home with his older buddies on the team - it was not cool to ride with your parents after the game – and I didn't feel like waiting for him to eat dinner.

“You left the dishes in the sink last night...also, the garbage can was stuffed full,” Susan revealed.

I looked at her with a hint of condescension.

“So that was what was bugging you so bad before the game? You could have just said so, hon.”

“Right...I'll work on that.”

I needed a plan, needed several plans, had to start mapping out scenarios. I didn't trust Peter to help me, so I decided not to worry about him, at least for the time being.

What if my two new friends decided to ‘punish’ me if I informed them that I wouldn't be told when the trial results were to be released to the media? I'd need a way to at least protect Susan and Tom.

It started to rain pretty heavily. Susan leaned in closer and started to laugh. “You know, I was so pissed walking over to the field that, when I got to the stands, I sat right next to Cheryl and Peter.”

“What did she say?” I asked.

“Nothing, I think she is waiting for an apology,” Susan replied. “So we small talked about the team and just watched the game.”

Tom arrived home twenty minutes after us, clearly in a great mood, as well he should have been.

“Great game, bud,” I told my son while slapping him on the back.

Tom dove into the beef stew and took a seat at the table.

“Hey, before I forget. These two guys came up to me after the game, one of them said he was a patient of yours and hoped to talk to you,” Tom stated with a mouthful of stew.

I looked at my son. Get going with those plans of yours, Nick.

“Did they give you their names?”

Of course they wouldn't, but it didn't hurt to ask.

“I asked them, but the one just said he'd call you in the morning.”

Susan walked in from the den.

“Any idea who that was, Nick?”

I shook my head. The lies were really starting to pop up.

“No, I really don't.”

The next morning, Susan was staring at me as I awoke; it was 5:50 a.m. During the school year, Susan ran earlier in the morning so she could get breakfast ready for Tom. He left for school in the morning at 7:40. We had been trying to get him up before 7:00 in order for him to have time for a shower and a good breakfast.

“Who's Ruski? You know, in all the years of our marriage, you haven't uttered a word in your sleep, until last night.”

“What?” I responded, trying to remove the cobwebs in order to quickly think straight.

I'd never been a morning person and, while Susan adored the morning, she didn't seem too thrilled now.

“You kept shouting out that Ruski is not going to get away with this. What on earth is wrong with you?”

That was weird because I didn't conclude that my two friends were Russian, and they could have been from a number of countries.

I stayed up last night listening to my recording of these guys talking to me in the car. The voices were pretty clear on the tape to my surprise. Also evident on the tape was that my front seat friend never told me when we would meet again and that the guy in the back seat seemed to upset my front seat friend. The guy in back definitely seemed to make a joke that got the guy in front speaking harshly back at him. The tape couldn't make clear what language they were speaking and somebody would have to help me with that. I went to bed thinking strongly that I needed to get this conversation translated and I knew somebody who could possibly figure it out.

But I really didn't think I went to bed believing these guys were necessarily Russian.

"That is odd, I'll give you that. Who the heck is Roosky?"

"Did you eat anything late last night? I noticed that you came to bed kind of late."

I looked down at my pillow.

"Yeah...I had some ice cream around 10:30, I know it was stupid."

Susan laughed and started to get out of bed, the morning run awaited.

"I didn't even know we had any ice cream. Where did you find it?"

"It was in the back of garage freezer...left over from the party we had in August."

We hosted a barbecue in early August for ten of our favorite families and bought way too much food. We'd been picking at it for two months now. The ice cream was Strawberry Cheese Cake.

"Was it still good?"

"Fantastic."

Susan was in the bathroom getting her running outfit on. She told me last week that she found a steal of a deal on running shoes and somehow that justified buying two pairs.

“You’re going to pour on the pounds if you keep that up, hon. I don’t recommend it.”

“Oh, Okay,” I responded mockingly.

The truth was I slept like crap last night thinking about the two new thugs in my life. If I got more than three hours of sleep, I’d be shocked.

Susan loved to sit with Stanley at his house during the 11 a.m. broadcast of the Family Feud each weekday. I couldn’t stand that show, but, while I laid there in bed last night and the wee hours of this morning, I imagined the host of the show asking his two families:

“We surveyed 100 people with the following question - top six answers are on the board: **name something you would do if you found out that someone was threatening to kill you.**”

What would these 100 people say?

Number one would likely be ‘**Talk to the police**’, but these thugs told me not to do that and I was going to listen to them for now on this subject. Who knew what they would do to me or my family if they learned that I paid a visit to the police?

Number two? **Buy a gun.** I bet Peter owned a gun. That was probably an area he could help with.

At least that was the next thing that came to my mind. Buy a gun? There were few things in life I didn’t want to know anything about more than the idea of buying a gun. I knew it was harder than it used to be, but where would somebody even start this process? Assuming I could even manage to buy a gun, where would I keep the darn thing?

Leaving the gun in the car wouldn’t be very useful if these thugs storm our home in the night. I didn’t believe they would do this, at least not until our next meeting, except these jerks had surprised me once already.

If I were to bring the gun into the house when at home, how could I do that without alerting Susan or Tom? Carrying the weapon on me in a holster was out of the question, though

maybe it could be kept in my work bag. It was not like I had small, curious children to worry about finding a loaded gun and accidentally setting it off. Tom was rarely home and Susan would never poke through my work bag.

I could put the bag in my closet each night since we had separate closets. She rarely went into my closet except to hang dry cleaned work shirts every now and then. Wearing collared sport shirts to the office on most days, I would wear a button down office shirt on occasion, though. I usually left my work bag in the kitchen, yet that wouldn't do any good if we get a 'Ruski' surprise in the night. The gun needed to stay close. Of course, I'd have to make sure that I transported my work bag to and from the closet without Susan asking questions.

When I was driving, I would want the gun under the driver seat. I thought I'd leave it there when I went to work, since I didn't think the 'Ruskies' would harm me at the office.

About 1 a.m., I realized that I should try harder to fall asleep, leading me to stop thinking about the whole gun idea. The other four answers in the Family Feud survey didn't come to me, mainly because I began to think about how much time I had today around the lunch hour to get some answers about my tape of the 'Ruskies'.

Susan came out of the bathroom and planted a kiss on my forehead.

"See you in a bit, sweetie!"

I thought about going back to sleep for another thirty minutes, but my heart was racing a little too fast. What if Susan heard about the threat facing our family via my newfound night time talking act? We'd see if this happened the next night, though if Susan complained again, I would need a plan. It seemed like I was coming up with a need for a new plan every couple of hours lately. Maybe sleeping pills could help with this.

"You have way too much energy in the morning – you know that, don't you?" I moaned to my wife as she tied her running shoes.

“It wouldn’t kill you to start joining me, you know. We could start slow.”

I laughed. “I’d be too afraid of Roosky jumping out from the bushes...anyway, enjoy your run.”

The baby across the street started crying - I was not a big fan of babies – which could be heard perfectly clear through our open bathroom window. That family moved in last month and the mother took the baby on a run every morning with a jogging stroller. There weren’t too many young children on this street anymore and the neighborhood was just now starting to turn over. This new couple bought the house from the Coopers who had been there for 35 years until they bought into a retirement community down in Delaware.

“I will – oh, and don’t forget to wake Tom up. I think he rushes too much to get ready in the morning.”

Tom rarely headed for the shower before 7:20, despite our best efforts to awake him twenty minutes prior. This meant he was usually just grabbing a power bar on the way out the door.

“I’ll work on it. I’ll try the air horn approach today. That should work just fine, you know.”

Susan looked over at me disapprovingly and walked out of the bedroom.

“Joking,” I declared.

Why did Oleg give me his name? I lay back down in the bed, closing my eyes. The mental nugget that had rattled around my brain for nearly an hour before I finally fell asleep earlier this morning was this: Oleg was probably playing with my head, trying to become even more unpredictable than the terror his thug partner had just laid on me by invading my car and putting a knife to my throat. There was no way he was trying to be nice. He showed me a video of him and his thug partner close to murdering an innocent couple for god’s sake. He was trying to

be civil with me? This guy could not be familiar with social etiquette – he was an animal, with a name. I was not sure how to spell his name, but a quick Internet search pointed me to Eastern European origins.

Tom said that two unidentified men had come up to him after the game. How did Oleg even know about tonight's soccer game? I left the office around 3:30 and stopped by the house to pick up Susan, so Oleg must have been following us the whole time. That was just too creepy. How long had they been watching us? Then they approached my son after his game which was obvious because no patient I had would fail to give Tom their name if they truly wanted to talk with me. It had to be Oleg and his thug partner.

Hearing Susan open the front door, it hit me that my new 'friends' could be outside right now, so I raced up to the bedroom window facing Skyline Drive and scanned the neighborhood for any suspicious parked cars. Susan was stretching in the driveway...not a single car in sight. Oleg probably had a criminal warehouse with sophisticated computer operations linking a much larger crime network than just the two of them. They had the resources to find me after just two months on the Zyptorin committee. While I didn't know what pharmaceutical drug Dr. Linder was overseeing, Oleg's network clearly had found him. There had to be something bigger than just these two guys on the ground doing the dirty work.

If they had been following me as well as closely watching my family, why did he confirm who I was and that I worked with the Zyptorin trial? He must have known this. Was this another attempt to be civil so as to put me at ease? It didn't really work, in my opinion. Maybe by confirming my identity, Oleg was making it clear to me that this wasn't a random mugging, that there was far more to it than that.

In any case, though, I was damned glad I had that audio tape.

Wednesday, November 6th
11:30 am
Nick Johnson

“It’s great to see you, Nick.”

Marjorie Letten leaned in with a kiss on the cheek and I liked her choice of perfume, which smelled like strawberry.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Can you play it again?”

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

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

Marjorie picked up the phone.

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

Marjorie looked up at me while putting the phone down.

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

We small talked for thirty seconds, during which I learned that Jane’s youngest was in medical school, studying to be a Neurologist. That path was a long one though I held off on telling Marjorie what I was sure she already knew.

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

“What’s up, hon?” Jane asked.

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

Marjorie pointed at me to start the tape.

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

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

“The first guy says,

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

To which the other guy says,

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

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

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

“These scary guys came into Nick’s waiting room,” Marjorie informed Jane. “He’s an Internist...and they started speaking to each other for a while. His nurse was able to record part of the conversation.”

I leaned forward in my chair, put my face into my hands, and didn’t hear Jane’s next question.

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

Marjorie shook my right shoulder.

“You okay?” she asked.

I looked up at Jane.

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

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

“No, I don’t,” I replied.

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

Jane stated.

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

I knew the police couldn’t help me with my real problem, as opposed to the fictional one I had created for Marjorie.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Wednesday, November 6th
11:20 am
Peter Hansen

I was preparing for a lunch meeting with Brad Dellan, the lawyer for Ashley Wells, who was the late 20s pop star with four #1 albums and several drug rehabs under her belt. She broke it big when she was 19. She became a client a year later. Brad handled everything including setting up a trust fund, paying Ashley \$60,000 per month in cash living expenses. Two years later, more funds were given to me, such that the monthly figure spiked to \$100,000 per month. That was it for the money flowing to me, however, and I did find that odd given that I knew Ashley's earnings had risen tremendously over the past two years.

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

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

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

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

I smiled at her. “That’s alright...I highly doubt Ms. Wells ever sees this report.”

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

Brad was kind of obnoxious and I really didn’t enjoy his company. Ashley was his first big client - she pretty much launched him into the big-time of entertainment law – so he split his time between Hollywood and New York City. Brad always told me about him not understanding my move out to the New Jersey suburbs. Ever since we first met, I maybe had gotten in 10% of the words exchanged between us. But Ashley was a very important client, so I was happy to put up with that.

“You could be so much bigger than you are, Peter,” Brad told me the last time we met.

After Judy and I heard some people out in the lobby, we both went to see who it was. We rounded the corner to find Brad on his cell phone, next to Ashley Wells who was sitting on the lobby couch. She sprang up, darted over to me, and gave me a hug. Ashley was wearing an oversized sweater with jeans not appropriate for the under 18 crowd. Her blond hair, smelling like peaches, looked way blonder in person.

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

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

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

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

Judy headed off for her lunch break, while I climbed into Brad’s suburban, not too eager to see the surprise they had in store for me. As Brad started talking on the ride over to the

restaurant, it struck me that his voice kind of sounded like the voice of the ‘pants on fire’ harasser. That was probably just my dislike for Brad surfacing, however, so I told myself to relax.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I’m going to be touring in Europe for the first time,” Ashley told me.

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

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

No one else in my family liked sea food, so I loved coming to the Zebra. Yet, I knew Susan would smell the ocean scent when I got home.

“I’m selling my place in Los Angeles and we are looking to buy a place together in the city,” Ashley stated.

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

We were there at the Zebra for about an hour. During the ride back to the office, Brad decided to start talking business and went on about the stock market losses from the prior two years. Worldcom and Enron were on everybody's mind. I was happy to report to Brad that none of my clients owned either of those two stocks. By the time they dropped me off at my office, we had worked out where to put another \$15 million of Ashley's money. The goal was to bring her monthly spend money to close to \$150,000 in addition to starting a sizeable long term investment fund.

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

Exactly what Oleg told Nick during their meeting wasn't known to me, so I had no idea just what Nick was thinking at that moment. One thing was for sure, he was scared out of his mind and madly wondering how this problem had found him. Oleg probably told Nick that they would leave him alone as long as he did what they asked. While Julio had pretty much told me the same thing, I was not convinced. Way the heck down in Mexico, it was in Julio's best business interest to kill Nick and his family even if he gave Oleg the drug study information in a few months.

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

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

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

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

"Liar, Liar, Pants on Fire, keep it up and you'll be one big crier," rang out the same deep voice as before. At least it sounded like the same voice, but I couldn't be sure because the first

episode was a slowed down tape recording that sounded underwater and the second phone call was just a few words. That last phone call was nearly two months ago.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Hello, Peter Hansen,” I answered, wanting to act like I didn’t recognize Martin’s phone number.

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

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

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

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

“Nobody likes problems, Martin,” I responded. “So, you’re sending a guy over this afternoon?”

“That’s right, now I have to run, but call me if you need anything, okay Peter?”

“I will, and thanks a lot Martin.”

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

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

Wednesday, November 6th
11:30 am

“I’m worried about Nick, I think this drug trial is getting under his skin or something,” Susan Johnson told her brother Stan over the phone.

“People get bad dreams, you know, remember how I went through that sleep walking stage when I was twelve?”

The strut down memory lane spurred a much needed laugh out of Susan. That was nice because she did like to laugh.

“Yes, you scared Mom and Dad half to death. When you first did it, Dad nearly bludgeoned you with the baseball bat he kept.”

Susan always found it odd that her father kept a baseball bat under his bed, though it never really occurred to her to challenge him on it. In a strange way, it made Susan feel safer in the house.

“Uh huh...so I’m told. We still have no idea how it started or how it just disappeared.”

Stan’s sleep walking only lasted a few months and he saw several doctors during this period, none of which provided any answers.

“Yeah, I recall you being rather happy about it disappearing.”

“Sis, my point here is to relax with Nick. He’s a good egg. Don’t crack him.”

Susan always liked Stan’s corny sense of humor but he had also been a huge fan of Nick over the years.

“So, I guess I shouldn’t be suspicious that he’s begun smoking all of a sudden?” Susan asked my brother.

“What!” Stanley shouted.

She sighed away her morning coffee breath and put the cup down on the kitchen table.

“Last night, after the game, I climbed into our car and got bowled over by a smoky smell. Stan, it wasn’t there when I left the car to go to the game. Nick claims he stayed behind to record some medical notes.”

“Do his clothes smell smoky?”

“No, I checked that.”

“Does his breath reek of smoke?”

“Nope.”

Susan heard running water on Stan’s end. He loved his toasted bagel in the morning given that he had a real basic toaster. Susan always left a sliced bagel in a zip loc bag on the counter next to the toaster. He could find the cream cheese in the refrigerator and put it on himself. Stan mainly drunk tap water with his bagel, though Susan brought him a Starbucks surprise when she popped in each morning for a mid morning pick me up.

“Then stop it, Susan. It could have been anything, you know that.”

“I guess you’re right. Can I ask you a question?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“Are we lonely?”

Stan snorted into the phone.

“What do you mean ‘we’? I got you in my life; and mom when she wants to be. You have Nick and Tom. Are they lonely?”

Susan stood up and started scrubbing away at the stove top after Tom made some French toast last night following the game. He produced quite a mess.

“Tom was blasting a song last week in his room and the chorus shouts, ‘We’re all suckin’ loners, our best is friend is fate...’”

Stan repeated the chorus. He tried to sing it but stopped himself after a few attempts.

“That’s pretty bleak stuff. I don’t believe in fate.”

“It just got me thinking. Are we all looking out for ourselves in the end?”

“I’m gonna hang up now, Susan. You’d better bring a morning smile. See you in a bit.”

“Okay, hon.”

Susan hung up the phone and finished scrubbing away at the stove top.

Nick Johnson

“Hello, Father Mike? It’s Nick Johnson, around 1:15, Wednesday afternoon. I was wondering if we could talk some time tonight after work. Please call me at my office when you have a chance. 555-0709 is the number. Thanks.”

Hanging up the phone, I leaned back in my chair since I had a 15 minute break between patients. I had left Marjorie’s office pretty quickly and hoped I didn’t seem too despairing, but I needed to get out of there. Why couldn’t these thugs target a single doctor? Someone who didn’t have any other family members to consider? This network was too smart for that, I supposed. They probably were looking for the guy on the committee with a lot of family in the area and along came me.

It felt like I was losing control of this situation, partly because who to turn to was still a mystery. Not being able to bring in Susan had already started to eat away at me, though the danger level was way too high for that. She would probably have run to the police and we would both have been dead in a few days given that the police weren’t going to assign an officer to follow me 24-7 indefinitely. The police could have grabbed these guys if they were lurking around my house, but it would have been my word against there’s. It didn’t help that I didn’t know when or where these guys would try to talk with me again.

I didn’t think anyone was following me, having been on the lookout since leaving Marjorie’s office. Clearly, these guys wanted me to believe that, if I helped them, they would leave me and my family alone. It took all the reasoning that I had in me not to get in my car in the university visitor lot, ready to hop on I-80 across the country. When you realize that someone is going to kill you, you want to run as fast as you can away from that threat. But I knew I couldn’t go away and leave my family in danger.

I took a sip of my diet cola that I kept stocked in my office refrigerator. Usually limiting myself to two sodas a day, I was on my fourth today and wondered what other poor health habits I would pick up given the haunting problem facing me.

My tongue moved over a canker sore that I was developing on the inside of my cheek. Stress always brought these bad boys out in my mouth - the diet coke stung a bit. But I really didn't care at this point.

Logging into my AOL account, I searched for anonymous chat rooms. This was a totally new experience for me but it occurred to me that morning that I should find out just how anonymous these chat rooms were. Tom and his buddies used to spend time on these chat rooms a few years ago, though we didn't see him on them anymore. Maybe I could lay out my problem in cyberspace to see if anyone out there had ideas for me. But the AOL chat rooms weren't truly secure and someone could report my problem to the AOL people; they would know my identity so I couldn't take that risk.

I was able to do a little bit of gun research online that morning even with my busy schedule. Maybe someone in the chat rooms would have ideas about that. Outside of Peter and Father Mike, I couldn't think of anybody in person to talk to about it because they couldn't be expected to stay quiet. And Peter wasn't completely trustworthy at that point.

While online that morning I found some helpful websites. It sounded like I could get a NJ state gun permit within 30 days but would require fingerprinting. Of course, I had to be careful about any mailings to the house as an official envelope from the Morristown police department would surely get Susan firing some questions in my direction.

The Linders were in fact murdered on September 1st, according to a story that I found. Last night, Oleg didn't tell me they were dead, yet the story's online version sure confirmed it. There were no witnesses and it didn't sound like any progress on suspects was going to be made.

My phone rang.

“Hello Nick, Father Mike here.”

“Oh, hello Father...that was quick. I just left you the message a few minutes ago.”

“Right, I just got back from a run. I try to fit in 3 miles every other day around lunch time.”

I did know this actually as I had told him in the past how ‘in shape’ he always seemed to be on the squash court.

“Good for you, my man. Keep that ticker of yours healthy. Anyway, do you have time for me tonight?”

“Yes, I believe I do. How does 5:30 sound? I will be in the parish office and we can talk there.”

I was not quite sure where the parish office was, but I was pretty good about those kinds of things.

“That will work just fine, Father. Thank you. I will see you at 5:30.”

“Take care, Nick.”

Looking up at the clock, I realized that I needed to get ready for the afternoon appointments. I clicked open the first few patients history on our brand new computer network that I was still trying to figure out.

Bob Regan was back again for the third time in two months for allergies that I couldn’t seem to solve, while Christine Wilson was getting a lump on her arm removed today.

Wednesday, November 6th
5:30 pm

I found Father Michael in the St. Anthony's parish office like he had asked. I'd only been inside this church a few times before and it looked like it held 300 or so people, maybe filling up only for weddings and funerals. Nobody was around, some kind of toxic incense was burning and two communion cups rested on a table beside the office door.

Father Michael stood up from the computer screen.

"Hey, Father, thanks for meeting me." I walked up to him and shook his hand.

He looked so much more formal in his priest outfit than he did on the squash court. Maybe he changed into his priest outfit after showering at the Morristown Racquet Club. I never showered there, so I wouldn't know, though most of the men at the club did shower there after playing. I just preferred my own shower at home.

"You're welcome, Nick. Have a seat. So, am I going to see you on the squash court this Friday?"

Father Michael pointed to the two chairs in front of his desk where a large dark stain blotted the grey carpet underneath the seat that I selected. One of the fluorescent light bulbs above hummed loudly.

"Um, not sure at this moment. I'd sure like to play, though."

Father Michael leaned back in his chair and locked his hands behind his head.

"Well, we could use you, of course."

"Alright then...Father, I have a big problem and I don't know where else to turn."

"Oh?"

I continued. "I have been sitting on a pharmaceutical drug trial committee for a few months now. A few days ago, these two thugs with foreign accents confronted me in my car."

Father Michael shot forward against the desk. "Really..."

"These guys tell me to give them advance notice of the trial results, or they will harm my family."

Father Michael's eyes bugged out. "You're kidding! Have you talked to the police?"

"See, that's the thing. They told me not to talk to the police or I'd regret it. One of them had a knife against my throat..."

"Oh, brother! And they want you to give them inside information about this drug?"

Standing up, I started pacing, realizing that, even though Father Michael must have heard everything over the years, maybe even confessed murder, this seemed to be a new one for my priest friend. I thought they still did confession in the privacy booths, but I was talking to Father Michael as a friend in trouble. How many of these did he get each year?

"Uh, huh."

"What then? Will they leave you alone?"

I shouldn't have told him the next part but I just needed to get it out, in an odd way, it felt more liberating than I imagined.

"No, I don't think they will. I overheard them saying how they plan on killing me regardless."

Father Michael walked around the worn desk and sat on the front end of it.

"Nick, you have a real problem. I think you need to find a way to talk to the police without these guys finding out."

I sat down on the desk next to Father Michael.

“Father, these guys knew so much about my family, it was too creepy...like they are watching me all of the time.”

I pointed out to Father Michael that I had been shown a video of the last doctor who tried to ‘play’ the two Czechs and how he and his wife were brutally murdered.

“Let me just say that it wasn’t pretty,” I told my priest friend. “I’ve never seen anybody murdered before.”

Though I didn’t actually see the Linders murdered on the video, I had no problem imagining it in my garbled mind of mine.

“You saw them killed?” Father Michael’s hands slapped the desk. I was suddenly not sure I should be telling him these details.

“Look Father, I really don’t expect you to find any master solution to this problem of mine. It just feels really good to finally tell somebody.”

Father Michael let out a loud cough, it sounded like a chest cold.

“I can understand that,” Father Michael stated. “When do you think they will contact you again?”

Putting my hands in my pockets, I thought for a second. Dr. Linder hired somebody to protect his family and that didn’t stop the Oleg gang from getting to him and Mrs. Linder. I began to have doubts about the whole gun idea. Never even fired one before, not even a bb gun during childhood because Dad would never have allowed it.

If I could connect Oleg to the Linder murders, the police would likely talk with me. Looking at the video, the Czechs could have left some of their DNA at the scene in the form of blood or hair follicles since I had seen enough crime shows to know that. If I had known when Oleg would meet with me again, I could have alerted the police. Yet, I would need to be 100% certain that they would be locked up for good and I didn’t have that assurance, nor did I have a

clue when our next meeting would be. For all I knew, Oleg and his thug partner could have followed me to the police station and taken me out right there - going to the police could have backfired in a huge way.

I looked up at Father Michael. He had his finger on his lip and was looking up at the ceiling.

“I don’t know for sure. I told them that the trial was scheduled to last another three or so months.”

“Well, I was just thinking that if you knew when and where they were going to contact you next, the police could pick them up.”

I stood up to face Father Michael.

“I don’t think the police would be able to hold them, though. It would be just hearsay on my part and I don’t even know when I would see these guys again, but I have thought about all of this, trust me Father.”

A door down the hallway opened and we heard footsteps coming toward the office.

“Are you expecting anybody?” I asked Father Michael.

He shook his head no.

My face tightened up. I thought I was careful so I really didn’t think the Czechs followed me here. It felt like it took this person five minutes to walk down the hallway.

A woman in her fifties entered the office who was wearing a very old fashioned flower dress like she was off to a picnic in the park.

“Oh hi, Father. I forgot to tell you before I left that Ron Walters is meeting with you at 9:30 tomorrow.

“Deb, this is Nick Johnson,” Father Michael said. “Nick, Deb runs the office here.”

I shook her hand.

“Nice to meet you, Deb.”

Thank God it wasn't Oleg and his thug partner.

“Father, that cough of yours sounds like you should take some Robitussin to clear up those lungs.”

Father Michael laughed. “Thanks Doc.”

Deb began to laugh, while looking at Father Michael.

“Finally, somebody else is telling you do something about that cough of yours. Nick, Father hates it when I nag him.”

Father Michael looked annoyed and he crossed his arms, he was a grown man, after all.

“Alright you two, I have some paperwork to handle before it gets too late tonight, so if you'll excuse me...”

When Deb grabbed my arm as she walked me to the door, I picked up on her odd perfume scent, a bit orange like.

“Remember, Father, I am not looking for a solution here. It just was great to talk about it,” I told him.

“Nick, you're more than welcome. I hope to see you on Friday,” Father Michael stated.

Our squash games would never be the same again. I didn't think I would make it on Friday, but I didn't tell Father Michael this because I thought I had dumped way too much crap on his plate already.

I walked Deb to her car, and headed home for dinner. Starving out of my mind, I began to focus on what Susan had told me earlier that day: she was making her famous Chicken Alfredo.

Wednesday, November 6th
6:40 pm

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

"Betsy?" the priest asked the woman who picked up the phone.

"Yes?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Okay."

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

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

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

"Where did this happen?"

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

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

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

William chuckled slightly.

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

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

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

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

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

“What?”

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

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

“He has a wife and teenage boy.”

“That complicates things.”

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

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

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

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

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

“William, I really appreciate this.”

“My pleasure, Father.”

Timothy Gilbert
Damage Control

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

Nick Johnson

Garlic fumes were filling my garage as I stepped out of the Camry. Susan was a fabulous cook and I had been practically tasting dinner since calling home ten minutes earlier to let Susan know that I was on my way. She knew of my late meeting after me telling her that afternoon to expect me home at 6:30.

When I walked into the kitchen, Susan was looking into the pantry for something while Tom was at the kitchen desk typing away at the computer.

They didn't deserve to have this Czech crap dumped on them - I was fairly certain that the Czechs were watching our house at that moment – but Oleg and his gang didn't care about what was fair or right. Our street was dark enough for them to be lurking around. I had walked back out of the garage after parking the car moments ago to see if they were out there.

During the drive home from the church, I couldn't shake the negative thoughts that popped up while talking with Father Michael. Who was I kidding? I couldn't defend my family against these guys and if I stupidly tried to go down that path, I could end up getting us all killed. Buying a gun was not the solution. There had to be a way to head Oleg off at the pass, though, well before he could try to kill me and my family.

Then it hit me. What if I let the Czechs know that I knew that they plan to kill me no matter what? Throw that little nugget back into their lap...see how they reacted. Of course, they would deny it...try to calm me down...but it would surely screw with their heads. I would love to do that. I needed so desperately to feel as if I had at least some control of this horrid situation, and this plan might just have done it.

This latest thought sent me into the best mood of the day, so much so, that I might have even let on a little smile. While looking out onto the street, my plan if they were spotted, was to

shout out to them that I had translated our car conversation - so I knew their plans for me - but no such luck.

I moved in for a hug and kiss from Susan.

“Hey, Johnson Family. How are you all?”

“Hey, Dad, I’ve got to write a paper for US History by next Monday and I’m getting an early start.”

Susan looked at me, shrugging her shoulders. “Dinner’s almost ready, hon, you had a long day. Did your late meeting go okay?”

I really didn’t feel like lying again today, so I tried to change the subject to avoid her asking with whom I met.

“It was a long day. Dinner smells great; Tom, no soccer practice today?”

Tom looked up from the computer. “No, Coach wasn’t feeling well, so he gave us the afternoon off.”

Most nights during soccer season, Tom didn’t get home until after 7:00. He seemed to be better at juggling the school work and the soccer demands this fall than last fall. I decided not to ask Tom why one of the assistant coaches didn’t run the practice, mainly because it was nice having him home early.

“What’s up with Stanley?” I asked Susan.

“Not much...he wants to put a screened in porch off of his kitchen and he’s got a guy coming over next week to talk about his plans.”

“Okay, I guess. I didn’t think he liked being outside too long though. Wouldn’t a porch, screened in or not, have the same effect on him?”

My handle of the many of Stanley’s quirks after all of these years was pretty strong, but Susan liked to point out to me my lack of effort with her brother. Resentment is a bitch.

“That’s what I said to him, but he ignored me and acted like this would give him great tranquility at night.”

“We can give him tapes of nature sounds, if that’s what he wants – whatever, he’s an adult, he can do what he wants. Lord, he’s got a whole lot more money than we do.”

Susan and I were guessing Stanley had amassed over \$15 million over the years given that he was a pretty savvy investor. He wrote Warren Buffet once about an idea and Warren actually wrote him back, which was when Susan had always said that Stanley stopped worrying about money.

“Yeah, that’s how I always seem to come out on with his projects,” Susan stated.

The phone rang.

“Hello? Susan said as she opened the oven door to check on the chicken.

She looked up at me.

“Honey, it’s Father Michael from St. Anthony’s?” Susan puzzled expression told me I needed to think of something quick.

“Oh, he’s trying to line up a squash tournament.”

And the lying continued as I picked up the handset and walked into my office.

“Hey, Father, what’s up?” I sat down at my desk, hoping that I hadn’t caused Father Michael any trouble with my talk.

“Nick, I have to tell you that I told a member of our parish about somebody coming to talk to me about guys that were threatening him over some information that they wanted. Also, going to the police was not an option.”

My heart jumped at first, but it sounded like Father Michael kept it very general.

“Why would you do that, Father? We need to keep this quiet...”

“Nick, this guy is a former detective for Morristown....he might have ideas for you.”

I leaned back in my chair and scratched the back of my head.

“And that’s all that you told him?”

“Yes, there’s no way he can make the connection. But he does want to meet with you.”

“Father Michael, I told you that I’m not looking for any solutions from you...I only wanted to talk about it with you.”

I tried to say this as gently as possible, but my family couldn’t afford to bring anybody else into the loop here. For one thing, the Czechs were watching, so they might get suspicious. I certainly didn’t want to spur anybody to run to the police on my behalf.

I looked over my shoulder to make sure Susan wasn’t listening. She was talking with Tom in the kitchen.

“Nick, I trust this fellow and I know that he can help you. He does understand that getting the police involved will put you and your family at risk.”

All afternoon, I had a growing sensation that there was a solution out there for me that kept Oleg away from us. I just hadn’t thought of it yet. Maybe a former Morristown detective could help with that.

Susan poked her head into the office.

“Honey, dinner’s ready.”

Looking back at her, I nodded.

“No, I understand that Father Michael, I do, let me think about it, okay?”

“Of course. Nick, you have a great night, alright?”

“Thanks, Father.”

I hung up the phone and walked back into the kitchen where Susan and Tom were sitting at the table talking about US history. Grabbing a beer from the refrigerator, I joined them.

The dish smelled wonderful.

“So when does he want to have the tournament?”

I forgot to ask Father Michael to only call me at the office.

“We haven’t decided on a date yet,” I asserted.

“You know Jason Waters? He’s trying to start a squash team for us. Jason’s a bit of a loser, though.”

“Thomas Johnson! That is no way to talk about anybody, and you know that young man,” Susan chided him.

“Sorry!” Tom said with a mouth full of chicken.

Susan didn’t quit, causing me to roll my eyes. She had a way of belaboring her point some times.

“And just who is a loser in your eyes? Someone who doesn’t party or play your kind of sports? Is he too smart...”

“Well, you won’t let me go to any parties, so I wouldn’t know anything about that, would I?” Tom interrupted.

At this point, there was a need for me to jump in. Tom could get pretty emotional when his mother laid into him like this.

“Alright, you two...let’s stop this, okay? I think we should have a peaceful dinner.”

Susan looked at me and sighed loudly, placing both hands on the table. We recently bought a new kitchen table which came in two pieces: a round piece of glass that served as the table surface and a cylinder metal stand for the glass. I was still hesitant to place too much weight on the glass. Susan assured me, though, that unless someone sat on the edge of the table, the glass would stay in place.

“Let’s do High Low,” I announced.

The High Low game was something that Tom brought home from school in second or third grade. It was not really a game, but a ‘talking about one’s day’ aid. Each member of the family had to talk about the High and Low point of their day. In recent years, Susan and I had found it to be the only way Tom would talk about his school day with us, but this fall, we’d only been able to do ‘High Low’ two or three times a week.

I realized, of course, that I could not be real honest about the low point of my day - they wouldn’t exactly take my learning of Oleg’s plans for me all that well.

Susan smiled and announced that she would go first.

“Well my High today was talking with my cousin Linda this afternoon. Nick, she and Dave are expecting their third child in May, it was a real surprise, since I think she is in her early 40s.”

“Wow...Kevin and Peter are in middle and high school now, right?” I asked.

Linda and Dave lived in Buffalo, NY - I’d met them six or seven times over the years.

“Well, she did mention that Kevin was a freshman, so Peter would be in sixth or seventh grade. Okay, now my Low was Stan not liking the Starbucks surprise I brought him this morning.”

I looked over at Tom, seeing that he wasn’t paying any attention to us.

“Now, let me think here...Tom, do you have a High Low?”

“Yup...my Low was not being able to ask Ashlee Bates to the dance next Saturday, while my High was hearing from Coach that I am a big reason my team is doing so well this season.”

“That would awesome, bud!” I reached in for some knuckles. “My High is having dinner with my family. I love you two so much. My Low was learning about the workload I needed to put into this drug trial.”

Susan slid her chair over and held my right hand.

“It’s worth it, Nick.”

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

This was the first person to respond to my *ChatNet* post which laid out how thugs were demanding sensitive information from me and planned to kill me afterward. I also said that going to the police would only worsen the situation.

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

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

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

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

- 2) Susan would never leave Stanley, and, going back to #1, she would most certainly tell Stanley about the Czechs. Stanley was too much of a loudmouth. I had thought about possibly taking Stanley as well, but that was way too complicated.

- 3) I gave Oleg more than a reasonable chance of tracking us all down if we were to relocate. There was no telling how big their organization was, but they seem very organized to me. I still didn't know how the Czechs found me to begin with. Yet, they did, and that alone led me to keep a healthy respect of their criminal abilities. Three people leaving in the middle of the night always leave a trail.

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

I offer up a condensed version of my list to Tiger87.

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

“I overheard them talking about it.”

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

Tiger87 logged off from the chat room.

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

“What are you doing?” Susan leaned and kissed my neck.

After quickly closing out the *ChatNet* window, I looked up at my wife. She didn't ask about the website – how on earth could she could have missed it – which was beautiful because it was so nice to feel her love at that moment.

“I’m good, hon. You going to bed?”

“Not quite yet. I’m warming up some cocoa. You want some?”

Susan loved to serve some kind of warm liquid after 9pm, usually hot chocolate or coffee.

“I’d love some. Where’s Tom?”

“He’s on the phone with Ashlee. Your son has hormones, so I guess we should be happy about that.”

I stood up from the computer and walked with Susan into the kitchen. Tom was laughing in the living room.

Susan had some kind of beef in the crock pot which she was planning to roast until tomorrow afternoon.

Tom came into the kitchen.

“Ashlee can go with me to the dance,” he announced.

“That’s great, honey!” Susan yelled out.

She gave Tom an awkward hug.

Our black lab, Zeke, started to make a loud wheezing sound from underneath the kitchen table. As Tom got down on the floor, he called the dog. Zeke looked up at Tom and came out from under the table. He sat down, looked at the three of us, and then began to wheeze violently.

“He’s trying to cough something up!” Tom yelled.

Susan started to massage Zeke’s throat before prying open his mouth to see if she could find anything by reaching in his mouth.

“I can’t feel anything,” she asserted.

Susan returned to massaging Zeke’s throat but the wheezing was getting louder.

“He probably ate a bird,” I said. “Was he out most of the day?”

Susan looked up from the floor, giving me a snotty “Yeah!”

Tom grabbed Zeke’s bowl, then filled it with water.

“Here Boy!” Tom yelled. “Drink this water.”

Zeke stood up and walked over to the bowl, but, before he could bend his neck down to the bowl, Zeke collapsed on his side.

I rushed over and reached into his mouth like Susan. There didn’t seem to be anything blocking his airway. Dog CPR is a lot like human CPR: it requires firm pumping on the chest directly beneath the dog’s elbow. This I promptly did for about a minute.

Susan was hysterical and Tom looked to be in shock. Zeke was Tom’s dog for his first few years, but, lately, Zeke was spending most of the day with Susan. She usually walked him over to Stanley’s around mid morning. Stanley adored the dog.

Zeke made a gurgling sound...blood started pouring out of his mouth. When his eyes rolled back, I realized that Zeke was dead.

“Guys, he’s gone.”

Tom looked at me, not saying anything. Susan couldn’t stop bawling. I assumed she heard me so I stood up and gave her a hug.

“Honey, we tried. I don’t know how this happened,” I whispered into her ear.

I found the Veterinarian hotline number on a refrigerator magnet. It was the paging service.

The odds were very good that the Czechs poisoned poor Zeke. The Veterinarian would tell me how Zeke died, though I already had a pretty solid idea. The majority of black labs don’t keel over like this at age seven.

“What are we going to do, Nick?” Susan asked me as she stopped crying.

She walked over to me and put her hands on her hips.

“Well, I’d already called for the Vet, so I’ll get Zeke down there tonight.”

“That’s not what I meant. Zeke was a big piece of this family and now he is gone.”

Tom was petting Zeke’s head.

“He had a good life,” Tom told us.

“Yes he had, Tom,” I asserted loudly. He was taking this much better than his mother.

“Stan is going to freak out,” Susan mumbled to herself.

She walked into the powder room to blow her nose.

“Is he going to lie here until morning?” Tom asked.

I put my hand on his shoulder.

“No, buddy... The vet will send someone down to his office tonight to meet us with Zeke.”

Susan emerged from the powder room.

“All right, Johnsons. Let’s do this right,” she declared. “Let’s go into the den and talk about our great memories of Zeke, he’d want a eulogy.”

She strutted out of the kitchen in a Mick Jagger kind of way. Tom looked at me for direction so I motioned my head toward Susan and we walked into the den. Susan was already sitting on our leather couch, while Tom sat on the floor. I sat next to my wife who went first with a Eulogy thought.

“I have walked and run with Zeke for over five years...he has befriended everybody in this neighborhood. He was loved.”

I put my head against hers and kissed her cheek, amazed that Susan was able to pull it together at this moment of crisis. Maybe I was selling her short. Maybe Susan would be able to handle the Oleg problem with the steadiness it required.

“You go, Nick,” Susan said, stroking my right knee.

“Okay...I’m...going to miss his snoring.”

My mind had momentarily slipped away from the eulogy and toward the list that Tiger87 had been discussing with me. The Zeke snoring comment was more kneejerk than anything. But, it did come from the heart because Zeke slept at the foot of our bed every night...very loudly. I always wondered what kind of dreams Zeke had given the groaning and snoring pouring from his snout each night.

Susan turned to me with a glaring look, apparently thinking that I was making light of this moment.

“I’m serious...in a weird way, I’m going to miss that side of him.”

“Well, my friends all adored him. He was very avable,” Tom stated.

I put my arm around Susan.

“Honey, do you mean ‘affable’, which means friendly?” Susan inquired.

Tom was trying to build up his vocabulary as he didn’t think he did that well on last month’s PSAT.

“Yeah, that’s the word...affable.”

The phone rang and I shot up to answer it.

It was the Veterinarian telling me that his assistant would meet me at the office in 30 minutes.

“Tom, I’m going to need your help with Zeke, I’ll put a blanket down on the back seat of my car and you can help me carry him.”

It was at moments like this one that I wished we owned an SUV or Minivan. Susan ran to find a bed sheet or a few towels that she didn’t mind throwing out. We couldn’t imagine using a towel or sleeping on a bed sheet previously used to help with the transport of a dead dog. Poor Zeke.

“Here, use this,” Susan said as she came down the stairs. “This bed sheet has had it.”

Tom ran out to my Camry and laid the sheet down onto the back seat, while Susan grabbed a towel to clean up Zeke’s discharge. I could hear her crying softly as she wiped the floor.

“Okay, how do we carry him?” Tom asked upon entering the kitchen.

“You know, I’m not sure...why don’t you hold onto his front paws and I’ll hold onto his hind legs. We can carry him upside down.”

Susan followed us out to the garage. “Tom, you were nine years old when Zeke joined our family,” she said.

“Yup,” Tom replied. “This really sucks.”

I hit the garage door opener and we climbed into the Camry. We got about halfway down the driveway when I noticed somebody standing directly across the street. He was smoking. As the Camry angled in reverse, my headlights hit him...it was Oleg. I put the car in forward drive, thinking for a second of slamming the car into him. Instead, I moved slowly passed. He looked directly at me, dropped his cigarette and got back into his car.

“Who’s that?” Tom asked.

“Uh...I’m not sure, buddy.”

Asshole! Tom and I should have run him over when we had the chance. I started to wonder why my instinct was to be such a wuss bag. Of course, the other Czech was probably in the car, so he might have started shooting at us. Maybe my instinct was not so bad after all.

I looked back, saw him start the car and head down the street behind us. With Susan in the house alone, what would I have done if the Czechs didn’t follow us? I’d probably have turned the car around to talk with the fellows. They had to realize that their plan was jeopardized if I told my family about the threat. And if they kept hanging around our house, they raised the odds that I

may have been forced to do just that. They didn't want me to behave irrationally. But pulling such crap like killing my dog was pushing me over the edge.

Maybe these guys weren't that smart, because it seemed like he was taunting me back there and that was just stupid. Angry people often don't make the best decisions, like going to the police or telling the whole world about a problem. The Czechs didn't want that, so why were they trying to provoke me?

The Czechs followed me down Skyline Drive to Route 202. We turned left, they turned right.

I couldn't believe they killed Zeke and they were going to pay for that. I had no idea how, but I had to believe it.

Five minutes later, we pulled into the parking lot of the veterinarian. Doctor Hanson. Luke, his assistant was waiting for us. He brought out a rolling stretcher to help us get Zeke out from the back seat of the Camry.

Tom walked up to Zeke and gave him a kiss on his head.

"See you, Champ," Tom whispered. "I will never forget you."

Thursday, November 7th

“You know, the Robinsons had a middle age dog drop dead a few weeks ago,” Susan Johnson’s mother, Jean, piped in. “That dog ran with Jim Bucket, their son-in-law, every day at 5am.”

Susan didn’t offer up a response, just a nasty glare given that she couldn’t believe Jean would say this. It was like any chance Jean had to wound Susan, she grabbed with a scary amount of gusto. A ten year old would have gotten that loud and clear insinuation. Yeah, she ran Zeke to death... that must have been it. Jean saw the glare while she sat down on the couch probably because she was whining about her hip on the way over. But Susan was all out of sympathy at the moment.

The Robinsons lived two houses down from Jean on Mountainside Drive. The Buckets lived almost right across the street from the Robinsons. Susan always found that to be very strange, especially at this moment with Jean being her lovely self.

“Are you going to get another hound?” Stan asked his sister.

Stan didn’t say anything when Susan told him so she asked Jean to come along because she was usually very sweet to Stan.

“Uh, Stanley, I think now might be a good time to look into a dog for yourself,” Jean said. “He wouldn’t have to be a seeing-eye dog, so to speak.”

Stan shot up, walked into the kitchen, and Susan hurried after him.

“I like my life, Susan. It’s my routine so I’d prefer to stick with it.” Stan put his hands on his hips.

“Honey, we just know how much you loved spending time with Zeke.”

His sister threw her arm around Stan and gave him a gentle shake while Jean sauntered into the kitchen.

“Hey, guys, let’s go for a nice lunch. This is too depressing.”

Susan looked at her watch; it was 10:25.

“Sorry we can’t make this too happy of a moment for you, Mom,” Susan replied.

“Anyway, it’s kind of early for that.”

“And *The Price is Right* is on shortly. Can’t we sit for that?” Stan asked.

Jean hated describing the items to Stan so that he could bid along. She found it too tedious.

“This is me rolling my eyes, Stanley, you need to get out of the house more. Walking a dog which has been properly trained could do you a world of good each morning,” Jean commented.

Susan turned around to my mother. “Let it drop, mom. Man....”

Stan opened the refrigerator and pulled out a Diet Pepsi.

“Don’t mind the blind guy,” he muttered.

“Cute, Stanley,” Jean said. She sat down at the kitchen table.

Stan opened the Diet Pepsi, taking a loud sip.

“Hey, Susan...for the record, I am going to miss Zeke and I bet you, Nick and Tom will too.”

Susan looked directly at her mother.

“Well, the walk over here was kind of lonely. We are thinking of getting a new lab, but I’m just not sure we want to do the puppy thing all over again.”

Jean was not particularly helpful when Tom was a baby, coming up with a world of excuses to dodge babysitting requests. Nick’s mother, Janet, on the other hand, adored babies and

had been available over the years more than Nick and Susan could have asked. Janet was visiting her sister, Wendy, in St. Petersburg, Florida. She planned to return a few days before Thanksgiving. Remarkably, Jean and Janet got along very well, having taken a few vacations together the past several years.

An alarm went off in the den and Stan hopped up. Susan set two alarm clocks for Stan each day. One set for 10:30am, the other set for the six o'clock news on channel four.

Why Stan had Susan set this particular alarm set was beyond her, given that she was there every morning for the *Price is Right*. He told her it allowed him some control over his life, but she knew he couldn't possibly believe that.

"Time for my favorite game show," he said.

Stan walked up to the alarm, shut it off, grabbed my hand and we sat on the couch.

The phone rang.

"Stanley, it's John...about your back porch?" Jean said.

"Man! Just when I sat down," Stan complained loudly, while reaching the phone.

"Hello, John. What's up?"

"Well you can stop by anytime tomorrow morning."

"Uh huh...I'm thinking somewhere around a 15x15 size room. How long do you think that might take?"

"I want it screened in, no glass windows."

"Okay, see you tomorrow around 9am. Have a great day, John."

Stan handed the phone back to Jean and she put it back in the cradle.

"Stanley, for the life of me, I don't know how you manage to run this house the way you do - you sure you want a screen porch?"

“Mother, we’ve talked about this. I know it will be very seasonal, but it’ll be worth it...trust me.”

The *Price is Right* was just starting the first round of bidding. Susan quickly described the item to Stan. He loved to shout out his bid and was more often right than wrong.

Back in 1973, Susan helped Stan write a 70 page journal of all that he saw in his visions, and she was amazed that he was able to fill 70 pages, even though the words flowed mightily. Susan thought her brother was nuts. But she felt so bad for his condition and would have supported him no matter what he wanted to do. This was rather extreme, though.

Stephanie Watkins was Stan’s primary nurse at the Vets hospital. Stephanie had a brother, Joel Watkins, in the book agency business and she introduced Stan to Joel, whose book agency focused mainly on autobiographies. Joel didn’t know what to do with Stan’s 70 page journal, yet he promised to Stephanie that he would find a publishing home for Stan’s work. Joel realized that Stan’s unfortunate injury alone could prove to be highly marketable to the American public. However, he wasn’t convinced that this injury wrapped in a prophetic heavenly vision was the answer.

After a month of showing Stan’s work around the industry, Joel was able to find a small publisher in the Soho section of Manhattan. Stan’s journal sold over 3 million copies in the first five years of the journal's publication in late 1973 and it was the number one best-selling book in the nation in 1974.

This was as far as Stan was willing to take this experience, though. Joel fielded all inquiries from religious figures but Stan did not want to debate the validity of his book or even talk with churches about his experience.

Stan became wealthy from his book earnings. Then he became a very astute stock picker, such that, in 1975, Stan was able to build a flat ranch home with one acre, wooded lots on both sides for peace and quiet. The home was in Morristown, N.J.

Susan visited Stan daily, handling all of his shopping, bills and laundry. Jean tried to help the best she could but she fell into hip trouble two years ago which deteriorated her mobility greatly. Susan's father, Andrew, died from stomach cancer four years ago. Andrew was 72 when doctors first discovered the cancer. He lived just six horrid months longer after discovery. Before Jean's hip problems, Stan ate at either Susan or Jean's house three or four times a week. Since then, Stan – always afraid of being too much of a burden - insisted that Susan not invite him over for dinner more than twice a week.

Friday, November 8th

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

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

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

“Well, this week, I deposited \$15 million of Ashley’s earnings into your firm’s accounts at Metrogroup...I got the craziest question from the banker when I called to confirm the deposit.”

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

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

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

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

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

“I just don’t like the sound of this, you understand,” Brad said. “I mean, Peter was acting funny that whole lunch and didn’t seem too professional when I mentioned the \$15 million that was coming his way.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Good luck!” Judy whispered loudly.

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

He knocked lightly on Peter's door.

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

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

"Right, I had lunch with him and Ashley last week," Peter said. "Very odd lunch...they are engaged you know."

Darryl laughed. "Dude, you're kidding, right?"

"No, I'm not...so what did Brad want?"

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

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

"A banker at Metrogroup asked him if the \$15 million was to be deposited into this fund," Darryl said as flatly as possible. "Why would they ask him that if that was the standard practice?"

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

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

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

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

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

Nick Johnson
Saturday, November 9th

Chatnet allowed a customer to view inputted messages containing their unique IDs for up to one week. Last night was the first time since Wednesday evening that I had time to login to the site and I noticed that *Tiger87* tried to contact me yesterday morning. All that he said, though, in the message was that he had struck upon a really good idea for my predicament.

Three other people responded to my original chat session from Wednesday evening but they all just pressed me to go to the police since it was the most sensible thing. The only problem here was that this situation of mine had gone way beyond sensible because, the way I saw it, I had three, maybe four months to get these guys off my back without any official help.

Susan and Tom were at St. Hubert's Animal Rescue Center that morning to look at dogs, but they had their doubts about finding a suitable lab. I believed the three of us were on the same page about not wanting to deal with a puppy right then - my vote was easy, at least in my mind.

I wondered why *Tiger87* didn't say what his great idea was, given that he had to realize that everybody on the site could see his post. This was not a personal e-mail network and that was what I liked about it.

For the past two nights, Susan had complained that I had shouted out a few times. She had been awakened but never heard what was said because I didn't continue talking, apparently. This morning, she suggested I see a grief counselor over Zeke's death.

"It's like when Tom was a baby, waking up in the night. Nick, I'm not used to this...I'm having a heck of a time getting back to sleep, maybe I should get some ear plugs."

Susan didn't even go on a run this morning because she claimed that she was up three hours in the night.

"I can prescribe some mild sleeping pills," I told her.

Susan stuck out her lower lip and nodded in slight agreement.

“I think I heard ‘checkmate!’ shouted last night, but I can’t be sure.” Susan scratched her wrist.

The vet, Dr. Hanson, called yesterday to tell us that the general necropsy indicated heart failure. He wondered if we wanted a pathologist to look for any out of the ordinary chemicals in the blood. In other words, the heart looked to be in good shape, maybe too good. I told Susan that I didn’t think that was necessary and she kind of surprised me with her agreement. The last thing we needed right now was for Susan to realize that Zeke was poisoned. This would force her to relive the experience by wondering what Zeke may have eaten that poisoned him. That hunt wouldn’t do our family any good at all.

I stared at my laptop, trying to think what my next move should be. I was getting tired of the computer and missed the easel that I used extensively in my medical office. Most of my patient plans started out being magic marked on large easel-held paper. I wished that I could do that at home.

My office looked out across the street and featured a window seat nearly six feet long for which Susan switched the seat cushions every year. Currently, the color was red plaid. I decided to stretch myself onto the seat and work with my laptop there - it was surprisingly comfortable. It was so easy on my lower back, which had been tightening up on me the past few days. I wondered why I’d been sitting at my desk all this while.

The young couple across the street was playing with their baby in their front yard. Apparently, the child was starting to walk – the mother’s excitement was a sight for my sore eyes.

The father had the video camera running and, as I looked at their harmony, I wondered why such despair was allowed to happen just across the street at the Johnson household.

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

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

I decided to draw up a chart for all six people involved. Each person got two columns: Issue and Solution. The first issue for everybody was buying into the real threat that the Czechs posed to us all since I liked to think that, once they believed in this threat, their level of trust in me became less important – we would see.

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

Issues	Solution
Czech believability	Audio tape of the Czechs
Medical Care	
House arrangements	

She doesn't like me

Keeping her from the police

The idea of abandoning our houses posed so many problems that I wondered if this may be the biggest hurdle for all parties. We all could rent our homes for a year or two, but that would be too easy for the Czechs to ferret out. We all needed to believe that we were never coming back if we stood any chance of selling this to the Czechs.

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

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

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

I inherited a two bedroom apartment in Manhattan that Mom and Dad owned for twenty five years. I remember Dad spending a weeknight every few weeks in the city during the heyday of his career. My mother never liked the apartment and would often sob herself to sleep during Dad's nights in the city, so, a few weeks following Dad's funeral, Mom asked me to sell the apartment. I understood why.

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

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

"You know, Nicholas, before it's too late, you should consider taking the pre-med classes," Dad flatly stated as he pulled the pipe out of his mouth.

I was a freshman at Princeton and hadn't truly considered going down the path of medical school. Hadn't really considered any path at that point in my life.

"Why not the legal profession? You've done well for yourself and us." I queried.

Earlier that year, I started to note a change with Dad, as he was a man who was in charge of one of NY's premier law firms becoming increasingly dissatisfied with his stature. Granted, it wasn't like he was going to give up his prominent position or leave the legal field, far from it, but some indirect comments that he made about his career took me a back a bit. And this was one of them, so I pressed Dad a bit.

"Do you remember Frank Peters?" Dad asked rhetorically.

How could I forget? Mr. Peters was the center of one of my key childhood memories. Everybody has an event in their childhood upon which they draw an internal verdict for our parents, something that reveals their true character, their core being.

Dad and I were jogging one Saturday morning after I had just turned eleven. There was nothing particularly special about the morning, you could smell the dew on the ground and the leaves were starting to fall. There were very few cars on the road. We started jogging together

every Saturday morning when I was nine. On these jogs we would head downtown to the bagel shop, pick up one half dozen, and jog back. The journey was a little over two miles.

On this Saturday morning, we were running up the west side of Washington Boulevard, returning home after picking up the bagels, when we saw a car coming down the hill at an accelerated pace - it was an old Ford pickup. The truck quickly veered to the east and jumped the curb. It may have struck the nearest house were it not for a big oak tree standing several feet inside the sidewalk. The vehicle slammed into the tree leading the tires to spin madly. The collision made the loudest thud that I had ever heard, rocking the surrounding earth.

Dad grabbed my shirt and yanked me in the direction of the vehicle. We sprinted across the street. As I held the bagels, I just stood there watching Dad take action. He pried open the driver side door, undid the seat belt of the driver, and pulled the driver out of the Ford. He rested the man down on the grass, then started CPR, breathing several breaths into the man. Next, Dad started pumping his chest.

A woman came running out of the house whose yard the Ford pickup had violated and shouted to us that she had called the accident into the police. She had told them to bring an ambulance.

At first, I thought she was going to raise a ruckus over the tree the Ford truck had just dented, but the woman was carrying a blanket and a medical kit – she was there to help.

It seemed like Dad banged on this poor guy's chest for an hour before the first police car arrived, quickly followed by an ambulance. Dad walked back to me.

“Do you know who that was?” he asked, grabbing one of the bagels out of the bag. His hair was mussed up and he was out of breath.

“No clue, who was it?”

“That was Frank Peters. He just retired last year from Dean Witter. I thought he and Lucy had moved to Florida...”

Dad rubbed his chin, he often got people’s ‘stories’ confused. He was not blessed with too many social graces but Dad knew it and really could not care less.

“What was wrong with him?”

Dad looked at me, then paused. He had to remind himself that he was talking with an eleven year who could easily get freaked out about medical illnesses and death.

“He had a heart attack, but the medics were able to revive him. He should be just fine.” Dad smiled and gently shook my right shoulder. “Let’s head home.”

Eight years later, Dad hadn’t forgotten about the Frank Peters event either.

“Of course I remember Frank Peters,” I replied.

“Well, I’ve been thinking a lot about that morning recently. “I’m not saying you can’t do great work for society as an attorney, but a career where you keep people healthy and help save lives...that seems to be very enriching.” Dad smiled at me.

I hadn’t yet picked out my schedule for the Spring semester, so I told Dad that I would talk with my advisor and come up with an arrangement. That was the first time I considered becoming a doctor, but, I was fully aware that the grueling Organic Chemistry course was staring right at me. I had a pre-med roommate, Andy Dwight, and I quickly realized during the first semester how much harder Andy worked than I.

A headache was quickly filling my temples and I put the laptop down. The young couple with the baby was pulling the child in a plastic wagon down the street. When I heard the squeals, it was hard to tell if the baby was laughing or crying. Bill, his son Danny and a friend of Danny’s were throwing the football in the front yard. It was nice to see Bill smiling, having a good time

with his kid. I thought about asking Tom to throw the ball around when he got home. We hadn't done that in a while, but I had no idea how long Susan and Tom would be that morning.

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

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

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

"What are you all discussing?" I typed.

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

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

I stood up and started rubbing my face.

"Bud, listen to us...this will work and it involves no police or harm to your family,"

Tiger87 wrote.

"I'm listening," I typed.

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

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

Suddenly feeling nauseous, I folded my arms against my stomach.

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

Saturday, November 9th
Oleg Yashkov

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

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

I laced up my boots and fumbled for my watch – 9:37am.

Karel and I were staying in a suite at the Holiday Inn on the upper west side of Manhattan. We had no idea when we would return to New Jersey. I believed we made our point to the doctor on Wednesday night, though; Karel believed that killing the dog was too over the top. I asked him if he learned anything from the Philadelphia job because taking out a trained security guy was something I didn't want to have to do again. And Karel's shoulder wound was still pretty sore.

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

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

All was going as planned until Harold told us a month out from the expected trial result announcement date that he didn't know anything anymore, suddenly claiming to have been removed from the drug trial committee. We hadn't been watching the Linder house around the clock, but we quickly started. Fred told us to pick a night for a home invasion. A few days later, a

large male began going in and out of the house. It sure looked like good 'ole Harold had hired a security guy.

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

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

The Linders were locked inside their car and Dr. Linder kept ramming his sedan into our truck, hoping to work their way free. And, given another two minutes, they would have done it. I smashed the driver window, yanking Dr. Linder and his wife out of the car. They were screaming and I was surprised that we didn't wake the neighbors. We grabbed Dr. Linder out first and got duct tape on him quickly; he didn't put up much of a fight after that, but did ask us to be gentle with his wife.

His wife was a total bitch. She had stopped yelling once we pulled out her husband. I calmly went around to her side and got her out of the car. Mrs. Linder was real quiet until I tried to get the duct tape on her mouth, when, suddenly, she sprang to life, managing to knee me in the

balls and scratch the hell out of my neck. I bowled over in pain, so Karel left Dr. Linder to help me out by driving his fist into Mrs. Linder's right eye which sent her crashing to the floor with a thud. Duct taping her mouth and wrists wasn't a problem after that.

I had a clump of her hair in my hand as I held Mrs. Linder down on the floor while Karel got Dr. Linder set up in the house. When I picked Mrs. Linder up, the bitch tried to head butt me but I was ready for her and slammed her head against the garage refrigerator. This knocked her out cold which sent her slumping back to the floor. I was really pissed by now, my neck was bleeding and it felt like my balls had shot into my stomach, so I dragged her body into the house by her feet, doing a number on the back of her head.

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

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

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

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

“This is for the fight, you bitch.”

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

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

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

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

“Hey bring back some breakfast, we can have it in bed!” my lady friend yelled at me as I walked out of the bedroom.

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

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

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

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

My cell phone vibrated.

“Hello.”

“Did it work?”

“Of course it worked. The poison kicked in three hours later like we planned. How much do we owe you?”

“A thousand... where are you guys right now?”

“In the city for a few days. We’re not thinking about going back to New Jersey until the middle of next week.”

“Well my boss says that I can’t get you anything more until we get paid for the first job.”

“Gotcha... we’ll get you your money.”

“Alright, don’t do anything in the city I wouldn’t do... we’ll talk later.”

“Okay.”

I hung up the cell phone.

“What a loser,” I muttered to myself. I was tired of hanging around losers but the money was too good to pass up.

I planned on grabbing four breakfast platters at that busy diner on 9th avenue we all ate at nine hours earlier. There was nobody on the sidewalk - not a cab in sight this Saturday morning – and I was kinda enjoying how the city was showing a different side of itself.

Saturday, November 9th
Nick Johnson

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

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

I had sat in my home office for an hour, thinking about the chatroom folks’ plan for me before concluding that getting out of the house would be good. Susan and Tom weren’t back, yet I really didn’t want to see them at that moment anyway, so I gave William a call. He said we should talk.

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

“It’s a pleasure, Nick. Father Michael told me that I should meet with you,” he replied.

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

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

It sounded like Father Mike was pretty general in describing my situation with William. I didn't know why this was surprising to me given that Father Mike had assured me that he was careful during our phone conversation Wednesday night

"They killed our dog three nights ago," I told William.

"What?" William stopped walking. "Are you sure?"

"Well, about as sure as I can be without having real proof."

"Huh...Father Mike also told me that you cannot go to the police."

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

"How did you meet these jerks?"

"They met me, in my car...with a knife at my throat. It was a real treat," I replied back.

Williams managed to look right at me.

"So, how do you see your options here?"

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

The dog stopped to take a dump.

"Why can't you give them the information? They'd leave you alone then."

I nodded my head and cleared my throat. Here came the kicker.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

William yanked on the leash, then we stopped walking.

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

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

I laughed slightly and William looked at me curiously.

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

I didn't know why I was bringing this up, because he couldn't possibly have cared about that. I needed to focus.

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

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

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

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

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

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

William chuckled.

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

“Yeah...hard to believe, huh?”

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

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

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

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

“Whoa girl!” William shouted.

We started walking again down Eagle Boulevard.

“Does George live on this street?”

William pointed back toward his home.

“Three houses down from us,” he replied.

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

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

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

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

I put my hand on William's shoulder.

"Wow...let's hope Chuck doesn't go too nuts with that chain saw!" I exclaimed.

William stopped Jules and turned to me. He looked puzzled.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I hated to disappoint my new friend who was only trying to help me, but Oleg and his friend were seasoned pros who were covering all of their bases.

William started rubbing the stubble on his chin.

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

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

I was kind of a midway substitute for the committee, and it definitely was strange that they wanted a non specialist like me. Was there a conspiracy driven by someone on the Zyptorin

trial committee? Oleg didn't specifically mention the idea of leaving committee, yet he did make it clear that he would kill Susan and me if he didn't end up with the information. I was sure suddenly leaving the trial would qualify under that killing statement.

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

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

"Yeah, I admit, it is kind of suspicious, this committee thing," I told William.

William eyes grew wider and he started to whisper.

"Are you sure you weren't followed?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You got that right, I just can't take that chance," I told my new friend.

My cell phone started ringing.

“Hello?” I asked into the phone. Only Susan ever called me on my cell, but it wasn’t her.

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

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

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

“What? Why so cloak and dagger, man?”

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

“Alright, give me fifteen minutes.”

William and I walked back to his house, where I thanked him hugely for listening to my mess. We agreed to talk again – he needed some time to craft a plan. Off to the Morristown train station, I half expected Oleg to be there waiting for me, rational or not. How Peter got hold of my cell phone number was beyond me, but he could have just called the office this week and asked Mary for it. Susan probably didn’t give it to him, because he wouldn’t have called her on account of the stupid feud between Claire and my wife.

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

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

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

I sighed loudly. “So, I am letting you now,” I said exasperatedly. “What is it?”

Peter turned, looking right into my eyes – it was very disturbing – and took a deep breath.

“Nick, they are going to kill you no matter what.”

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

“What?” I screamed.

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

If Peter was not on my side here, he would never be telling me all of this. That would just be crazy. I was sure Peter had considered the risk of Oleg following me to our meeting at the train station, so he had to be on the level. Oleg and his criminal network would not like to see us talking. I would hate to think what they would do. I thought about warning Peter about this, but he had to be well aware.

“We can’t just pick up and leave in the middle of the night,” I told Peter. “My family is too big and I haven’t told any of them about this crap.”

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

“Hey bud, can we talk outside the truck?” I asked, motioning my head outside and bugging out my eyes.

Peter looked at me, nodding his head. “Okay...”

I walked around to his side of the SUV. “I wouldn’t be surprised if Oleg has bugged your truck.”

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

“I’m going to fake my death,” I told Peter.

He looked at me, didn’t say anything for a few seconds, and began to rub his chin.

“Really? You thought of that just now?”

“Not exactly,” I said. “I’ve known about their plans for me for a few days now, actually.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yeah, I heard about Zeke from Charlie, but I didn't link to Oleg," Peter stated. "Are you sure?"

The past few nights I had woken in the middle of the night from dreams where I had plowed over Oleg in the street, with my mind creating two different scenarios. The first scenario had me driving away, unharmed, with Tom clueless about me running over a strange man. The second scenario had Tom screaming in the back seat and Oleg's partner gunning us down before we could escape down the road. Obviously, the first dreamy sequence made no sense at all.

“He was standing outside my house and I almost ran him over as Tom and I drove Zeke to the Vet.”

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

Peter and Claire had a little, yappy dog named Annie, but Oleg hadn’t messed with their dog. Probably because these guys needed Peter to stick around and be functional enough to keep up the money laundering scheme. I was sure Peter was doing his best to stay important in the eyes of Julio Viola. That was a luxury I clearly didn’t have.

“How did you meet this guy?” I asked him.

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

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

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

Spoken like a true money launderer.

Saturday, November 9th
2pm
William Miler

“Hi, Father. It’s William Miler.”

“Oh hi, William. What’s on your mind?”

William was not sure why he was letting Father Michael know that he had agreed to help Nick Johnson. After all, he didn’t think Father Michael cared to get involved any further than he currently had been.

William could hear a whirring noise in the background, kind of like the sound of a cake mixer. Betsy was a wonderful baker and probably had her kitchen aide mixer whirring once a week. He knew that sound, but he had a hard time envisioning Father Michael mixing cake or brownie ingredients.

“Well, Father, I just wanted to let you know that I have talked with Nick Johnson and have agreed to help him,” William revealed. “It’s quite a problem he has facing him and his family.”

“You’re not kidding. I have a hard time believing this kind of thing happens to people,” Father Michael stated. “You know, I spent a good part of last night thinking how these thugs found Nick in the first place.”

That was the sixty thousand dollar question as William asked Nick this question twice and he just didn’t have an answer. These thugs must have had an insider working for them, somebody who had internal knowledge of these pharmaceutical drug trials.

“You have a question that none of us have an answer for...Nick has no idea, Father.”

Father Michael sighed loudly into the phone and William realized that he really didn't want him losing sleep over this. But his job was to be a totally caring person. He was such a good priest, so much so that William didn't know how he did it. William couldn't remember the last time Father Michael took a vacation.

“Do I want to know how you two plan to prevent these thugs from killing dear Nick?”

“Well, he is going to have to leave town for a while and make everyone believe that he is dead. That is the tricky part. But, you don't need to know any more details than that. ”

Father Michael didn't say anything right away causing William to think that maybe he had spooked the priest or something like that.

Betsy and William had dinner plans with the Feinsteins who lived up the street from them. They all were going to Benihana's.

“Well, I will be sure to be there for Susan, his wife, when the whole thing goes down. There will be a lot of grief, you know.”

“Father, that's why I am keeping you in the loop.”

William heard him laughing.

“I'll do my best, but this whole thing is a doozy!”

“You got that right, Father.”

They wished each other a good rest of their Saturday and William told his priest friend that he would see him at Mass Sunday morning.

Betsy was out shopping. Who knew how long that would take? This was as good a time as any to start drawing up a list for Nick. William had told Nick to do the same and they could compare notes.

William saw on their Caller ID that Andy called at 11:37 this morning and he wondered if Andy and Betsy talked. Those two could talk for an hour without thinking anything of it. William thought that was awesome.

Sitting down on his family room couch, William started thinking of ways to fake one's death. He tried to think of how many cases he saw over his career where there was no body but signs of a struggle that could lead to a murder. There usually was a lot of blood and maybe some tissue found by forensics. They always waited a few weeks to make any determinations because the body always turned up somehow, in restaurant freezers or car trunks. There was that one case in the early eighties where they found blood and part of a thumb on a warehouse floor. William never found the body in that case, yet it sure looked like a mob hit gone ugly. A death was eventually declared for that guy – what was his name? Man he was getting old!

Nick Johnson

“Where have you been,” Susan asked, while putting groceries away in the pantry.

I leaned down to help her out. We were spending a small fortune feeding young Tom every week.

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

“That’s nice.”

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

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

“Is Tom in the house?”

“No he took off for Charlie’s. We didn’t like any of the dogs we saw – too mangy, all of them.”

I could have called that one because I thought we had all agreed to wait until next spring to get a puppy and do it right. Of course, we wouldn’t be doing that because my plan was to have disappeared by then.

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

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

“We’re all having tacos.”

“Cool.” I put away two jars of pasta sauce and headed into my office.

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

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

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

I was currently targeting mid-late February for my disappearance. Latest signals from the Zyptorin committee indicated that trial results were to be made public in late April of next year. I really had zero idea how long it was going to take me to get all of my ducks in a row. I was guessing two or three months, yet hoping it wouldn’t take that long.

Susan was singing in the kitchen. She absolutely loved it when Tom had friends over for dinner. The holidays were also rapidly approaching and my wife was fully aware that we only had so many of these left before Tom became a full-fledged adult. She was particularly jazzed about this upcoming holiday. Excuse me for not sharing in the glee.

A ray of quickly disappearing sunlight shined on me...a brainy moment hit my mind.

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

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

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

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

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

“Smells great Mrs. J!” Charlie exclaimed.

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

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

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

The blood and hair part of the crime scene was not going to be too difficult to arrange - I would simply need to draw pints of blood a few times to make the volume needed for a believable crime scene – so it didn’t require much thinking ahead.

The location of this event was another key item to plan out. Our house was ruled out, given that the last thing I wanted was for Susan or Tom to discover the crime scene. I probably had the most control over my medical office. I would need to make sure it looked like someone had taken me dead or alive because, obviously, my body would not be there.

I also thought about my car as a potential crime scene since somebody could attack me while driving. That would possibly be harder in that it had to be made to look like I'd been forced off of the road. There would be the need to ding up the driver and rear sides of the car yet I didn't know how I'd do that.

I drove around the neighborhood on the way back from William's street to see if Oleg were anywhere near watching me, but didn't see them. Nobody seemed to be following me, so I didn't know what was up with their routine. It'd be hard to pull my plan off if they were watching me closely all of the time. If I did this at night, driving to whatever crime scene arranged by me, the last thing I wanted was for Oleg to follow me. He needed to believe that I was either dead or abducted by a competitor to him. And if these guys had a routine, I could plan around it.

I wondered if Oleg had been in this house because it wouldn't shock me, plus he had access to Zeke in the back yard, after all. He and his thug friend could have bugged our house for all I knew. I unscrewed the receiver of our landline but didn't see anything suspicious. Who knew what kind of technology these guys access to? I had to think it was advanced, though. Right then, I decided that all calls were to be made on my cell phone and preferably, all communication with William was to be done in person.

"Hey stranger, what are you doing in here," Susan asked while walking into my office.

I stood up from the window seat.

"How's the dinner prep going?" It was a weak attempt at changing the subject - it just flew out of my mouth - though it didn't work.

"You seem so stoic. What are you thinking about?"

"Oh, thinking about the holidays," I replied. "Do you have any idea how lucky we are?"

Susan smiled and walked over to me for a hug.

"You know, this window seat is beautiful this time of year with the early sunset."

We sat down on the seat, looking out onto our front yard. The house was strangely quiet given Tom and Charlie's presence. Susan began to rub my left thigh.

The thigh or any real fleshy areas of the body were possible candidates for my crime scene. Regardless, I needed to take the flesh from an area that would not produce a lot of blood or require a lot of stitching. I had taken enough moles and cysts off of arms, under-arms, legs, backs, and necks, almost all of those requiring 1-2 stitches to close the wound. My practice probably saw two patients a week with this medical issue.

"I'm proud of you Nick," Susan said. "Most men in their mid-late forties are not happy where they are or what they have achieved."

I gave Susan a long kiss. My lips were getting chapped, so I had to take care of that.

"And you think I'm happy?"

"Yes, Nicholas Johnson, I do," Susan answered. "This drug trial committee could bring great things to your career."

"It is a big honor," I said. "But I don't think most male friends of mine are unhappy. I mean, yeah, Wall Street sucks right now and the Arbors aren't happy..."

How long could I keep this up? Did I really seem happy? In the past three days, our dog had been killed by the guys planning on killing me and, maybe, my son and wife. Plus, I had come to the conclusion that the best course of action for my family was to fake my death in order to disappear. What was not to be happy about?

"Sorry for being dramatic about men your age, but I am proud of you," Susan stated firmly.

Susan slapped her hands on her knees and stood up.

"The appetizers should be ready. I'll tell the boys."

"Sounds good, hon."

Many non fleshy parts of the body still weren't going to work if that area required steady use like the hands, fingers, feet and ankles. Wherever I disappeared to, I would need to walk a lot and carry things, so I would need these parts to be pain free.

"Boys, I have some chicken wings and potato wedges ready for you before dinner," Susan shouted from the top of the basement stairs.

I was definitely living parallel worlds, mentally concocting the best part of me to slice off in one world and playing the holiday, fun with the teenagers, engaged in my marriage husband in the other world - I was trying figure out which was more stressful.

As always, we would have everybody over at our house for both Thanksgiving and Christmas this year. Stanley had his chair in our family room – he did his best to stay clear of the mayhem in the kitchen. Each year, Tom grew less and less interested in these family holiday events, but I heard that was normal. How the Mom and Joan tag team massaged Susan's stress at unhealthy levels. Oh, it was all fun!

I met the boys in the kitchen.

"Thanks Mrs. J! You guys rock!" Charlie exclaimed upon seeing the heaping portion of hot wings.

He looked at Tom and threw his head toward Susan and myself.

"Hey, Mom, Dad....Coach is hearing I have a shot at third team all state," Tom remarked. "It's kind of a long shot, but still surprising."

I walked up to Tom and mussed up his hair a little.

"That is awesome, bud!"

Tom was the tallest kid in his grade up until the sixth grade when Kevin Rogers sprang up seven inches that year; and my son hated every minute of it. I remember Tom coming home one day in second grade crying like mad over being teased about his height.

I stood a little over 6'2, never was much of an athlete and, frankly, I was pretty surprised that Tom had gotten as far in soccer as he had. He never seemed to enjoy sports that much and I never pushed him. Susan and I thought that he would be done with team sports by middle school. He started to play a little bit of golf when he was 11 and was happier on the golf course than running around on the soccer field or shagging down fly balls in the outfield.

Even in youth soccer, Tom was assigned to defense because he was slower than the other kids. He tried really hard, but it was painful to watch him chase another team's forward after being beaten on a play. By the fifth grade, Tom was clearly a better baseball player than soccer player. He did try basketball one winter during fourth grade, only to complain that none of his other friends played the sport. He lasted just that winter season and, while I thought it was the running up and down the basketball court that drove Tom away from the game, he would never admit this.

It is funny how friends can shape kids and Tom was no different. Charlie started jogging during the spring of their seventh grade, and he tried mightily to get Tom to join him, so they went out for two mile runs a few times. Tom, though, was getting quite vocal about his distaste for soccer. We told him that he didn't have to play the game, but lying on the family room couch was not an option either. That summer, Tom spent most of his time on the golf course - Charlie got the hint.

Yet one July evening between 7th and 8th grades, Charlie started to press Tom to turn into a goalie. Apparently, these two were playing the boxing game on Tom's Nintendo. We would

find out later that Charlie and Tom bet the soccer goalie decision on the boxing video game. With Charlie winning, Tom had to at least give the goalie thing a shot.

Tom and Charlie practiced in the backyard for the rest of the summer, where they set up a goal. Charlie fired shot after shot at Tom. Those two did a number on my backyard fence and I had to reinforce it over several weekends. I made them help out with the heavy lifting.

The following fall, Tom was the goalie for the eighth grade soccer team, He did alright, letting in some easy goals, but, by the end of the season, Tom had developed an attitude while in the net. It didn't hurt that he was growing into his large sturdy frame, well on his way to his 6'1 height by the end of freshman year. I thought he could grow to 6'3 through high school.

Last year, Charlie and Tom played on the freshmen team and Tom's skills improved with each game. The Varsity goalie was a senior, so Tom competed with two other players for Varsity goalie during his sophomore year and Tom won the job. We had never seen him happier.

Tom looked up at me, smiling awkwardly with a mouthful of chicken. Susan came up behind us and did her best at a group hug, giving us a little shake and saying,

“Go Johnson, Go Johnson, Go Johnson, GO!”

When Tom was little, the family would get into a huddle to shout that chant while shaking each other gently. We still do it every now and then.

Charlie broke into hysterical laughter.

“You know, Tom tried to explain that to me last year, but he was right – you gotta see it to believe it.

Tom looked real embarrassed and did his best to change the subject.

“Dad, all the dogs we saw today sucked. What are we going to do?”

I looked over at Susan who shrugged her shoulders. Talking about the future was pointless though me acting like everything was normal wasn't.

"I think we should find a well bred puppy in the spring, towards the end of the school year."

"Yeah, Mr. and Mrs. J? I want to tell you how sorry I was to hear about Zeke," Charlie chimed in.

Tom reached over to Charlie and nearly tackled him.

"Isn't he the sweetest thang?"

"Get off me, you doofus!" Charlie shouted.

I walked over to separate the two of them as they were definitely getting too big for this. I could easily have thrown my back out and that was the last thing I needed.

Susan began to fry the beef and I dove into the hot wings.

It suddenly dawned on me that there was an auto junkyard in East Orange. I knew this from a patient of mine who had a relative that ran the junkyard. He may even have owned the land, yet that was unclear. Could I get my car to that sight, maybe crash my car enough? Make it look like the car had been forced off of the road. Just how much damage does a car experience under such a situation?

Munching on the hot wings, I began thinking about the best time of day to disappear. If I left the house early in the morning, Susan would probably notice and could cause a problem for me. Maybe coming to the office to see what was up or call Melanie or Mary. Yes, that could be a problem.

If I stayed out late at night, Susan would most certainly notice, but that might not be a bad thing. I could make up some excuse to stay late at the office, something I hadn't done in years. Or I could tell Susan that I had a Zyptorin committee meeting so that she didn't expect me

home until late. I liked this idea the best...A night time Zyptorin committee meeting. That damn drug caused this whole crap to fall on my family, why not use it to any advantage I may possibly have had in that situation?

The doorbell rang.

I looked through the side window panel of the door to see Chris Patin standing there. Chris was the youngest son of Ron and Linda Patin, neighbors to the east of us. Chris played professional soccer in Italy.

“Chris, this is a surprise. It’s great to see you,” I said, extending my hand for a shake.

I had no idea if Inter Milan’s season was happening now or what.

“Hey, Mr. Johnson, my Dad just told me that Tom’s team did great this year,” Chris responded.

“Uh, yeah, you wanna come in?”

“Sure, just for a sec.”

Tom and Charlie arrived at the door and practically yanked Chris into the house.

“Dude, when did you get into town?” Tom asked.

“This morning...short trip,” Chris stated. “I hear you guys kicked ass at Morris County.”

Morristown got to the finals of the Morris County tournament where it lost 1-0 to Madison. Morristown was the fourth best team in the state for points allowed and I suspected that was why Tom was being considered for Third Team All State. He was only a sophomore, so that award would have been a really big deal. Morristown had fielded just two teams in the past ten years to generate more wins than losses.

“Yup, Morristown High doesn’t know what to do with us,” Charlie said. “It’s been a long time since we did this well.”

Chris laughed.

“Don’t worry, the Green Wave will be back on top next year.”

The Green Wave was the mascot for Delbarton, a Catholic prep school in town.

“Yeh, yeh....So what’s Italy like?” Tom asked.

“Well, they’re grown men in this league,” Chris stated coolly. “And they want to take my head off every game.”

Chris lifted up his shirt and displayed an enormous bruise on his lower right back, over the kidneys. I had heard the kidney punch was the most painful punch to withstand but I wondered if the Refs were blindfolded or something during Chris’s games.

“Whoa! That is a killer bruise, man!” Tom shouted. “Did you get that during a game?”

Chris nodded his head. I bent down and looked closer at the bruise, which was starting to yellow around the edges.

“You should get this scanned, Chris,” I said.

“Already done, Mr. Johnson.”

Chris tucked his shirt back into his jeans.

Susan made her way over to us and shook Chris’s hand.

“Hello, Chris. I’m sure your parents are thrilled to have you back,” she told him.

Ron Patin owned a company that made veterinarian equipment, having taken over the company from his father 30 years ago. Older son Ken did not want to work for his father after college. When Chris chose to play soccer in Europe, Ron became fully aware that he would have to sell the company at some point. His disappointment grew unbearable, keeping Ron from talking with his son for a year.

Chris smiled awkwardly. Linda Patin and Susan were solid friends, a bit unusual given the 10 year difference in age. Susan was there for Linda when Chris and Ron stopped speaking.

They went to dinner two or three times a month during this time and Susan knew that Linda simply needed to vent for Susan was a great listener. I'd learned a lot from her.

“Right, it's good to be home,” Chris said. “Ken is here with his girlfriend, Lisa.”

Ken was five years older than Chris. He went to Morristown High and loved to give his little brother crap about going to Delbarton for high school.

“Yes, I'd bet this quiet street of ours is a nice change of scenery for you,” Susan responded.

Just then, I realized that neighbors of mine might have seen Oleg and his friend watching our house. Maybe they hadn't, but I could make Oleg believe that neighbors were noticing him. It was quite reasonable to think that someone had seen them and taken note. I could tell Oleg to be more careful or someone was likely to call the police. He wouldn't want that and maybe he would stop watching my house. I didn't want them following me to William's or Father Mike's...anywhere for that matter.

I didn't know for a fact that they'd been in my neighborhood other than last Wednesday night for the Zeke incident, yet I was guessing that they had and there needed to be a plan to keep them away.

When was the best time to tell them this? Should I wait until closer to my disappearance? Now I was hoping to see them sooner than that so as to try out my new strategy.

“It sure is a change. Milan is a loud, vibrant city,” Chris stated.

He glanced at his watch.

“Hey, it was great seeing you all. I gotta run.”

Susan reached in and gave Chris a strong hug. Chris would never know the emotions baked into that embrace.

I opened the door for Chris and he walked back to the Patin home.

“Who knows when we will ever see him again,” Tom said.

“Yup....”

Back to the wings.

Saturday, November 9th
David Clark

“As I was saying David, that bunker on 12th idea is a bad one,” Alan McLuhan stated firmly.

Alan was up in arms over the course planning committee’s latest idea to keep the course current. Sure, with the 14 handicap that Alan sported, David Clark could see why he’d want to keep any more bunkers on #9 out of the picture. David belonged to Palm Golf Club in Mendham, where the golf was solid, yet he didn’t quite care for the social scene. The Clarks would be looking to upgrade next year as there were too many wannabes at Palm Golf making upper middle class dough.

But his wife, Toni, loved the place, so they found themselves at the club at least one Saturday night of each month. Palm Golf usually did have a decent band and Toni and David were better than average dancers. If he did say so himself.

“Oh, come now Alan, that slice of yours won’t put the ball anywhere near this new bunker.”

It was his way of saying nicely, ‘kiss my bald rump, Alan, and stop your whining’.

“David Clark, how’s that Zyptorin trial going?” said a woman whose name he should have known, but he had nothing. “Toni says you’re busier than ever.”

“Oh, you know I can’t talk about the trials I work on,” David said in his kindest, teasing way.

Zyptorin - Distal Pharmaceuticals didn’t need to spend millions on this stupid trial, David could have told you the drug was average at best. However, the \$450k Distal had already paid him in consulting fees over the past year kept him interested enough, and the Clarks now had a

beachfront three bedroom condo in Miami Beach, thanks to Distal and friends. They bought it out of foreclosure, so, of course, it was nice to know the right people.

The next thing David knew, this woman had her hand on his butt.

“Well, when are Steve and I going to get invited to your Miami Beach pad?” she whispered into his left ear. “Toni just told me about your hot tub.”

David looked over at his wife who was talking with the Robinsons. Why he could not remember this woman’s name was beyond him.

Toni was the co-executive producer for CBS morning show. The Clarks had been married for 17 years and it had been truly exciting to watch the rise in Toni’s career. The thing about becoming a cardiologist was that once David was done with his residency in 1988, he was basically a star from that point on. Granted, his income had seen a nice pop thanks to the folks at Distal, though he was making great money fourteen years ago.

His chest started to vibrate - it was his cell phone - so he reached inside his jacket and pulled it out from his pocket. David glanced at the number and he knew there was big news on the other end of this call. A call from Norm Watson this late on a Friday night had to be important. Norm was heading the Zyptorin committee.

“Hello Norm,” David said, flipping the phone open.

“Oh, David, am I glad I caught you,” Norm said hurriedly. “Have you heard about Jim Newel?”

Jim Newel was the CEO of Distal Pharmaceuticals.

“No, I haven’t. What’s up?” His heart rate started to pick up the pace.

“David, he’s had a heart attack and it looks bad. He is in a coma.”

That certainly wasn’t the good news David was hoping for because he was due to have lunch with Jim Newel in less than two weeks. He wasn’t sure about his consulting arrangement

once the Zyptorin trial finished up, and David was hoping to get inside Jim's inner circle. He had been trying get on this guy's lunch schedule for six months. They had met on a few occasions, but it was always in a small group of people, each equally eager to talk with the glorified CEO.

David didn't know what to say back to Norm, so he thought for a moment.

"David, you there?" Norm asked.

"Yeah, I'm here, sorry about that. So what does this mean for our trial?"

"We don't know yet, and probably won't know anything for a while," Norm replied. "Do you think you can call the rest of the committee to assure them that nothing is changing, at least not for a while?"

"Well, if Jim dies, the board will have to act fast," David pointed out.

The reality here was quite stark, even if this guy lived through it. Heart attacks rarely lead to comas but when they do, big problems often happen. Somebody was going to need to step into the CEO slot even if Jim made a full recovery. What a mess. This was going to set David back two hard years of work to get as far inside Distal as he had.

"Well, David, I'll call you next week. Have a great weekend," Norm stated.

"Thanks for the heads up, Norm." David put the cell phone back inside his jacket and finished his drink - clenching the glass that was just crying out to be hurled across the room.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it!" he yelled to himself. Jim Newel was done and David knew it. This was no mild heart attack. There was no way he was going to be able to handle the pressures of the CEO job, even if he stabilized.

David wondered what to tell Toni. It was going to be all over the news in the morning anyway, so why ruin a night?

Toni was promoted to her current position last year. She arose each weekday morning at 3am and drove into the midtown Manhattan studio. Toni was able to leave the office at 4pm.

They had one son, Andy, who attended the ninth grade at the Pingry School. Andy was under the services of our nanny, Lucy, up until last year.

The Clark family would be in Vail for the Christmas holiday, where they owned a slope side chalet. David had an easier time taking vacations than did Toni who lived in constant fear that some up and rising star would take her highly coveted position. If they could take two 7-8 day vacations a year, David considered himself lucky. In the prior year, the Clark family was only able to take one of these and David felt the overall mood in the Clark household suffered as a direct result of this.

Toni was one of few people to put David in his place and was not at all impressed by him as a Cardiologist. She was impressed when they first met at a New Year's eve gala at the top the World Trade Center One. Yet, the years had grown long and the fascination turned to mid-life reality. Toni definitely felt like she had earned her career success a whole lot more than her husband had earned it.

"All you needed to do was to score well on your MCATs," Toni had told David on a few occasions. "Granted, that's not easy to do and I respect that but it was still just one test."

David couldn't really argue with that, though his inroads with Distal's management team had been watering down these feelings quite a bit in recent months. Then friggin' Jim Newel goes and has a heart attack! Crap!

Of all of their friends, Toni had the most spectacular female career, though lots of women they knew had banged around in the corporate world. Susan Johnson was an example and she actually achieved decent success. David always wondered if she started to make more money than Nick because Susan must have gotten close to Nick's salary level when she made the Vice President level at her company. But, Nick didn't seem like the kind of guy who would be bothered by that kind of thing.

It had been fun to watch Nick's wide-eyed enthusiasm during the Zyptorin committee meetings. David knew this committee had some celebrity doctors on it, though he hoped Nick didn't think this was going to lead to anything. Nick was basically a glorified family doctor and non-specialists almost never got onto these trials. David hoped Nick knew how lucky he was to be on the Zyptorin committee.

The band had been playing for ten minutes what sounded like blues band music, heavy on the saxophone.

That worked for the Clarks.

Sunday, November 10th
8:45am
Peter Hansen

“What the hell is going on over at Distal?” Martin hollered.

We stepped out onto my front porch. This was the first time Martin had been to my home, at least the first that I was aware of, and he clearly was rattled.

“Look, calm down. This trial is way too important to Distal, they’re not going to shut it down.”

I was mainly worried about the stock price reaction on Monday to the news about Jim Newel’s highly precarious medical state. The board needed to act quickly to stabilize the ship, and if it did that, then the stock would recover from any initial weakness in early Monday trading. Every stock analyst on the street was awaiting the results from the Zyptorin trial, so the health of the CEO had no direct bearing on the trial results. The irony here was that Jim Newel could possibly have benefited from Zyptorin and its artery plaque reduction ability.

“Well, what do I tell Julio?” Martin asked.

“Tell him nothing changes, because that is the truth. Keep the heat on.”

“Oh, that they’re doing! They have this doctor scared out of his god!” Martin exclaimed.

The wind was starting to pick up and I wanted to get back inside. “Alright, let’s not talk for a while unless it’s urgent, okay?”

Martin nodded and walked back to his black sedan. He knew better than to rattle Julio. It was in nobody’s interest to have the Violas make a rash, emotional decision. I needed to keep this man happy with his new drug trial plan, happy with my firm.

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Monday, November 11th
12:25am

Ashley Wells ran in her flip flops and naked under her robe back to the heated hot tub, taking care not to slip on the tile that was wet from the five minute midnight rain shower that just passed through.

Twice a week, Ashley eagerly flaunted her palatial estate in South Hampton, New York, having hosted nearly 100 music industry people earlier that evening. Ashley's assistant, Judy, confirmed twenty minutes earlier that everyone was out of the home and exiting the property.

The hot tub was one of seven on the estate and rested on the third floor balcony off the master bedroom.

"Okay, stud, thanks for the potty break," Ashley giggled. "Hope the chlorine level is fine."

Ashley grabbed her vodka drink from the ledge, lifted her left leg, and nudged Brad in the back of the head.

"Hey sweetie, cat got your tongue?"

Brad fell forward face first into the water, leading Ashley to send into the night a screech that would spin her music producer's head around. Ashley reached over the edge of the tub to save Brad before noticing the blender in the tub, pouring strawberry daiquiri into the water. The blender was sparking and Ashley knew better than to reach into the electrified water.

"Help!" she yelled from the balcony.

Ashley took her towel and grabbed Brad's head to pull him back up into a sitting position. Lifting her fiancé up by the arm pits, she pulled him out of the tub. Ashley was in the middle of mouth to mouth when Linda hurried into the room.

"What happened?" Linda asked Ashley, ready to dial 9-1-1.

Ashley looked up from Brad and shouted tear streamed instructions to call for an ambulance.

“He electrocuted himself with the blender!” Ashley yelled.

Eduardo could hear Ms. Wells shouting for help while descending down the home on his removable cable. He was almost to the first floor balcony when Ashley discovered Mr. Dellan dead in the tub. He made sure not to make any noise.

It was supposed to look like an accident and things could not have worked out any better for Eduardo, who camped out in the house for 36 hours prior to the killing so as to study the couple. When Julio first called Eduardo on Friday night, he wanted him to kill Mr. Dellan in the most horrible way possible, but, hours later, Julio had changed his mind. Now, it had to look like an accident, and that made the task so much more difficult.

Pushing a target down the stairs can break their neck though it's not full proof by any stretch; same with heavy furniture like an armoire falling on the victim. Electrocution is the most common way because it is the most reliable, yet the target obviously needs to be in water. Eduardo knew they used the hot tub nearly every night, but he didn't want to kill Ms. Wells so he needed to have Mr. Dellan alone in the water.

Ms. Wells was in the tub for part of Saturday night, yet never left her fiancé alone. Eduardo hid just below the third balcony ledge, in the darkest part that faced some woods. His back was stiff the next morning, however, it was the best spot to hide by far. On Sunday night, an opportunity opened up when Ms. Wells went to the bathroom for a few minutes. Eduardo put his plan into work. Scaling the side of the balcony, he scared the crap out of Mr. Dellan, who tried to stand up, but the turned-on blender was quickly in the water and Mr. Dellan didn't stand a chance.

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Eduardo hooked up his removable cable and waited to make sure the target was dead.

When that became clear, the hit man started his descent.

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Monday, November 11th
9:05pm
Peter Hansen

I was watching Giants vs. Eagles when Charlie ran into our family room, clearly exited about something.

“Did you hear about Ashley Wells?” he queried.

I looked at him, thinking that my son should know that I didn’t follow entertainment industry news.

“No, what happened?”

Charlie laughed. “Well, CNN just reported that her fiancé was electrocuted in a hot tub last night.”

“Did she do it?” I asked while sitting up and suddenly paying a lot more attention.

Charlie walked over to me and sat next to me on the couch and I tried to remember the last time we sat on the couch together, but came up empty.

“They’re saying it’s an accident... a blender fell into the water when he was alone in the tub.”

“Really!” I said trying hard not to laugh. “I suppose there was no way to keep this kind of thing from the press.”

Charlie punched me in the arm. “Are you kidding? The paparotsy covered her party and were hanging out by her front gate.”

As he was saying this, I had that pit in my stomach again, the pit that was a gift from Julio that just kept on giving. It didn’t sound like Julio’s work, but Brad was complaining about where Ashley’s money was going. It would not surprise me at all if the cartel had tapped my phones.

I slapped Charlie on the knee.

“Good stuff, my boy!”

I walked into the kitchen, found my cell phone, and dialed Martin’s number that I knew by heart.

“Martin, we’ve got to talk,” I opened.

He sighed into the phone. “Oh, this doesn’t sound good.”

“Do you know about Ashley Wells and her fiancé?” I probed.

“The singer? Gee, I guess I haven’t.”

“Come on now, Martin, level with me!”

He didn’t say anything for a few seconds. I knew he was thinking about whether or not to tell me anything.

“Are you on your cell phone?” Martin finally asked.

“Of course.”

“Now, you’ve got to know by now that we have your phones tapped, right?” Martin continued.

Actually, I didn’t think there was much to alert me that he had tapped my phones, yet I played along.

“That’s why I am calling you,” I said, trying to corner Martin into telling me everything.

“Okay, so we knew this Brad guy was poking around with questions about your firm that could have landed us all in trouble, and we could not afford to take that chance,” Martin revealed to me.

“So, you had him whacked?” I asked, now in the basement.

“You said it I didn’t,” Martin stated.

“Jesus! Brad was harmless!” I ran my hands through my hair.

“Hey we cannot have lawyers sniffing around our firm,” Martin said quite firmly. “There is way too much at stake here, and I am surprised that you don’t realize that!”

I knew Martin was right but just could not let myself ever feel okay with killing somebody – ever. That self promise was made back when I learned about the Linders.

“And someday you can tell Darryl how lucky he is because Julio was going to have him iced as well, but I convinced Julio that it might look too suspicious if two people associated with the firm were killed.”

I didn’t know what to say to that so I simply stood there silent in my basement for a good twenty seconds. My family was moving around upstairs, though I felt I might as well be on a deserted island faced with imminent danger and no one to turn to for key decisions other than myself. At some point, Julio was going to find me expendable – it was only a matter of time. I could see Martin taking the spare office at PLH, making nice with the clients and gradually running me out of the picture.

I had to do something to change the course because if I didn’t alter the status quo, Julio would eventually do it for me. My whole family would be wiped out and Julio wouldn’t give a rip about it.

“You still there?” Martin asked. “Look, I know this is hard for you, but think how much harder it would be if the feds suddenly show up at your door demanding to see your cooked books. It wouldn’t take them 20 minutes to figure out the scam your running.”

I let out a loud sigh and started to rub my temples. “You’re guy is just down the street watching over me and my family, so don’t think that I don’t appreciate it, but why did you have to tell me about Brad Dellan and the Linders?”

Martin’s guy had been around since the prior Wednesday and I hadn’t had any more problems with ‘pants on fire.’

Martin laughed mightily into the phone. “Damnit! Because you asked...you have always been curious about what kind of organization you are linked to the hip. We are a drug cartel, after all, and we don’t play nice in the sandbox.”

Now that was the understatement of the century.

“Dad, you down there?” Charlie shouted from upstairs. “Jamie Lyons is on the phone for you.”

Jamie Lyons was a low A list actor who was in his late 20s and starting to get some really big roles over the past year. He could not quite yet headline a movie, but Jamie was being seen as the next big action star. He was well received opposite Maggie Lewis in *Survivor*, a movie set in 2055 after a nuclear explosion. *Survivor* grossed over \$400 million in North America as Jamie’s career hit a new level. He could now command \$9-12 million per picture and was filming an untitled blockbuster due Christmas, 2003.

Jamie had only been a client for eighteen months and I hadn’t the foggiest idea why he would be calling me at home on a weeknight. The Vegas line pointed to bad news for me, however.

I said my goodbye to Martin and grabbed the handset from the basement landline.

“Hello, Jamie, what can I do for you?” I asked, not wanting to come out firing with the ‘why the hell are you calling me at home’ question.

There was an awkward pause on the line but I swore I heard a woman in the background.

“Peter, I need to take out my money, all of it...I’m buying a house,” Jamie blurted.

I didn’t have the exact number, but knew it was around \$12 million that Jamie had with me. At least that’s what I believed his last statement showed. I was kind of hoping that he would send me a few more million this year, now that he was making the obscene Hollywood bucks.

“Okay...Jamie, shouldn't you have Dan Hale handle this for you, maybe tomorrow morning when I'm in the office?”

“Oh, I fired Dan's ass this afternoon,” Jamie replied. “I'm handling everything now.”

I had already figured that Martin had my home phone lines tapped in addition to my office lines, so I was sure he would hear this conversation at some point in the next 24 hours. I had to be careful in order to not motivate the cartel into wanting to go off and kill Jamie Lyons for pulling his money out of the firm.

“Alright then, I will tally up the exact amount you have with PLH as of today's market movement and give you a ring tomorrow,” I told Jamie.

I certainly didn't want to press Jamie as to why he fired his attorney of several years, and he didn't sound as if he was going to offer that information up anyway.

“Sounds good, my man,” Jamie said. “And you're being real decent about this...I mean, I know the stock market sucks right now and you probably don't want to part with the cash...”

He was starting to yammer away so I figured he could easily warp into a statement ripe for being misconstrued by my cartel friends. I decided to cut him off.

“Jamie, I gotta run, but I will call you tomorrow morning from the office.”

“Okay, dude, Ciao!”

I leaned back in the basement sofa I had sunken into, and wondered just how many hand holdings with my clients I would have to do in the future. All because I was so worried about what the cartel would think. No one had taken money out of the firm since Julio came on board, so this was going to be heavily scrutinized. Best of luck to Jamie Lyons, but if the news reported how an ice pick found its way into Jamie's forehead, I would know that Julio had been a bad boy.

My cell phone began ringing and it startled the heck out of me.

“Peter, Martin,” Julio’s point man told me to start what I presumed to be yet another unhealthy and stressful conversation.

“Uh huh, what’s up?”

“Julio is coming to town the night of January 15th and will be in New York for a few days. He wants to meet you the afternoon of the 16th.”

“Does he always plan things out so far in advance?”

I couldn’t say that I was terribly surprised by that, because if the cartel was anything, besides being scaldingly ruthless, it was obsessively organized in all that it did.

“Yes, and simply listen. . . .I’m not in the mood for your snarky comments,” Martin stated firmly.

“Okay, okay,” I replied. “I don’t think I have anything on the calendar on that day, but I will check first thing tomorrow and block that entire week off if I have to.”

Crap, I’d call it a month if that would make Julio happy. Sitting there in the couch before Martin phoned back, the thought of Julio someday finding a more suitable money launderer haunted my frontal lobe.

I decided not to tell Martin about the Jamie Lyons money withdrawal right then – it could wait until morning – or maybe I just never mention it at all. And this Julio news was big. Could I somehow use this Julio travel information to my advantage?

Tuesday, November 12th
8:20 a.m.
Peter Hansen

“Martin, I got a call from a Hollywood client last night who wants to withdraw \$11.89 million of assets.”

The reality was that Jamie had \$7.1 million after my investment losses the past few years, so the difference would have to come out of somebody else’s funds. A few more sizeable customer withdrawals, and PLH would ordinarily be facing meltdown. That’s why the \$40 million that Julio left in the pooled assets was so critical, a nice cushion for a rainy day.

After much thought from the night before, a decision had been made: it didn’t matter if I was telling Martin something he already knew, I just didn’t want to be viewed as withholding key information like the first customer withdrawal since the cartel took over PLH. That said, I didn’t want to give up Jamie’s name if I didn’t have to, because there was a chance that Martin had not tapped my home line.

“You better be sure this guy wasn’t talking with Brad Dellan.”

I didn’t like that question and did my best to steer the conversation away from Martin’s suspicions about those poking their noses into PLH.

“Nothing like that, Martin,” I said. “Funds needed for a home purchase, that’s all. Hey, the afternoon of January 16th is all clear for me, just let me know when Julio wants to meet. I’ll probably need to meet him in the city, right?”

I glanced down at the yellow sticky note that I had written to remind myself to call Nick Johnson.

“No, I think he plans to spend a day out in suburban NJ, take your family out for lunch kind of thing.”

Great, this guy now wanted to meet the family. How was I going to explain that to Claire and the kids? I didn't think I ever had taken the family on a business event. We all did go to Disney World five years ago. That trip coincided with an investment management conference in Orlando that I attended for a day, but business and family still didn't mix on that occasion.

"That would be lovely, Martin," I said as sarcastically as possible.

"Personally, I think it's a bad idea for Julio to meet your family," Martin said. "There really is no upside."

Boy, I couldn't have said that better myself. Did Julio want to play with my mind, as if he hadn't done that enough already?

"Well, keep working on him," I replied. "I think it's a terrible idea. What, are going to start exchanging Christmas cards or something?"

Martin laughed softly. That was one of the few times I had heard that man laugh. I had never seen it, only on the phone.

"Oh, I forgot to tell you that I am switching men to watch over you, just a scheduling adjustment, that's all," Martin said. "You shouldn't experience anything different."

I breathed heavily into the phone. "That's good, because I have hardly noticed anybody watching over me."

And that was the truth. Yeah, I saw him follow me to work and back home every day, but he parked away from the house, near some woods, so no neighbors would complain or become suspicious. Most importantly, my family didn't notice. That would be bad.

Martin said his goodbye, telling me that he'd be calling me later.

My call to Jamie Lyons lasted maybe thirty seconds. It felt weird to call Jamie back on so many levels.

First, I should have been talking to his attorney, not him - I had no idea why Jamie fired his longstanding attorney and I didn't want to pry – since most celebrity clients of mine never talked business with me. Steven Angle was the exception, of course, yet maybe that was a reflection of him simply being older and wiser. Or maybe not.

Second, Martin quite possibly considered Jamie to be a threat to PLH and I was helpless to warn him of that.

So, there I was on the phone with Jamie, telling him that I would be wiring the \$11.89 million at the end of the day.

Darryl leaned in his head into my office. “Metrogroup has confirmed Mr. Lyons’s transaction and they’re sending over the documentation right now.”

Darryl had an interesting weekend. Apparently, someone was following him and Jonathan. I did my damndest to act clueless while he was telling me his story but it wasn't easy because I was fuming inside.

They noticed the same man four times in a few hour span midday Saturday. Twice in the flea market, once outside the shoe store – Darryl needed some new penny loafers - and finally, during the drive home. Jonathan noticed the man two cars behind him and made a few quick turns to let the man know he'd been spotted. They were so spooked that they cancelled their Saturday evening plans for dinner in the city. Instead, they hunkered down in their home all night. Jonathan and Darryl had not seen the man since. Taking the 5:45 a.m. train into Manhattan for his attorney job every morning, Jonathan spent the entire Monday looking over his shoulder.

Martin had told me that Darryl was off limits, but this made me nervous. Julio had been known to change his mind, even in the short time that I had known the man, so this could be serious. I cared for Darryl and if another person close to me got caught in the cross hairs of the

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cartel, I just might have lost it. As Darryl was finishing up the story, I made a mental note to call Martin after lunch about this mystery man.

Tuesday, November 12th
6:05 p.m.

Darryl ran his fingers over the new black granite countertop he and Jonathan had installed in their kitchen three weeks before. The granite still felt cold and slick to the touch, a feature that Darryl found quite endearing. The couple was actively looking for new appliances to match the new countertop.

Darryl had just arrived home, roughly ninety minutes before Jonathan. He cracked open a Miller Lite and stood against the 30-year old stove that was a week or two removed from the trip to the junk yard. Darryl and Jonathan lived at 34 Maple Drive, ten minutes away from PHL.

The couple had agreed to take a nice vacation to Aruba before using most of last year's bonus money on fixing up their home. They had the place re-roofed, windowed, and sided. Only recently had set their sights on the interior. The wood floors were re-finished last month, a process that inspired one of the worst fights ever for the six- year old couple.

Jonathan hated the new color of the floors once the final stain had set into the wood and wanted to call the contractor with demands for a major fix. Darryl couldn't disagree more, mainly because he feared a long dragged out battle with the contractor but also because he had already tired of not being able to use the downstairs. The refinishing was into the third week.

The two didn't talk for 36 hours until Jonathan's mother got into the middle by suggesting some large area rugs to blend in the wood color. His mother never seemed to have an issue with Darryl, and his father was already dead by the time they met. Darryl's parents were another story, having only recently seemed more comfortable with their son's sexual state. Darryl's four brothers were only mildly less intolerant than his parents, though the prior Thanksgiving dinner at Darryl's parents' home was the warmest it had been in years. This was the first relationship that both Jonathan and Darryl announced to the world.

Darryl's cell phone began to ring.

"Hello?"

"Hey, I'm hopping on the train right now, but I wanted to tell you that this company you gave me, United Enterprises, doesn't exist...I mean they're several of businesses with that name but none of them acknowledged having an account with Metrobank, and, frankly, none of them seemed to be remotely successful enough to have that much cash sitting at Metrobank."

Darryl had called Metrobank on Monday, asking for a list of all PLH accounts and the account names. Darryl expected to be told that there was just one account for PLH at Metrobank, namely the account Peter used to pool all investor money.

But there were two accounts, and, when Metrobank faxed the list over, Darryl saw the name United Enterprises. That night, Jonathan agreed to do some legal searches on the name to see what came up.

"What the hell is going on?" Darryl shouted. "Should I talk to Peter about this?"

"No, we need to do some more digging," Jonathan said, starting to fade out. "Let's talk when I get home. Love you."

"I love you too."

Darryl hung up and opened the refrigerator. He was the one to cook dinner every night and was thawing out some Cajun steaks. Jonathan tried to do most of the cooking on the weekends, yet both of them acknowledged that Darryl was much better in the kitchen. A honey - mustard dressing for the salad would be nice, thought Darryl.

The arm came around his neck as Darryl closed the refrigerator door and, before he could even try to pull away, a sharp object penetrated his neck.

"In a few seconds, you'll be dead," the voice whispered to Darryl. "Just relax."

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Darryl fell to the floor, dropping the plate of steaks, and leaving quite a surprise for his beloved Jonathan.

Tuesday, November 12th
7:40 p.m.

Jonathan closed the garage door and walked into the pantry area which served as a large coat closet with tiled flooring. Hanging up his coat, he placed his briefcase up onto the cedar shelf the couple had purchased the weekend they moved into the house two years ago. Jonathan didn't have any office work to do that evening but did pull out his United Enterprise folder from his briefcase.

"Darryl, hon, I'm home!" Jonathan yelled while opening the door to the main hallway of the home.

The television was off, which was strange because Darryl adored the evening news. There was no smell of dinner wafting from the kitchen, though the kitchen and front foyer lights were on.

Jonathan put the United Enterprises folder on the front foyer chest that belonged to Darryl's grandmother, and walked into the kitchen.

Jonathan's heart leapt against his chest as his eyes fell upon Darryl collapsed and dead on the wood floor. Jonathan swooped in for mouth to mouth for thirty seconds before realizing that he needed to call 911.

Fifteen minutes later, the EMT team whisked Darryl away, but Jonathan knew Darryl was dead. And all he could think about was the man that was following them last weekend. In Jonathan's eyes, his soul mate was murdered and someone was going to pay.

Police officer Will Roberts had arrived shortly before the ambulance. He was trying to calm Jonathan down.

"Jonathan, let's wait for the coroner's report because I didn't see any damage to the outside of Darryl's body; no gunshot wound, strangulation marks, nothing like that."

Jonathan's mother ran into the house and hugged her son. "I am so sorry, sweetie," she sobbed. "What happened?"

Her son explained everything including his suspicions, just as he had told Officer Roberts.

Tuesday, November 12th
8:15 p.m.

Fropogil is a wonder drug, most commonly used in hospital settings for outpatient surgeries. A sedative, Fropogil will knock people out in seconds after injection, and even five minutes of sedation can make the recipient feel like they've had a full night's rest. This characteristic makes the drug highly addictive to students crashing for exams and medical interns on 48-hour shifts.

It also makes the perfect weapon for killing. A forty milligram injection will cause the heart to arrest within ten seconds. Also, with a half-life of less than ten minutes, coroners don't stand a chance to catch the drug during autopsy. Eduardo would have used it on Brad Dellan but he couldn't get his hands on the drug with such short notice from Julio. For Darryl Ludsten, though, Eduardo had plenty, and he had spent the past two days observing Darryl and Jonathan.

He learned on Monday that Jonathan arrived home at least an hour after Darryl, so that was Eduardo's opportunity. Since the drug acted so quickly, there wasn't any need to do anything fancy or engage in a heated struggle. One clean shot to get the injection in – that's all Eduardo needed. He broke the lock on the basement sliding glass door and positioned himself in the house at 4:00 p.m. Once Darryl arrived two hours later, Eduardo listened for him to enter the kitchen from his position in the dining room. The refrigerator door was open long enough for Eduardo to move in from behind. It was remarkably easy.

Wednesday, November 13th

7:15 a.m.

Peter Hansen

“Hello?” I answered our home phone.

“Peter! It’s Judy!” my receptionist yelled into the phone. Judy opened the office each day at 7:00 a.m. “Darryl is dead!”

I slammed the cabinet above the phone portal so hard that Claire called from upstairs asking what the noise was. Wanting to call Martin right then and completely lay into the asshole, I tried to figure out how to make this short with Judy.

“Peter, you there?” Judy asked all panic like.

“What the hell happened?” I asked.

“They’re telling Jonathan that it was a heart attack.”

“Damn it to hell!” I exclaimed. “I’m coming in.”

I hung up the phone and leaned over because my stomach was starting to turn. How many people were going to die on account of my mistakes? I stood there hunched over in my kitchen for thirty seconds.

Martin was going to get an ear full, so I ran over to my office to grab my cell phone. I yelled to Claire and the kids to have a great day, hustled into the garage, and hopped into my car. Almost driving into the closed garage door, I hit the brakes at the last second.

“Martin, I am out, I am so out it’s not funny!” I screamed into the cell phone.

“Peter, what has happened?” Martin asked quickly. “Something has happened, what is it?”

“Don’t insult me, you ass!” I yelled again. “I want to hear you say it.”

Suddenly, I had this feeling that Martin didn’t know what the hell I was talking about, so I decided to take a different tack even before Martin could respond.

“You don’t know, do you?” I asked sinisterly. “Julio did this without consulting the great Martin!”

“Peter, please tell me what has happened,” said remarkably calmly.

I paused, wanting this jerk to feel left out in the cold, to feel the calculating whims of our favorite drug lord. Julio killed for fun, that I was now convinced. He really could not have actually believed that Darryl was a threat to our operation. Julio was smarter than that, so why kill him?

“Julio had Darryl killed last night,” I finally revealed for Martin.

“What!” Martin yelled for the first time in my presence, on the phone or in person.

“That’s right, your lunatic employer has outdone himself this time.”

Martin didn’t say anything for fifteen seconds and I wondered if he was thrashing himself or something.

“Peter, I have to call you back.”

As we hung up, I realized that somebody wouldn’t have to do much digging to make a connection between Brad Dellan and Darryl. That I was the connection was something that I planned to take to my grave. Now it was sitting there out in the open for some detective to start asking some tough questions.

Wednesday, November 13th
7:20 a.m.

“Julio, it’s Martin, just when were you going to tell me about your change in plans for Peter’s assistant?”

The drug lord sighed into the phone. “Martin, my boy, this was one of those things that was best delivered without your glorious handiwork, believe it or not”

“I cannot believe you did this,” Martin stated.

Julio replied, “You gave me your advice, I considered it, and it happened that I chose a different path, that’s all.”

Martin got up from his chair and started to pace the room. This was big though he wasn’t sure that Julio realized it. Or he simply didn’t care. Martin and Julio had their disagreements but nothing quite like this. Connecting the dots between Brad Dellan and Peter’s assistant wouldn’t be too hard if someone were pointed in the right direction.

“It won’t matter if you waited a month or two, someone will clue into the two deaths and trace it all back to your favorite money laundering center,” Martin declared.

“And if I didn’t take care of Darryl Ludsten, I like the odds that he starts sniffing around based on what Brad Dellan told him,” Julio replied. “And that would hurt worse.”

Julio had already heard my reply to that worry a few days ago, that we had all of the business lines tapped. Of course, tapping the guy’s home line as well as checking his cell phone every day was all part of the package.

“You know we could easily have tracked all means of Darryl’s communication to anybody, and I also know we cannot control the communication of the first detective to make the not so hard connection between what happened to the fiancé of a PLH client and a PLH employee.”

Julio yelled to somebody in his house. “And I know that you are easily replaceable, Martin. I have never asked you to do any dirty work, clean up after an icing, count some dirty drug money...”

Martin had successfully irritated Julio - he suddenly felt foolish, if not outright insane.

“Okay, Okay, have it your way,” Martin interrupted as politely as he could.

“Good boy, now hang up the phone and make me some more money.”

Wednesday, November 13th

7:35 a.m.

Peter Hansen

Judy ran up to me as soon as I walked through the door to the lobby.

“Peter, can you believe this?” she cried. “For the love of God, he was only 29!”

I knew of professional athletes that died of heart attacks, but this whole thing had to be looked upon as a very strange occurrence.

“So, what else did the coroner say?” I asked Judy.

“Nothing else other than that the heart was very stressed for his age.”

I couldn't think of how Julio pulled this off, and been trying to mentally grasp that killing method since hanging up from my conversation with Martin. Martin was no help, so that had me quite nervous. He was my steady contact with Julio, so if Julio went with someone else, maybe that person would like a money laundering center somewhere else, not with PLH. That meant bad news for the safety of the Hansen family.

I closed my eyes to try to stop my mind from racing so much and didn't think Judy even noticed. The three of us at PLH were a tight team, our lives wide open at all levels – my time with Julio notwithstanding – but this could tear us apart. How was Judy going to behave over the next few weeks? Months? By trying to save PLH, I actually ended up destroying a big part of PLH.

We were going to miss Darryl's laugh, it sounded like Ed McMahon's. Darryl also made a mean cheesecake.

“Jonathan was beside himself when he called me this morning,” Judy told me. “He'd been up all night.”

“Yeah.” I sighed. “Can you let him know that if he needs anything, we are happy to help?”

Martin might not even have had a job after his talk with Julio, and that was something I had to be prepared for. I had so little control over anything at that moment that I felt numb to the curtain that was being lifted to show the world what evil Peter Hansen had unleashed.

I began to walk down the hallway to my office when Jonathan entered the lobby. He charged right up to me with an index finger angrily extended. Jonathan looked like crap, with hair that showed like it had spent five days camping in the Adirondacks and clothes that should have been removed twelve hours prior.

“Darryl told you about that guy following us last Saturday, right?” Jonathan blurted.

I looked over at Judy who was clearly perplexed by the question and was shifting in her desk chair.

“Yes, he did,” I replied. “Have you seen him since?”

Knowing that he hadn’t, I simply was trying to defuse Jonathan’s anger.

“No...we have not...and the cops think I’m crazy.”

I gave Jonathan my best puzzled facial look and took a small step back.

“You talked to the cops?” I asked.

“Well, they keep telling me that this has been ruled a heart attack and that there is no sign of foul play....”

“But you don’t believe them,” I interrupted.

Jonathan scratched his head. “I don’t know...I’m sure the coroner would have found something if there was foul play...it’s just so strange that we start digging up information on United Enterprises, and he goes and dies on me.”

I couldn’t believe what I had heard just then and the numbness feeling that I had earlier gave way to stomach knots.

“United Enterprises?” I asked, forcing a smile onto my face and trying to act as cool as possible. “They’re a client of this firm. I can tell you all about them, except what’s confidential, of course.”

Jonathan looked at me, taking a deep breath. With his shoulders slumped, he suddenly appeared more like a freshman debate student getting stumped for the first time than somebody hot on the trail of a major scandal.

“No, that’s okay, this is all so crazy...I don’t mean to be accusatory to you...I mean it’s not like you had anything to do with Darryl having a heart attack.”

My puzzled face was back, maybe a little too strong. “No, I would say not!”

Jonathan shook both my and Judy’s hands and started walking to the lobby door. “I won’t waste any more of your day...”

“If there is anything, we can do...just let us know, alright?” I affirmed.

Jonathan looked back at us, flashed a weak smile, and exited the lobby. I glanced over at Judy.

“What was all that about?” I asked her.

“I don’t know...I have heard that grief can bring about some strange thoughts and emotions in people,” Judy replied. “But why was Darryl digging into United Enterprises?”

Shaking my head, I laughed through my nose. “That’s nuts. United has an account with Metrobank that I manage, have for years...he may have been surprised that United is not in the general pool of funds, but all he had to do was to ask me.”

Judy began talking to a UPS delivery guy who had entered the lobby.

I walked down the hall to my office and closed the door behind me. Collapsing into my desk chair, I put my head into my hands. I wasn’t sure if I was going to hurl, but it felt touch and go.

What the hell was I going to do now? I didn't want to bother Martin again, as he obviously had some issues to clear up with his drug lord boss. Yet, I would need to make sure we set up some non-traceable tracks for United Enterprises by establishing a legitimate business front. This was not the last question I would hear about this client. As things stood right then, our dummy United Enterprises account had a business origin of Sweden, but that might not have been so believable to a probing detective. I needed to get Martin to change that to a U.S location.

One crazily important question Jonathan did not ask was about Brad Dellan. I had to assume that Darryl told him about the lawyer of one my clients getting killed in an accident, so why hadn't Jonathan made that connection? This would only be a matter of time, though the facts kind of spoke for themselves – both deaths showed no signs of a criminal activity – and I had Julio's clever assassin to thank for that.

It didn't surprise me that there was a drug out there that could spark a heart attack and, at the same time, become untraceable in the body. For all I knew, it was Julio's home brew, concocted and chemicalized in his own operation. For over a year now, I had wondered - even lost sleep - over the scale of Julio's operation. Just how big was his cartel in the world of cartels?

One of my phone lines began to ring. It was my wife. She probably heard about Darryl's death from the Morristown gossip hotline.

"Hey hon, what's new at the house?" I asked.

"Sweetie, I heard about Darryl," she said, probably wondering why I had time to think about ongoingings at our house.

"It's terrible, complete shock....what 29 year-old gets a heart attack?"

"Judy must be beside herself, poor thing!" Claire said. "And what's with your bad luck string? I mean, two people associated with your firm end up dead in less than a week. Is somebody out to get you or something?"

My whole family knew about Brad Dellan, so Claire's question was hardly guesswork. Charlie loved the fact that Ashley Wells was single again, and, like most kids his age, found the facts around Brad's death to be rather comical.

"No, it's nothing that I'm aware of...but I feel so bad for Jonathan," I replied, getting up for a stretch. "You should make him one of your casseroles, and get the church group involved. Darryl always said what a lousy cook Jonathan was."

Claire was silent for a few seconds. "Hey, some guy from the power company was just here to check the meter. Don't they check the meters on the first of the month?"

"Yeah, I suppose...alright, let me go back to work."

"Okay, love you sweetie."

Sitting back down in my seat, I thought of all the ways Julio was going to amp up the watching and listening of the ongoings around Peter Hansen. What had been security from 'pants on fire' was likely to quickly morph into outright surveillance. Julio had to know that I would be royally pissed at the killing of Darryl. This was as personal as he had gotten. I didn't know the Linders, and only partly knew and didn't like Brad Dellan. But Darryl was a good friend.

So, while I didn't expect Julio to steal a power company truck, uniforms and masquerade as a meter reader in order to hook up some new monitoring system for my house, I did expect full audio and possibly video of 95% of my actions. Or maybe Julio did steal a power company truck.

Wednesday, November 13th
11:30 a.m.
Peter Hansen

At 11:30 a.m. Nick Johnson pulled into the covered garage connected to our building. I wanted to meet in person because I didn't really trust any other form of communication. My work lines were tapped, and who knew if the Cartel had a way to intercept my cell phones and e-mail? I had one cell phone that I rarely used and didn't think anybody knew about, so that was the phone I used to ask Nick to meet me at 11:30 a.m. But even then, it was a quick call with no names acknowledged, kind of like, "Hey it's me. Can we meet at 11:30 in the garage?"

I got this cell phone a few months after I first met Julio, for the sole intention of owning a communication device that could be kept a secret. I never left it lying around in the office or at home, and probably had only used it five or six times.

Judy had gone for lunch already, something she did a few times a month usually with Darryl. I didn't expect her back until 1:00 p.m. Though, I tried to take the three of us out to lunch once a month if not more, it had been over six weeks and we were due.

This morning, I couldn't leave Judy all alone down the hallway, so from 8:30 on, I sat in Darryl's spot. We talked about our favorite memories of him, of the holiday parties he organized for just the three of us during office hours, of the disaster of a car Darryl owned up until last year, and of his fanciful clothing. We both knew I would have to hire a replacement for him, but I really was in no hurry.

There were maybe fifteen cars in the two story garage. I never used it, except on snowy days, something Claire hated because she claimed I would stay healthier if I kept out of the foul weather.

"Peter, what's up?" Nick asked while stepping out of the car. He was dressed casually in a brown leather jacket and tan slacks. The man watching me was on the other side of the building

and couldn't see into the garage, only the entrance. I trusted that he wouldn't recognize Nick, unless Martin had given him a picture, telling him to be on the lookout for a visit to my office by Mr. Johnson. That wasn't real likely.

“Okay, January 16th is your date, if you choose to go ahead with your plan,” I said, looking around to make sure no one else was listening.

Nick looked puzzled. “Why that date?”

I couldn't be honest with Nick here so I made up something believable from his standpoint.

“Because there is a big Cartel meeting in New York on the 16th, so there will be way less attention on you.”

Nick nodded his head. “Alright, I was thinking hard about the middle of January, so that date is as good as any, I suppose.”

My heart was beating at a coronary pace. I never liked lying, but this was the rare occasion where it was clearly in Nick's best interest

“How are Susan and Tom?”

“They're good, don't suspect a thing,” Nick said. “I can't believe what Oleg is forcing me to do.”

I put my hand on his shoulder. “It is the best option for you in the long run.”

It definitely took balls to try and pull something like faking your death to fool a Mexican drug cartel. I couldn't imagine how many sleepless nights Nick Johnson had experienced since Oleg forced his way into Nick's life. For Pete's sake, I knew I had my share.

The sad thing was that Nick didn't understand who he was dealing with. He was thinking far too rationally, that if he could fool the cartel into thinking he was dead, the cartel would leave

his family alone. But I could easily envision Julio killing Susan and Tom just in case they knew something dangerous to Julio's operation.

Nick smiled weakly and looked down at the garage floor. The man had such limited options at this point that all I could do was to act like he stood a chance.

"What are you doing for lunch?" I asked.

Saturday, December 7th
5:45pm
Nick Johnson

“So, who did your plumbing last year for your basement bathroom,” Ron Patin asked me.

Ron and Linda looked the happiest I had seen them in a long time, and I didn’t even need Susan to point that out for me. Susan and I built out a bedroom and $\frac{3}{4}$ bathroom last winter, mainly because Stanley spent the night with us every few months. This way, he had his own bathroom. We thought it had been good for him. Tom’s friends had told me how they appreciated the bathroom as well, which I thought was nice until Charlie asked me when the kegerator was going to be installed.

“Dan O’Brien – good man. But you know, Ron, the electrical piece of that job took the most time.”

Linda came up to us. “Nick, can I steal Ron from you?”

“Of course, can I get you two anything?” I asked.

Linda grabbed my arm. “Tell Susan her artichoke dip is fantastic! I must get that recipe.”

We were standing in the living room. As usual, most of the party was in the kitchen and, last year, I didn’t think people ever left the kitchen. This year, I was determined to draw people into the living and family rooms. It was not working all that well.

Our party ran from 5:30-7:00 and people spent 20-25 minutes at the party on average. We knew of four other parties happening at the same time, so we were impressed each year that a good 60-70 people rotated through over ninety minutes. Most people didn’t want to talk with me for more than three minutes anyway.

Stanley was here as was Joan, both of whom would be spending the night. Mom was still visiting her sister in Florida, but she was returning the following week. We weren’t sure if Joan

was going to make it to the party tonight – she acted all week like she had other plans. That passive aggressive crap that Joan and Susan played drove me up the wall at times because it was almost like a sport for them.

Last year, we didn't serve any meat and I thought our party suffered because of that. We had always served a carved ham. I didn't know what changed last year, but the ham was back for this year's party. Judging by Ron's plate full, it was more than welcome. I pushed for a roasted Turkey ball in addition to the ham, yet Susan thought that we were too close to Thanksgiving. Tom wondered if we were serving dinner roles for mini ham sandwiches. Susan explained to him that this party wasn't a football tailgating event.

We'd only been having Thanksgiving dinner at our house for three years now, after Susan's father passed away. For the first seven years of our marriage, we alternated Thanksgiving and Christmas between our parents' homes. Yet, that plan proved outdated once Tom was three and could grasp with full throttle the bliss of Christmas morning. To this day, I admired the stand Susan ended up taking before Tom's three year birthday in January: Christmas morning was to be at our house. Whoever wanted to be present for the wee hour mayhem was welcome to spend the night in our house or drive over that morning.

Not a single year did we have anybody but Stanley stay over at our house. I guessed both sets of parents found it nicer to sleep in their own beds and arise in time to see little Tommy dive into the pile of gifts. Amazingly, no one was ever late, though Susan's father, Dave, broke his arm one Christmas eve, yet not even that could delay things the next morning.

Thanksgiving this year was the typical emotional volleyball at the Johnson house. That morning, Susan and I agreed that I would pick Stanley up at 10am. However, that was before Joan arrived. Joan walked into our house about twenty minutes before Mom, announcing that she

would pick Stanley up. This sent Susan into a seething state for the rest of the day, despite me trying my best to overrule my mother-in-law which I found to be quite the out of body experience I always told myself to avoid. Susan appreciated the effort though – even in her seething state.

“Joan, I need your help with the apple pie,” Susan pleaded.

“Nonsense...have Tom and Nick grade the apples and I’ll be back to put it all together.”

Susan knew that Joan could not simply pick Stanley up, because she had to super clean his kitchen, start a load of laundry and wash whatever else was in need of a mother’s touch.

Tom and I graded the apples like Susan instructed us, but, when Joan returned, she clearly was not happy with our work.

“You know Joan, this whole thing could have been avoided if I had picked Stanley up as originally planned,” I told Joan as patiently as I possibly could.

“My arthritis is acting up,” she snorted back while starting to assemble the pies with poorly cut apple slices.

I retreated to the family room to watch the remainder of the Macy’s parade, where Tom was busy describing the balloons to Stanley. He loved to help Stanley out and those two had really developed a solid bond. They had absolutely nothing in common, yet that didn’t stop the effortless talking between them.

We didn’t sit down until 2:30pm, thirty minutes later than we were shooting for. Apart from Stanley, no one said much during the meal. There’s nothing like a Thanksgiving dinner with anger swirling around the table, waiting to devour the next happy holiday thought.

I had been in a crappy mood all week because there had been no sign of Oleg and his thug partner. Having crafted my story and gotten it down pat, it was time to sell it to the criminal network. My success in convincing them that there was a competitor out there would play a big role on how I could move forward. If they were only partly convinced, or worse, didn't believe me at all, that could prove to be disastrous.

William called me at work last week and he basically affirmed my decisions to date.

"You know, the more I think about, there is no way to move six people in four different homes in the middle of the night," William told me.

The logistics alone would be crazy hard to figure out but, more importantly, I knew the group couldn't keep it quiet. Oleg was able to find me to start this whole thing, so I had to assume he had eyes and ears everywhere. And if he was watching our house the night we left, that could turn ugly in a hurry.

I knew it was not helpful to my plan going forward, yet it was just killing me that I didn't have a clue how Oleg found me. I had lunch with Dave Clark last week and got a zero read on the conspiracy theory. Frankly, I didn't see how anybody on the committee would benefit any more by setting me up than they could benefit on their own. They all had inside information. If they wanted to set up some financial game to benefit from that, they could just as well do that without involving me.

Oleg probably had other doctor targets - it made sense. Distal alone had four other clinical drug trials going on right then so there must have been 40 or so trials happening across the nation. Oleg and his thug buddy were likely putting their murderous squeeze on a few doctors in the NY metro area. Why stop with me, after all?

Everyone was still in the kitchen. I sauntered in and saw Melanie, my nurse, talking with Susan. Melanie's husband, Tim, was here. Tim was always good for a few stock picks. He never

told me if his hedge fund bosses were doing the same thing, but he might as well have winked at me. That was cool.

“Hey, bud, nice party...you two pull out the stops every year.”

I spun to see Dave Clark. I didn't let the Clarks in but they could have slipped by while I was in the living room. The Clarks came every year.

“I thought you were going down to Miami Beach for the weekend?”

“Nah, Toni has been raising a real stink about that purchase lately, so I have it rented from Thanksgiving through the New Year.”

The life of the rich and famous I would never understand. We were sending Tom on a ski trip with a group of his buddies and two sets of parents the week between Christmas and the New Year, so he can represent the Johnsons to the rich and famous at the ski slopes this year.

“That's too bad, you've told me how sweet it is,” I said.

Dave snorted. “I don't know...we got a steal on that condo. Maybe it's the bikini babes on the beach she doesn't like.”

“So, I guess the beachside Villa in the south of France is out,” I remarked. We both smirked at the thought of that location.

“Hey, Andy wanted to know if Tom made all-state,” Dave asked.

I guessed his son didn't read the sports pages, but I acted like it was a reasonable question.

“Well, we were hoping that Tom would get third team all state, but we had to settle for honorable mention.”

Morristown lost 2-1 to Westfield High in the first round game of the state tournament, during which Tom got elbowed in the head on a corner kick and lost track of the ball which was headed in for the go ahead goal. Tom needed 4 stitches in the top of his scalp. He swore that it

was a dirty move because the guy threw his elbow just as his teammate was striking the ball from the corner of the field. I thought it looked clean, yet I didn't dare tell my son that.

We had to tell Tom on several occasions that fall to cool the anger after the games. It was hard enough to have a teenager in the house, but a teenager storming around seemed like a rotten gift that just kept on giving.

I thought that if Morristown had won that game and moved on another round, Tom would have secured the third team slot. Instead, that slot went to the goalie from Redbank High, which got to the quarter-finals due to its goalie playing lights out during the tournament. It also didn't help Tom that he was just a sophomore. Also, Morristown came out of nowhere that year to surprise people.

Andy and Tom played together as kids every now and then. However, the Clarks lived across town so it became too hard to arrange things once the boys were in school. Play dates became awkward once Tom was beyond second grade. At least that was what Susan kept telling me. Dave never brought up his family when we had lunch, while Susan and Tom dominated my thoughts and words whenever I was talking with friends, so I found this odd. But would I ever ask him about this? In the end, I didn't know him that well.

"Honey, can you get some more white wine?" Susan yelled through the conversation cloud hovering in our kitchen. "Tom must have run off somewhere!"

Tom was in charge of keeping our two ice buckets full as well as the white wine and beer trays stocked with bottles. We were keeping the alcohol and ice on the back porch given the 27 degree temperature outside. I looked around I didn't see any sign of our son, either.

I was also serving vodka and scotch but no one seemed to have touched it. The bottles and glasses were sitting on another table, so maybe people thought it was not part of the offering. I slid the table next to the counter where the beer and white wine sat with the ice buckets.

“Do you want any help with that?” Dave asked.

“No thanks. I just need to step out to the back porch.”

Dave walked over to Toni and whispered something in her right ear, probably telling her that it was time to go. The Clarks didn't really know any of our friends, so I was glad they came.

I looked over at the two ice buckets. One of them was empty. Tom must have been in the bathroom, on the phone, or both.

Jill and Dick Tesser were talking inside our back entry way with a couple that I didn't know. I gave Dick a gentle pat on the back. Susan had heard they were trying to work things out - they seemed to be having a good time. I slid between them to get to the back porch. The pile of ice bags looked kind of trashy but no one was coming or going through this door.

“Hello, Dr. Johnson,” the voice said as I bent down to pick up one of the ice bags.

I knew that voice - it made me swallow so hard it hurt. It was Oleg; I slowly turned around. Oleg came out of the dark and walked up to me, seemingly alone, although I could only see about ten feet in front of me.

I had been rehearsing what to say to Oleg when we met next, and, since I didn't know when he would pop out at me, I practiced my delivery every day, thinking that could be the day. So be ready.

“What are you doing? You stopped by here last night and talked to my wife,” I said accusingly, waving my finger at Oleg.

Except I didn't mean to say it like that - I meant to say that I talked with some guy who threatened me like Oleg did; that I saw this person, not Susan. Damn! I waited to see what Oleg said next before saying anything else.

“Now, calm down, Dr. Johnson,” he said firmly.

Oleg certainly had a puzzled look on his face but that didn't stop him from reaching into his coat like he was going to pull a weapon of his liking.

This was the second good look I had gotten of this jerk. Oleg had dark, slicked back hair and stood about my height. He looked to be in his mid 30' with an angular face that culminated with a pointy chin. There was nothing distinctive about his eyes – it was too dark to see their color. His black pants struggled to stand out from his dark polo type jacket.

“I didn't stop by here last night,” he replied. “And if you do as we have told you, I will never talk with your wife.” His hand pulled out from his coat with nothing in it.

Oleg had a noticeable gap between his top front teeth.

I thought for a second. I just told him that Susan talked with this person and not me, so I needed to get Oleg thinking that this person was planning to lay the same threat on me as Oleg was.

“Well, somebody with a European accent came here last night asking for me,” I told him. “But I promise that I will turn everything I know about the Zyptorin trial over to you guys.”

Oleg took a step closer. “Is that all they said?”

“No, he told my wife that it concerned the Zyptorin trial, and I just assumed it was you.”

Turning around, Oleg yelled into the dark and, suddenly, his thug partner with the pony tail emerged. Oleg asked this guy a question in Czech, which produced an argument. They argued for maybe twenty seconds during which his partner raised his arms in frustration as they yelled.

The partner outweighed Oleg by fifty pounds but gave up four or five inches in height. He was wearing a white turtleneck and blue jeans. Oleg was clearly the one in charge, though a physical bout between these two men would appear to present quite a challenge for the leader of these dangerous men.

“Dr. Johnson, we know who these guys are and we will take care of it.”

I walked up to the two of them and asked the most important question: “Are these guys in competition with you?”

Oleg laughed awkwardly. “When they talk to you, just tell them you will do as they say.”

He turned back to his thug partner - they started arguing again.

I needed to sell this and, despite my verbal screw up, it sure seemed that I had done just that. Oleg could have assumed that this unknown European guy was no threat to his plans, that maybe he was simply a Zyptorin committee member like me. If Oleg thought that, then he wouldn't believe the crime scene that I intended to create. He would think I faked it.

I got lucky and I knew it. If I had said, liked I had rehearsed, that this European guy talked with me and not Susan, then I could say that this guy threatened me. Yet, since I slipped by saying that he talked with Susan, there could be no mention of a threat so Oleg might have thought nothing of it.

But, amazingly, I had touched a nerve here like I had hoped, as Oleg now thought that somebody was trying to move in on his turf. Even better, he had a good idea who that somebody was.

“Hey, I need to get back to the party,” I said firmly to them with a sudden burst of confidence.

Oleg looked at me. “Go back inside, Dr. Johnson. We'll be in touch soon.”

It occurred to me, as I picked up an ice bag and some wine, that someone at the party could have heard us talking, especially since Oleg was arguing pretty loudly with his thug partner. I walked into the house and looked at the crowd to see if anybody was staring at me.

“What were you doing out there? Staring at the moon?” Susan asked. She rushed up to me, taking the ice bag while I put the wine on the counter next to the beer. The beer supply appeared to be okay.

“Har har,” I responded, hoping to God that she didn’t press any further because I couldn’t think of an excuse.

Thankfully, Sarah Robinson, the neighbor directly behind us, started to talk with Susan; Sarah’s husband, Henry, died six months ago - Susan had been a great friend to Sarah.

Tom emerged from the back staircase that led up to the bedrooms over our garage.

“Hey, bud, we have been looking for you,” I told my son.

Tom held out his hands to explain. “Sorry, Dad. I had to make one phone call – I’ve been gone maybe five minutes,” he pleaded. “I’m back on duty for the rest of the night.”

Susan walked up to him, gave him a kiss, and handed Tom the ice bag. Tom emptied the ice bag into the buckets while Susan started talking again to Sarah Robinson.

I was able to walk downstairs to the basement unnoticed. Collapsing into the leather sofa, why had my much rehearsed talk with Oleg gotten so messed up? I leaned back, cocked my head over the top of the sofa, and recalled the moment where Oleg made me spin around from the ice bags with as much finger pointing fury as I could muster. At that moment, emotion took over. All my insides wanted me to do was to yell at Oleg; my rehearsed talk was to say that I talked with a new guy threatening me, but I couldn’t yell at Oleg for that, so, instead, I accused him of talking to my wife and it felt great to yell at this guy. For just a second, I had control - me, not that murdering son of a bitch.

Of course, my new story made it less clear if this guy with whom Susan talked was indeed another threat to me over this damn drug trial. This wasn’t a smart move, but I didn’t account for the emotional angle. Oh, how my family lucked out on this one.

I sat up in the couch, tuning into the chatter upstairs. I had to get back up there and put on a smile - I had missed 10-15 minutes of the party - though I needed to come downstairs to think while the Oleg moment was still fresh. It was my first big mistake, but, oddly, it may have played

in my favor. Bottom line: I needed to learn to be cold like Oleg going forward, no more room for emotional outbursts.

What was Oleg doing there? I'd bet he wasn't planning on talking with me. How would he know I would step out for the ice bag, especially since he must have noticed Tom taking care of the ice and wine all night? Oleg and his thug partner must not have been watching our house last night or they would know that my story was crap. I got way lucky on that account as well. It sure would have been nice if those two guys operated on a consistent schedule, since their ad hoc watching of my house put my ability to pull off my plan at risk.

I assumed that I was going to hear from Fred by the morning as Oleg seemed pretty rattled and news of what I had told the Czechs was sure to travel up the ranks. Hopefully, I had sent them all scrambling to find this 'other guy' that talked to my wife. Maybe now I had some leverage...I had to admit, it was starting to feel good. Really good.

I walked up the basement stairs and spotted a tuft of Zeke's fur in the carpet. I should have asked Oleg about the not so mysterious death of our beloved dog. But he'd probably just tell me that he did it and, if I didn't follow their instructions, I would end up with the same fate. Nice.

Sarah Robinson was at the top of the stairs talking with Laurie Arbor, our next door neighbors to the west.

"Well, hello, you two," I said as cheerfully as I could. "Mrs. Robinson, it is good to see you enjoying your holiday season."

That didn't come out quite right, given that this was the first holiday season without her husband Dale. Sarah didn't seem to mind, though.

Dale Robinson was 12 years older than his wife, and this was Dale's second marriage, the first with children. A year ago, Dale learned that he had Prostate cancer - he didn't last another seven months. Dale was 76 years old.

“I’m getting by,” Sarah said. “I have all three boys home for Christmas; three spouses and seven grandkids.”

I clapped my hands together. “That is just wonderful to hear.”

Laurie Arbor gave Sarah a hug. “Oh you are going to have a busy household for a few days, then, huh?”

Sarah laughed. “Right, two of the grandkids are twin four year old boys – a bit of a handful.”

“You know you can send them over to our house if you need a break for awhile,” Laurie offers. “Danny will love to play with them.”

I was not sure what was up with Bill Arbor’s job hunt – I didn’t even know if he was here tonight.

“Laurie, is Bill here?”

“No, he’s not feeling well,” Laurie replied. “He was up all last night hovering over the toilet.”

Sarah put her hand over her mouth. “Oh, Dear!” she exclaimed.

“Ladies, if you will excuse me.” I walked into the kitchen.

Susan walked up to me. “Nick, dear, Father Michael just arrived...he was just asking for you.”

I scanned the kitchen but didn’t see him. Susan had met Father Michael a few times in recent years. She must have thought I invited him because we were squash buddies.

Stanley’s laughter rang out from the hallway, so I investigated and found Father Michael talking with Stanley. I always found it odd how these two got along so well. Stanley had been so critical of the Catholic Church for as long as I had known him. I knew that Father Michael had a very thick skin, however.

“Well, look who the cat dragged in?” I said, trying to be warm and funny. “It’s good to see you Father Michael.”

“Hey, Nick. Good turnout tonight,” Stanley inserted.

Stanley was wearing a red cardigan sweater and looked to be drinking eggnog, a last minute call by Susan. She had me prepare it. I believed Stanley was the only one drinking the stuff tonight. Perhaps I should have told him that there was no alcohol in it.

“Nick, your brother-in-law was just telling me about your son’s soccer accomplishments this fall,” Father Michael said.

“Well the whole team beat expectations this season, but, yes, we are quite product of Tom.”

Looking intently at me, Father Michael threw his head toward the living room, his eyes quite large at the moment. Stanley was usually quite good at catching people making gestures around him, thinking that, since he was blind, he was oblivious to gaps in conversations and awkward silences. But he didn’t seem fazed here - I breathed a sigh of relief. Stanley could raise a bit of a fuss when he caught folks doing this.

“Uh, Stanley? Will you please excuse us? I have to talk with Father Michael about something.”

Stanley was smiling as he walked into the kitchen. He knew our house so well that he didn’t need help except on the stairs.

Father Michael and I walked into the living room. No one was there. It seemed there were about 25 people left in the house, spread between the kitchen and family room. Most of them were Susan’s friends that I didn’t know real well, and, not including neighbors, there were only a handful of couples here tonight that were decent friends with both Susan and me. As we got

older, Susan and I had found that we needed to work hard at keeping the couple friendships strong.

“Okay, look. If you are going to do this, you are going to need to get your ducks in row,” Father Michael whispered loudly to me.

I didn’t recall telling Father Michael about my plan. “I’m sorry, what exactly are we talking about?”

A nervous laugh left my mouth as I asked him this question. Father Michael moved in a little closer and looked around the empty room.

“William called me and told me about your plan,” he said. “Since I asked William to help you, he felt like he had to keep me posted with the latest details.”

“That’s okay, I know you guys will keep it quiet.”

Father Michael looked like he had a lot more to say. “Are these guys watching you all of the time?”

I thought for a second and decided not to tell him about the Czechs being at my house that very night because it would have freaked him out too much.

“Umm...not every night.”

William started whispering such that I needed to strain to hear him as the furnace had just kicked on, mixing with the noise of the party’s conversations in the other rooms of the house.

“You need to create your death scene at your office,” he said. “You have a lot more control there.”

I folded my arms. “Go on.”

“Well, what if they are watching you that day and follow you to the office?” Father Michael cocked his head at an angle, knowing this was a hard one.

Man, he was putting some thought into this – maybe even a few steps ahead - which could be handy. My latest thinking was to leave my car in the parking lot and take a cab to the Morristown greyhound station, but if Oleg and his thug partner were watching me from that parking lot, the whole damn plan would go up in flames.

“I hadn’t thought about that,” I told Father Michael in a normal voice. “They don’t consistently watch me, but I should plan on them watching on that day.”

“You could park your car in the Red Robin lot across the street.”

Red Robin was a burger place that opened up last year. They seemed to be always busy during the weeknights and my car would be lost for a while in that lot.

I wondered why Father Michael was focusing so much on the parking situation. Where were the questions about pulling off a crime scene that pointed to the obvious conclusion that I’d been drug away either dead or barely alive? That was the hard sell here.

“What? I run across the street and hope that they don’t see me?”

“I need to think more about this.”

Yeah, you and me both, big guy. I didn’t know what had surprised me more this night: Oleg’s visit or Father Michael’s ‘how to fake you death’ game planning.

“I don’t know if they have ever followed me to the office.”

“That might be something that you want to figure out.”

“Losing a tail is something for the movies... wait a minute! Our parking garage – you can’t get into it without an ID.”

So the Czechs would have to watch every car coming out of that garage to keep tabs with me throughout the day, or they could walk into the garage and look for my car, but they’d have to be pretty suspicious to do that.

The medical building I was in was designed in a circle format, a kind of hub and spoke layout of the offices. I shared the building with two Urologists, three Radiologists and two Orthopedic surgeons who were on the second floor.

My office took up 890 square feet, enough for a small waiting room, patient check in space, one exam room, my office and a lunch/break area for the staff. Patients walked in from the center lobby of the building and checked in with Mary; you made a right turn down the hallway for the exam room, my office and the break room.

At the end of this hallway was the staff entrance, though all of the staff, including me, entered from the lobby of the building. The staff entrance required two keys to get in from the outside - we all just thought it easier to go through the lobby. The staff door faced Wilton Avenue and the Red Robin, leading away from the outdoor lot of the medical building. In daylight, someone sitting in the parking lot could see a person leaving through the staff door, but it would be difficult to get a good look at night, at least that was what I hoped. There was an outdoor light above the staff door that I would have to disable. The outdoor lot was also rather treed which could have obstructed some views.

I was not quite sure why we had a two floored parking lot, given the decent size of the outdoor lot. There were no security cameras around the premises, but the landlord had thought about upgrading to cameras two years ago, and I don't know what happened with those plans. I had ruled out the junkyard, fake car wreck plan owing to the likelihood of security cameras at the junkyard.

The landlord's management company was responsible for opening the building at 7:30am and locking the lobby entrance at 5:30pm. The main lobby doors were alarmed but we'd been told specifically that the staff doors were not alarmed. That was kinda strange. My office had a 'last one out locks the office door' policy - we never had a problem.

Jill and Dick Tesser were getting ready to leave the party, so I excused myself from Father Michael to meet them at my front door.

“Hey guys, it was good catching up with you two,” I said as warmly as possible.

Jill gave me a hug. “Thanks for the party, Nick.”

“We’re going out to dinner,” Dick said. “I’ll probably see you anyway, but have a great Christmas, Nick.”

“You too, my man!” I slapped him in the back. I wanted to say something affirming their marriage but what the heck would I say?

An hour later, everyone had left the party. Stanley and Joan were sitting at the kitchen counter, while Susan was busy scrubbing down the stove top.

“You know, there is this organic watermelon smelling spray that cleans my stove top perfectly,” Joan remarked.

“This is working just fine, Mom.”

“It was great that the Tessers came together.” Stanley was a master at changing the subject.

Picking up a trash bag, I began wandering around picking up cocktail napkins and the plastic food plates we set out for the guests. The beer and wine glasses had already been emptied and placed into the dishwasher.

Joan was on her second glass of wine since the party cleared out, but I had given up keeping track of Stanley. I thought I just had one beer the whole night.

“Dick Tesser is the same conniving son of a bitch his father was,” Joan announced. “The apple doesn’t fall too far from the tree, you know.”

Last year, the Tessers found out that Dick had a daughter from a fling he had during the last month of college. He never saw the woman again, though her daughter surfaced about a year

ago after her mother died suddenly of pneumonia. When the 26 year old daughter contacted Dick, she explained that she wasn't looking for anything but to meet Dick. He politely refused until she showed up at a Memorial Day barbeque at the Tesser home. Jill had a cow and the trouble began for them.

"I don't see how he was conniving," I said. "It's something that happened a long time ago."

Even though I had no idea what Joan had on Dick's father, I chose to shut up and leave the kitchen.

My laptop was sitting on my desk. I pulled up the file called Oleg and started erasing it. The latest edition to the file was a death faking/disappearance check list:

- 1) Blood and skin samples
- 2) Hair follicles
- 3) Latex gloves
- 4) Cash
- 5) Cell Phone
- 6) Destination
- 7) Transportation

It was hardly a complete list, yet it was going to have to go into my head and stay there. The more I thought about everything, the more I was convinced that Oleg had been in this house and would return. Why wouldn't he? I was surprised the Czechs hadn't taken the laptop already, but they could just as easily have zipped all of my files onto another device. I didn't think this had happened because they clearly would have seen that I was planning something - Oleg and his thug partner would have gone ballistic on me if that were the case.

I woke up in a cold sweat a few weeks ago over my life insurance, since I had \$1.5 million under me and I'd be committing insurance fraud if it paid out. Of course, the insurance would only pay out upon a declared death. Would the police ever declare a death without a body? Susan wouldn't need the money, especially since Joan had insisted on paying for Tom's college. Still, the whole thought of it was bothering me.

Stanley walked into the office. It was amazing how he found his way around our house.

"So, Nick, what were you and Father Michael talking about," Stanley prompted.

"Oh, there is a patient of mine that is having some problems that I thought Father Michael could help with."

I led Stanley back into the kitchen.

Joan started coughing madly. She took a swill of wine to settle things.

"I'm fine," Joan said to all of us in the kitchen. "Guys, that ham was excellent. Where did you find it?"

"Rachel's Catering prepared it for us," Susan stated from the other side of the kitchen.

"I've been quite happy with them."

Timothy Gilbert
Damage Control

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Saturday, December 7th
6:10pm
Oleg Yashkov

Karel and I were standing in the shadows, on the gravel of the Johnsons' one car parking area off to the side of their driveway. It was quite the party the Johnsons were holding tonight, though they didn't live as well as the Linders lived. I would have loved to have the chance to see the Linders host a party. The Linders house was easily 1,000 square feet larger than this house, so it was the largest suburban house I had ever visited and easily the largest we had ever killed people in. Our previous killing, nine months ago, took place in a 30 story office building in Miami. That was a challenge. We caught the bastard in the elevator shaft between the 23rd and 24th floors.

That bastard was Bruce Lick and it brought an end to a crazy assignment the Viola family asked me to do. In 2001, Julio Viola asked us to babysit Bruce and Jim Lick of Miami Beach who owned a south Florida real estate company that had bought a piece of beachfront land along Miami Beach in 2000.

We always took orders from Julio Viola directly, which we found to be weird given that Julio was way too high up in the organization to be dealing with two security monkeys like us. Plus, the guy had a funny nasal whistle that made it very hard not to laugh when talking with him - laughing at this guy could easily get a guy shot in the head.

As was told to us by Julio, the brothers planned to build a luxury condo building but needed a bank to help with the money. This was how the Viola family bank got involved, but how the Lick brothers got to know of the Viola family, Karel and I never heard. Drugs had to be part of the deal because the Licks partied on their yacht several times a week, bringing in flame throwing dancers, stilt walkers, and women for all of the men.

Once we started following the Licks around Miami Beach, it was clear to us that they had no clue who they were in bed with. When we got there, the condo was about halfway done. The model unit we saw was amazing because all you saw was ocean when you walked in. Wall to wall glass, black marble floors and a balcony that wrapped around each corner of the building. All for a nifty price of \$3.8 million for each unit.

We had spent enough time in the Viola compound to know quality when we saw it, and this condo was quality. Of course, no drug lord in his right mind would base his compound right on the ocean.

About a month into our assignment, we heard that the Lick Brothers had found a different bank to pay for the condo. We quickly got notice from the Viola family to take them out. Bruce and Jim must have gotten advance warning that we were coming after them because they were already trying to escape when we attacked. Though we did end up finding Bruce and shooting him in the head a few times, his brother Jim got away.

It was colder out here than I had planned due to the wind. Johnson son, Tom, had been coming out for more ice and wine. He seemed like a happy kid – it was gonna be too bad.

Dr. Johnson stepped out of the house and examined the ice and wine supply.

“Stay here,” I whispered to Karel.

I walked up within fifteen feet of Dr. Johnson.

“Hello, Dr. Johnson,” I said.

He stood up, turned to face me, then walked quickly up to me with his finger waving madly.

“What are you doing? You stopped by here last night and talked to my wife.”

“Now, calm down, Dr. Johnson.” I told myself to stay level headed.

I reached inside my jacket to turn the tape recorder on - after the Linder incident, the decision was made that we should tape all conversations with our targets – thinking that the recorder should have been turned on already. I had been trying to think about our talks with Dr. Linder to see if he said anything that would have tipped us off to his scheme. A tape of those conversations would surely have made life easier.

Dr. Johnson had put his finger down and seemed a little more settled.

“I didn’t stop by here last night,” I stated. “And if you do as we have told you, I will never talk with your wife.”

Dr. Johnson took a step back.

“Well, somebody with a European accent came here last night asking for me,” he told me. “But I promise that I will turn everything I know about the Zyptorin trial over to you guys.”

I took a step closer. “Is that all they said?”

“No, he told my wife that it concerned the Zyptorin trial, and I just assumed it was you.”

I turned around and yelled for Karel, who came running up.

“Did Mihail set us up?” I shouted at him. “I think he has another team coming after this guy.”

“What are you talking about? Mihail doesn’t have another team.” Karel threw his arms in the air.

“Somebody else is harassing Dr. Johnson over the Zyptorin trial.”

“Wait a minute... who was that Johnny guy Mihail kept talking about?” Karel asked me.

I turned back to the doctor. “Dr. Johnson, we know who these guys are and we will take care of it.” We didn’t really but I felt the need to keep him focused on us.

Dr. Johnson rubbed his eye like he had something in it. “Are these guys in competition with you?” he asked.

“When they talk to you, just tell them you will do as they say.” I produced a weak laugh.

I turned back to Karel. “Alright, let’s get Mihail on the phone – tell him we want to meet this Johnny character.”

“He’s not going to do that for us,” Karel snapped back.

“What does that mean?” I asked. “You don’t think Mihail listens to me?”

Dr. Johnson started talking. “Excuse me! Hey, I need to get back to the party.”

This guy was really pissed about all of this, but I thought at first, when he spun around to us, that he was gonna talk about his dog. We should have been watching his house last night.

Then we would have seen who talked with his wife, Susan.

“Go back inside, Dr. Johnson,” I said. “We’ll be in touch soon.”

He grabbed an ice bag and a wine bottle and headed back inside.

“Go start the car – I’m going to give Mihail a ring.”

Karel ran off to start the car. I took my glove off to find my cell phone inside my jacket.

Mihail was our cleaner. He was not a cleaner in the traditional crime scene sense – he didn’t specialize in the removal of murdered bodies and the general mess left at a crime scene – he cleaned our mess, before the cops arrived. Specifically, he was excellent at removing any traces of us at a crime scene like hair, blood and clothing fibers mainly, some fingerprint removal if we were careless. At the Linder’s house, Karel got bloodied by the bullet and there was plenty of him lying on the kitchen floor as well as on the body of the security guy the Linders had hired.

Mihail was at the house when the Linder son arrived drunk out of his mind around 3am that morning. He was able to get out through the front door before the son was able to open the back door leading into the kitchen. He was sure the son would notice the three bodies in the kitchen so he high tailed it out of there and didn’t look back because the place was about to be swarming with cops.

He didn't get the chance to complete the job, most notably the cleaning of Mrs. Linder's fingernails – they looked pretty bloody. If I was ever captured by the police and connected to the Linder's, they'd have plenty of evidence against me from the fingernails alone.

Mihail blamed us for a messy job and general lack of preparedness because he expected us to know about the security guy. I saw his point there, but I didn't think we should have been able to warn him about the young Linder's surprise arrival at 3 am. That kid appeared out of nowhere, not living at the house the past month. Plus, we thought it was Fred's job to find out about the Linder kid.

We knew Mihail from the Lick Brother job in Miami Beach. That was how Fred ended up hiring him. Mihail must have thought he was allowed to complain about us all he damn well wanted, still, I was surprised that Fred never told us of Mihail's complaints. Or, more important, warned us to improve our act. When our fee cleared through the bank, I knew he was still cool with us. Our call to him shortly thereafter about another target, Dr. Nick Johnson, certainly didn't hurt our standing.

I dialed Mihail and was told by the wireless carrier that the number had been disconnected, which was not too surprising given that we were handed new cell phones every two weeks. I just thought I had his latest number. I looked up Fred's number – I knew he didn't keep changing his cell phone number.

“Hey, Fred, we need to talk,” I told my boss. “We just spoke with Nick Johnson and he told us about somebody trying to threaten him the way we've been doing.”

I heard a loud sigh. “Oleg, why are you bothering me with this?” Fred finally asks. “You are perfectly able to handle a possible competitor. Find out who it is and eliminate them.”

The way Fred sounded completely annoyed by this conversation made me reasonably sure that Mihail had gone behind Fred's back as well.

“And let me remind you, Oleg, that our network has deep pockets,” Fred continued. “Any competing network would have to find a similar cash source to fund the effort.”

“I think Mihail is behind all of this,” I asserted.

“The cleaner? That guy can barely tie his own shoes!”

“Okay, Fred, we’ll talk later.” I couldn’t ask Fred for Mihail’s number after what he just said. I would come off too weak.

We were back to square one and it felt like crap. I glanced over to Karel who was sitting in the car. He looked pissed, but he’d better not be pissed at me. What I really wanted to do at that moment was to barge into that fancy holiday party at the Johnson house and have a little talk with Susan. Scare a few folks...get a description of the guy she spoke with. One problem with that: I was pretty sure Nick had not told his wife about me and we learned our lesson with the Linders - don’t get the wife involved, they only confuse the situation.

Sunday, December 15th
Miami Beach, Florida

Jim Lick's cell phone buzzed just after teeing off on the 8th hole at the Miami Beach Dunes Club.

"Jim, it's Mihail, I used to work with your brother," Mihail blurted.

A long agonizing pause followed as Jim worked his brain and Mihail grew even more uncertain that his plan could get off the ground.

"Uh, vaguely, Mihail...where are you calling from?"

"What if I told you that Oleg and Karel are in New Jersey working a scam?"

"I'd say keep talking," Jim said, putting his 3 wood back in his bag.

Jim Lick took a deep breath, and could almost feel his connection with this Mihail guy blossom right then over the bad wireless connection.

"Well, I hear you're now in Boca, building Condos," Mihail asserted.

Jim coughed. "That's right, an outfit from Moscow is financing me this time around, and the Violas won't come after me with the Russian Mob protecting me. Now you say that those assholes are in New Jersey?"

Jim and Bruce Lick were sitting in their conference room of their corporate headquarters in June, 2000, when they received a phone call from a woman telling them to get out of the building immediately. The Violas had ordered a hit and the attackers were on their way.

Jim and Bruce agreed to split up, with Bruce heading to the west wing of the building and Jim racing over to the east wing. As fate would have it, Karel and Oleg entered through the west wing of the building. Jim thought he heard faint gun shots behind him as he ran out of the servicing entrance. He hung out in Costa Rica until he was able to make contact with his Russian

sponsors, who required Jim to give up 90% of the equity in the luxury condos they planned to build in Boca Raton, Florida.

“They are threatening doctors to give them inside information on drug trials that these doctors are working on,” Mihail declared. “Then they work the stocks of the pharmaceutical companies running these trials to profit from the inside information.”

Jim laughed. “Clever insider trading scam!” Jim shouted. “Can I get in on it?”

Mihail knew he needed a money man with muscle if he was going to take out Oleg and the Viola operations and proceed with the scam. He wasn’t seriously thinking about doing this until he learned that Oleg was pissed at him and he realized that he had better get on the offensive. A pissed off Oleg usually ended up with somebody dying, but going on the offensive without a financial backer was just suicide.

Mihail had heard Oleg was convinced he was trying to compete with Fred’s network, yet he had also heard that Oleg was pissed at him for complaining to Fred over the Linder mess. So, in Mihail’s mind, this competition story was most likely being made up to get Fred’s okay with the whacking of good ‘ole Mihail.

“Can you back me financially and with some men to take over this scam and to take care of Oleg and Karel?” Mihail asked.

“I can put up \$10 million to fund the stock manipulation side of things but I could also send a couple of guys, sure,” Jim said excitedly. “Are they currently targeting any doctors?”

“Yeah, there pretty far along with one doctor, so we’ll need to move pretty quickly.”

“Right, well, let me make a few phone calls, but I’m pretty certain I can send two guys to New Jersey in a week or two.”

“Sounds good, let’s talk tomorrow,” Mihail said.

“Okay, my man!”

Timothy Gilbert
Damage Control

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Jim Lick put the phone back in his pocket and rejoined Boris Yakovlev and his cousins on the 8th fairway.

Saturday, December 21st
Peter Hansen

Nick Johnson walked through the lobby at the Eagle Eye Golf Club where my family belonged. Both of us were being pretty thoroughly followed by thugs of the Viola Cartel - we agreed to arrive at the club with an hour between us. I didn't think the two crews watching us talked to each other, but they probably at least had met in the past and might have recognized each other in the parking lot. Especially if my talk with Nick was lengthy. So, I planned to keep our meeting short and hopefully sweet.

I arrived at the club at 11 a.m., hung at the bar watching college football, and waited for Nick to meet me a little past noon. He didn't belong to the club, yet the thugs following him likely didn't know that. Hopefully they wouldn't grow suspicious even if they did. I hadn't been to Eagle Eye since the Hansens had a family dinner there two months ago.

Nick found me in the bar and we hopped into a booth. He looked good, well rested and groomed.

"So, did you see Oleg following you into the parking lot?" I asked.

Nick nodded and smiled. "Yeah, they're on me all of the time, mainly because I have them chasing their own tale."

I shot him a puzzled look before glancing around the bar to make sure no one was taking any particular interest in our conversation.

"I have them convinced that there is a competitor seeking the same drug inside information."

I laughed in disbelief. "How did you pull that off?"

"It wasn't hard," Nick said. "I just told them that somebody came to our house asking Susan about me, and they went ballistic."

That I believed. No one sported paranoia like Julio's cartel and they would most certainly believe that some other outfit was after Nick's inside information. That I hadn't heard about this development with Nick didn't surprise me because Martin had disappeared. Julio's cousin, Jorge, was now dealing with me. Of course, the switch didn't happen right away – Julio loved keeping people twisting in the wind – and I didn't hear from anybody within the cartel until the first week in December when Julio called me to tell me about the switch to Jorge. I wanted to ask Julio what happened to Martin but good reason kept me from poking my nose where it didn't belong. Martin's cell phone had been disconnected since the third week in November as best I could tell because that was the first time I tried to call him after my angry discussion with him following my learning of what happened to Darryl. Sitting at Eagle Eye, I was not in good shape, and struggled to keep focused on Nick. I threw my neck out the previous week from all of the stress – ended up pumping four Advil a day for the pain – as Jorge offered me no ray of hope that Julio was with me for the long term.

“So that's why they're following you full time now?” I asked Nick.

“Right, and it's going to make my fake death so much more believable,” Nick replied.

“The plan is really coming together.”

I leaned across the table. “And, what's the latest with the drug study?”

Nick smiled. “The final announcement isn't expected for a few months now, so my mid January departure won't be cutting it too close.”

After Nick walked me through how he was going to set up the crime scene, I ended up pretty impressed with his plan. And I didn't know for sure if Julio would go after Susan and Tom, so maybe things could work out for the best here. After all, Julio had left Jamie Lyons alone after he pulled his assets from PLH.

Saturday, January 4th
5:45pm
Nick Johnson

Apparently, William Miler had a relative at the Screaming Eagle Resort in New Mexico, one of the top resorts out west where I'd always wanted to vacation, but never found the chance. New Mexico was nice and far away from New Jersey. Plus, I highly doubted Oleg's criminal network had an outpost in this resort town. I had been researching this town since mid December, when William first suggested it. William's cousin's kid moved there two years ago. This was William's quid pro quo, in that, for his helping me. All he was asking was for me to move to this resort and check up on his cousin's kid. His cousin died suddenly last year and William felt terrible about that. But the strange part of it was that the cousin died an illegal alien despite owning a successful plumbing business for twenty years. William figured that his cousin's kid also was illegal, though William did know that he was working at the Hilton Garden hotel in the ski village of Screaming Eagle.

"Don't tell him who you are exactly... actually, don't tell anybody who you are exactly," William said to me.

We were standing in his basement, a workman's dream, and I'd never seen toolsets like those he had. I bet someone could build a small city down there. William's wife, Betsy was out shopping. William felt most comfortable down there in the basement, and I couldn't say that I blamed him. He was in the process of building some cabinets for one of his kids. They were going to have glass frames in the front, so I was guessing they were for the kitchen. William had one cabinet near completion with cherry finish, and he told me that he had custom ordered the glass front of the cabinets.

“That makes sense,” I replied. “The plan is to leave for the resort in a few weeks.”

I decided a few weeks ago to move up the disappearance date for a number of reasons; first, Peter Hansen had strongly suggested it, and second, because the need to leave my medical building in the dark was becoming a key part of the plan. I had to keep my departure as close to 5pm as I could. The ideal date was in late December, but there was no way I could arrange this in that short amount of time. The earliest I could do this was in mid January, during which the sun sets around 4:55pm and it gets pretty dark by 5:40.

Perhaps the biggest reason for me moving up the date concerned the fictional ‘other party’ in competition with Oleg. My story about the guy talking with Susan at our house definitely hit a nerve with Oleg, enough so that he and his thug partner seemed like they were starting their hunt for this person that night of our holiday party. Also, I didn’t think I could keep creating this illusion for three or four months. At some point, they would figure out my game. So if I waited until mid February or early March, Oleg might have come to his senses by then.

My obsessively compulsive brain was now quite relieved that my last talk with Oleg happened the way it did – errors and brain farts included. By incorrectly stating that this person asking questions about the Zyptorin trial talked with Susan and not me, I had made it easier for me to avoid Oleg’s wrath if he determined that there was no other guy. I could simply say that I didn’t talk with him. So I couldn’t confirm if he was threatening me or was there for another reason. Maybe he was a reporter, a stock research analyst or even somebody on my committee. Granted, this fictional guy didn’t leave his name, as most non criminals would, but I thought I was in as good a spot here as anyone could possibly have expected me to be in at that point.

Still, the thing was, here we were in the first week of January, and this ‘other guy’ hadn’t found me to threaten me yet? This was not realistic, so the next time I met with Oleg, I was going to have to up the ante and tell Oleg that this other guy put a gun in my back in the parking lot of

my medical building. And threatened me in the same way Oleg and his thug partner did. They didn't have access to the garage – they would know that they couldn't have seen this from the outdoor parking lot. Also, I was going to tell Oleg that I didn't get a good look at him because he told me to get in my car and face forward.

I had yet to identify Oleg and his partner sitting in the outdoor parking lot though I was convinced they were watching me throughout the day. I thought I saw them last weekend on Skyline Drive and considered running up to their car. But I didn't because I didn't want them to think that I was looking over my shoulder. That might have made them quite suspicious. It was like I was a Ringling Brothers employee, walking an illusion tightrope.

Still, it would have been nice to know when the Czechs planned on visiting me again.

“I have arranged for the cash transfer like we discussed,” I said.

I was trying to mentally recall the long to do list that William gave me a few weeks ago. My offshore account in Belize recently posted a \$70,000 deposit via wire transfer. These were my living funds for my time at Screaming Valley. Susan and Tom would be fine. They would have plenty of cash reserves and Susan was still receiving her severance from Hallmark who essentially paid Susan to leave after Hunter's Mill was bought out by the greeting card company. Most importantly, beloved Stanley was a very wealthy who would gladly help his sister out financially if need be. I hoped the life insurance didn't pay out - that might be the one crime I ended up committing - but if it did, I would have to deal with that at some point down the road.

William had told me that New Jersey, and most states in the Union, require seven years to pass before a missing person can be officially declared dead. But given the crime scene that I was planning, the police might take a much quicker path. Enough time would have to pass to rule out kidnapping. Though, if no ransom was demanded, it could be declared a murder by the police in just a few months.

“Good. Have you looked into Greyhound?” William asked.

“Right...they don’t require an ID for tickets bought in cash.”

Once I disappeared, I needed to stop using anything that was traceable. Clearly, Susan and probably the police would notice a credit card transaction posting after the crime scene time – that would be totally stupid. A debit card from our bank would also be quickly detected, so, basically, I couldn’t use anything in my wallet.

I thought about leaving my wallet at the crime scene but was leaning against this idea. No cold, hard reasoning for this leaning – maybe I needed to bring it with me for dire emergencies or even to give me an emotional salve – but that was okay I guessed. The thing about this whole plan was that I knew I was going to make mistakes. I just hoped that these mistakes didn’t bring harm to my family.

The greyhound route would require three days of travel in the bus, heading across the Midwest to Colorado and then down to New Mexico. I needed to pack light and pick things that I knew Susan wouldn’t notice missing - a toiletry bag stuffed with my toothbrush, razor, shaving cream, deodorant and hairbrush would certainly be detected by my wife. Not that she would be suspicious if the police believed the crime scene. I had a ratty pair of sneakers that I would wear on the bus and would probably bring the work shoes that I would be wearing that day in the office. If I didn’t have room for the work shoes, I could’ve probably just thrown them away somewhere on route.

I had never met anybody who had ridden Greyhound though it didn’t have the greatest reputation, with online reviews saying to ride up front as close to the driver as possible to ensure safety. But no one online had found trouble on the bus themselves. A fight did break out in the back of the bus, during the ride of one reviewer. It took the driver several minutes to stop the bus and resolve the problem. The driver wielded a heavy night stick, apparently.

The reviews did say to expect the bus to be highly crowded at all points during the route, and I didn't know how I was going to sleep – I had never been able to sleep in a car. Anyway, I was not expecting to be too functional when I did arrive at the resort, so a lack of sleep over a few days wasn't going to kill me. Screaming Eagle was 100 miles south of Sante Fe, and Greyhound actually didn't travel to the resort. A Daybreak Transports bus from the Sante Fe stop would carry me the final leg of my journey.

“So...how do you see this playing out at the end of two years?” William asked.

I had told William that I planned on being at the resort for two years, but there was nothing magical about this length of time other than needing to make sure the Oleg threat was gone for good. They could leave town the day they learned of my foul play ridden disappearance or they could poke around my neighborhood for a while to see if I turned up. I chose the latter as the most likely, though I had no idea how long this would take for the Czechs to give up. Given that their crime network had to be much larger than these two thugs, extra caution was necessary. Hence, the two years.

“I'm not sure Susan will ever speak to me again,” I replied. “Tom will be close to graduation...”

William held his right index finger up. “So you plan to settle back into your life on Skyline Drive?”

“That's something I haven't figured out yet.”

And that was the truth. I didn't know if I would ever get our life back. Let's say my family believed my story – I did have the audio tape for evidence – and they were willing to reconcile with me, how could I live in this town without looking over my shoulder every second? While I didn't know where Oleg and his network would move to next, I did know that most

pharmaceutical companies were based in the New York metro area and also that most drug trials were coordinated here, so I didn't see Oleg moving to the West Coast. Were his operations based in New Jersey? The Linders were living in Philadelphia, so maybe Oleg was based there.

Of course, I'd have to start my practice all over again, after years of building it up; all of my patients over the next two years would have no choice but to find another physician. I suspected that, at my age, my only option would be to join a larger group of Internal Medicine docs. Not too difficult if I could get all my colleagues to realize that I was not some freak who had a mid-life meltdown.

"Yeah, I suppose you can afford to deal with that issue at some point down the road," William asserted.

"Well, I don't consider it to be a luxury of mine...it's more like I'm kickin' the can down the road."

If I got all worked up over what might happen two years from now, I might never have gathered the courage to pull off what I had to do in two weeks. I didn't want to tell William that because his question was a legitimate one and he was only trying to help.

"Do you think you can find physician work down there?" William began sorting his vast array of drill bits.

I laughed for a second. "No, I'd be crazy to try to re-apply for a New Mexico medical license under my own name and no place will touch me without a license."

Dr. Jake Mansen died last month in Albuquerque, New Mexico - he was 42 years old - having been killed in a car crash, and, for about a day in late December, I planned to use his name and medical license at the resort. The name would check out at the resort medical facilities - the Screaming Eagle Resort had two mountain side facilities for ski accidents - where I could work.

Any standard check with the New Mexico medical board would show me, Dr. Jake Mansen, as a licensed doctor.

Like I said, that thinking lasted for a day, after which I came to my senses. Even if the board didn't catch the resurrected license on the first pass, they were bound to catch the deceit when the license goes up for renewal. I didn't even have Jake Mansen's license number, which any doctor worth his salt had put to memory or had displayed in his office. So, when the board learned that neither the medical facility nor I had the license number, the red flags would have risen mightily. The bottom line was that I didn't plan on having to work. Any half cocked ideas that could blow up the two year disappearance plan just had to be kicked out of my mind. Plain and simple.

My current NJ medical license was up for renewal next winter - I'd have to let it expire. That thought alone almost gave me a heart attack as the NJ medical board could be a real pain in the ass. I always had renewed my license three months in advance due to horror stories I had heard about doctors getting suspended or put under review by the medical board for silly mistakes as renewal failure. Of course, even if I only disappeared for two months, the board would still ask me some tough questions because they would surely find out about my leaving.

"How do you know if the Czechs aren't watching you during the day at you office?" William asked. "Have you thought about the possibility of them interrupting your crime scene?"

"Yeah...they can't park in the garage, so I'd have to give them a reason to be suspicious," I said. "The practice will be locked and dark. You can't see the light of my office from the window looking in from the lobby."

The plan was to draw the blinds and use a flashlight – Oleg could be looking through my office window for all I knew. If I had learned anything from the Czechs, it was to expect the unexpected. I had no idea how to do that except to try to think like them as best I could.

“You should put the blood and flesh fragments on the fabric of the chair,” William asserted. “Like you just got stabbed and, after reaching for the wound, you put that hand on the chair as you fall to the ground.”

“What, and then leave a small blood trail on the carpet out to the exit?” I asked. I tried to imagine me being dragged down the hallway. My office was eighteen feet from the staff door. I walked the length out yesterday.

I planned on disabling the outdoor light above the staff door next weekend during the day. If I waited until the night of the crime scene, I risked Oleg seeing me and getting suspicious, and I needed to keep the Czechs from waiting for me outside the staff door the night of my disappearance. If he caught me next weekend, he could see that there was nothing suspicious going on in the practice – I was simply changing a light bulb.

William sat down on one of his work stools, then crossed his arms. “Let me think...put the blood on your hand and fingers and grab the doorframe from the inside, about a foot above the carpet.”

“Like I’m badly wounded and am being dragged out of my office,” I said. “I reach for the doorframe to stop from being dragged any further.”

I hadn’t figured out if I was going to be shot or stabbed or both. I wanted to leave enough of a mystery for the CSI as to how I was wounded and just how badly, but, obviously, the flesh part of the plan pointed to a knife attack.

My latest thinking with the flesh sample from my body was to take a small piece from my upper left thigh, an area that most resembles the stomach area. William had told me to keep the flesh fragments really small and almost impossible to see with the naked eye. Sounded simple, yet I was not exactly looking forward to the moment when I cut out a piece, however

small, out of my upper left thigh. The fine hair on my thighs was similar enough to those on my stomach. According to William, when a knife penetrates a body and is pulled out flesh fragments are left on the knife and the wound area. I was planning on two layers of stitching since the wound would need to be deep enough. Probably two stitches on the outer and deeper layers. I didn't do a lot of stitching as an Internal Medicine physician; in fact, I removed way more stitches from patients than put in fresh ones.

“Then, also take that bloody hand and wipe it on the carpet leading out to the exit,” William revealed. “You should also spread some of it on the walkway outdoors.”

There was a little bit of snow on the ground. If it was still there in late January, I could smear some blood on the snow patch behind the building and away from the main parking area - like I was dragged toward Wilton Avenue.

“You need to be careful of any security cameras along Wilton,” Williams said.

“Right, I'm thinking the Red Robin might have a couple cameras,” I replied. “There's a walkway to another office building thirty yards behind our building - I thought I'll head along that walkway.”

I certainly didn't want to leave any footprints in the snow.

“Well, that other building might have cameras, so I wouldn't plan to get picked up in their parking lot.”

The inside of my left eye started itching, and I wondered if it was the sawdust down there in the workshop. My other eye was okay, though, which was strange. The handy, but sometimes annoying asset of being a physician was the constant awareness of allergy inducing environments. This drove Susan up the wall at times, so I had learned to keep my findings mostly quiet.

“It should be hard to identify me because I plan to wear a hoodie sweatshirt underneath my down jacket,” I state. “The building behind us corners Wilton and Marsh, a much smaller street with apartments. I can get picked up on Marsh.”

“That sounds good,” William affirmed. He stood up from the stool. “You know, I could pick you up on Marsh Street.”

We heard some footsteps upstairs. Betsy was home, and she was singing a holiday tune.

I smiled at my retired detective buddy. “That would very helpful. Thank you, William.”

Monday, January 6th
11:15pm
Peter Hansen

“Peter, there is a Tim Murphy here to see you,” Judy informed me over the intercom.

I rose up from my chair and made my way down the hallway. Jorge had just given me over the phone some wire instructions to move more of the cartel’s money. This time I was told to move through several Asian companies and their banks. One thing was for sure, Julio wasn’t leaving any stone unturned if it could help him launder his assets.

The man in the lobby was wearing a cheap suit and old looking shoes – he definitely did not look like a potential client.

“Tom Murphy, Morristown detective,” he said while holding out his hand. “Can we talk in your office?”

I glanced over at Judy who looked like Mr. Murphy had not told her who he was when he first entered the lobby.

“That’s fine,” I said after shaking his hand.

The walk down the short hallway seemed football field long as my mind raced through all of the reasons a Morristown detective was wanting to talk with me. Had this to do with Nick Johnson, or could someone have complained about the two guys watching my building from the parking lot? Maybe ‘pants on fire’ had decided to go the police and tell everything, which wasn’t much at all anyway.

We sat down in my office and Detective Murphy got right to the point.

“Peter, I want to talk with you about Darryl Ludsten,” he started. “His friend, Jonathan Walsh, has been nagging us for two months with his theories about Darryl’s death, and I gotta tell you Peter, it makes up a wild story.”

Detective Murphy was a bit wild eyed when he said this, like he just couldn't wait to blurt out this wild story of Mr. Walsh. His hands were fidgeting in his lap and I wasn't sure if he was going to sit or stand. My brain started hurrying around trying to find a way to cool this guy's jets because this man was on a mission. Or at least it seemed that way.

"Alright, shoot," I replied.

"Well, Mr. Walsh believes that the deaths of Mr. Ludsten and Mr. Brad Dellan were connected so as to cover something up here at PLH," he started. "But, as you know, no foul play has been found in either death, so we have been holding off Mr. Walsh and his desire for us to talk with you."

I looked at the detective with a smirk. "Wow, sounds like something in the movies! But seriously, I had as much to do with their deaths as I did with JFK's forty years ago."

The detective let out a cough and it took him a few seconds to recover. "Well, it does seem odd that two people tied to PLH would die within a few days of one another."

"I would say tragic before I would call it odd, sir," I said.

"Okay, fair enough," the detective told me. "Do you know if United Enterprises had anything to do with these deaths?"

Boy, Jonathan was sure a busy boy with the police, not holding anything back.

"Look, he already talked to me about United," I said, with less patience than I had told myself to show. "United is a client for whom I don't directly manage their money. It's a very indirect relationship compared to my other clients. United had nothing to do with these deaths, nor did anybody. One was an accident, the other a heart attack. As far as I knew, Darryl and Brad lived in completely different worlds."

Suddenly, Detective Murphy stood up from his chair while staring intently at me. "And, you don't have any other clients that you suspect could be involved with these two deaths? It is

all too weird, something's...not right here. Mr. Ludsten finds out about United Enterprises and ends up dead shortly thereafter." The detective kept staring right at me.

"Detective Murphy, my clients are Hollywood stars. They're not angels by any means but c'mon, that's crazy." I looked at my watch. "I have a conference call to hop onto if you don't mind."

I shook the detective's hand and led him out to the lobby. It was a damn good thing, Julio knew a good assassin for the two jobs. Anyway, the cartel had already set up a good looking shell company for United Enterprises. So when Detective Murphy looked under the hood, he would see what looked like a real company making real products. In the end, though, this guy suspected something. That was clear. Damn.

Tuesday, January 7th
2:30pm

“Joseph, still no sign of them?” Mihail asked over the cell phone.

“Hey, I can’t explain it, maybe they bolted town when they heard we were coming.”

Mihail laughed uncomfortably. “Oh, I don’t think so. They’ll be back and we’ll be ready for them.”

Mihail heard Joseph’s partner, James, talking in the car and thought about asking if James was on his cell phone but decided against it. These were Jim Lick’s guys after all so Mihail knew he had to tread carefully.

“So, we just sit tight?” Joseph asked Mihail.

“No, plan on moving in when this doctor leaves for the evening,” Mihail ordered. “Wait for him in the garage.”

James and Joseph had arrived that past Sunday. There had been no sign of Oleg and his partner at the doctor’s house or office.

“You got it and I’ll make sure he understands there’s a new sheriff in town.”

“Very funny, just stick to the plan and don’t rough him up to much,” Mihail said.

Tuesday, January 7th
5:35pm
Nick Johnson

I turned out the hallway and waiting area lights and locked the practice door behind me. Mary and Melanie left about ten minutes ago. Flu season always left me exhausted at the end of the day - it was days like that which always made me consider bringing in another physician.

The door to the parking ramp opened automatically, and I walked through to the garage.

“Hello, Doctor Johnson,” the voice declared behind me. It didn’t sound like Oleg.

I swung around to find a bald headed, portly guy, about 5’10” standing just behind me.

“What’s this about?” I asked, looking around the garage to find it practically empty.

“We are your new boss here concerning the Zyptorin information,” the man said firmly.

“Oleg and his partner have been removed from their position and my partner and I have taken over.”

“So, you know where I live?” I asked, trying to figure out how these guys managed to take out the Czechs. The irony of me meeting in person my fictional ‘other criminal network’ that I laid out for Oleg and his pony tail partner was staring right at me.

“Of course, doctor. We know about Susan, Tom, Stanley and the two grandmothers,” the man said proudly.

“So, how do we do this?” I asked.

“Don’t play coy with us doctor,” the bald man said, sticking his finger into my chest.

“You will have information about the Zyptorin trial in about two months and we want that information.”

“Okay, can I go now?”

“Sure, run along.”

As I drove off toward the exit ramp, I saw the man standing where we talked and it looked like he was talking on a cell phone. He didn't seem happy.

I didn't know what to make of all of this. Did I no longer need to go ahead with my crime scene and disappearance plan? Surely, these guys played by the standard blackmail rules and they would leave my family alone if I give them the inside information.

Tuesday, January 7th
5:35pm
Oleg Yashkov

Did Jim Lick think he could send two punks - who I was sure were scratching their heads over our being nowhere in sight - up here to take us out of the picture? Karel and I had been driving separate cars the past few days and we were stalking these two jokers, not the other way around.

The fat bald one stepped out of the back door to the garage, swearing at his cell phone. Maybe he was upset that his partner wasn't picking up.

"This is a gun in your back, let's take a walk to my car," I said.

"Dude, you don't know what mess you're getting yourself into here," the fat bald one said like he was trying to warn me.

"You're about to learn that your partner has been shot in the head and we are going for a drive - I'd say you're the one with the mess right about now."

Karel came around the corner, gave me a confident nod and whispered in my ear that the dead guy was in his trunk - we didn't want police crawling around after all. His car was pulled to the building. We guided the fat bald one into the back seat after removing any weapons and giving him a nasty sedative. It's amazing how a grown man can cry when he sees a needle with a night long interrogation at the end of it. Karel and I had rented a storage unit that would serve nicely for an interrogation, but I wasn't sure how long before the sedative would wear off.

My cell started to buzz. "Yeah?"

"You idiot, now you have the Viola family on your ass. Congratulations."

"Mihail, did you set all of this up?" I asked mockingly. "Hey let's meet for dinner, just the two of us."

Mihail hung up.

“He must have been watching us,” I told Karel. “How else would he have known so fast what happened to his Florida guys?”

Karel whipped his head around, frantically trying to locate Mihail’s car but to no avail. “Let’s drive around the block and see if we can spot him.”

“No, he’s gone for the night,” I said. “He’s not stupid.”

Tuesday, January 7th
5:35pm
Nick Johnson

“William, Nick Johnson.”

I was having such a hard time processing what just happened that I had to pull the car over in a shopping center. After a few minutes, I knew this latest wrinkle should be presented to William. I was so close to my disappearance date that I just wanted to make sure I was thinking rationally. If I chose to delay the date for a month or two so as to get a better read of my new blackmailers, but then decided that I needed to disappear, the crime would have become a lot more difficult to pull off. Especially given how much longer the daylight is in March versus January.

“Nick, how are you?”

“Confused, William,” I say, pulling the car out of the shopping center. “It seems that I have a new criminal network blackmailing me. I met them fifteen minutes ago at my medical building and they told me that Oleg and his partner have been killed.”

“What?” William shouted into the phone. Betsy must not have been home. “This thing gets more bizarre by the minute!”

“Yeah, it does,” I say. “So the question here is whether these guys are going to play by standard blackmail rules and leave my family alone if I cooperate.”

“These guys didn’t tell you where they were from, did they?” William asked.

“No, but they have been doing their homework on my family,” I reply.

“Well, are they following you? Because, I would be on the lookout at your home tonight to see exactly who is monitoring you? And it just occurred to me that the Czechs may not be as dead as these guys are saying.”

The more I thought about it, it was hard to imagine Oleg and his pony tail partner being blindsided like that.

“So, don’t make any decision, wait it out for a few days?” I asked William.

“That seems to be your only choice at this point.”

Timothy Gilbert
Damage Control

282

Tuesday, January 7th
8:10pm

Jim Lick's cell phone buzzed and he flipped it open. "Jim, it's Mihail, we have a problem."

"What happened?" Jim fired into the phone.

"Your guys are dead because Oleg knew when they were coming. You have a leak somewhere and you must find it."

"Oh, that guy is getting an army up his ass!"

"Good," Mihail asserted.

"It'll take me a bit to put it all together, but, this time, it won't matter if Oleg knows when we are coming!"

"Alright, I'll call you over the weekend," Mihail said.

Wednesday, January 8th
2:30pm
Oleg Yashkov

“Sir, we have no more appointments open for today,” the woman behind the desk told me as I walked through the waiting area.

How did she know that I didn’t already have an appointment? Did she know all the patients that well to know a stranger when she saw one? Dr. Johnson’s practice was a lot smaller than I had thought.

The apple cinnamon smell from the scented candle on her desk was mixing curiously with the odor of medical cleansers.

“I’m sorry, but I need a few minutes of Dr. Johnson’s time,” I told her. “My name is Oleg...he’ll want to see me.” I left Karel in the car – two men wanting to see Dr. Johnson would be too weird.

The woman looked at me as if to tell me, “Good luck with that!” She got up from her desk and walked down the hallway. Not thirty seconds later, she came back.

“Dr. Johnson will see you now.” The woman looked to be in shock. “His office is the last room down the hallway on the left.”

I walked down the hallway catching the sight of a really heavy man with his shirt off in the exam room. Man boobs. Being a doctor must suck.

My knuckles rapped on the door. “Knock, knock, Dr. Johnson.” I walked into the office and closed the door. It was a heavy wood door, good to keep sounds inside the room and away from listening office staff ears. I could just see that patient check-in lady running down the hallway to hear what we were saying.

The doctor looked like he'd been kicked in the stomach. "Where's your partner?"

"I left him in the car," I said.

"Well, can you have him check the building's garage?" he asked. "Some guy threatened me last night demanding the same information that you want, telling me that you guys were dead."

The doctor looked right into my eyes.

"Did you get a good look at him?" I asked him. I don't know why I asked this, because I damn well knew who he talked to and that guy was a whole more dead than I was.

"He looked kinda portly, 5'10-ish, shaved head" the doctor told me. "How did this guy find me? Am I in the 'friggin yellow pages or something?"

I couldn't tell if Mihail was trying to throw me off by mentioning the Viola family. He was way over his head if he was stupid enough to bring them into the picture. Still, if he had done that, Fred's days were numbered, and whoever was providing the big money here was about to get wacked - if they hadn't gotten already. Lenny, who called last week to warn us about Jim Lick's plans, told me that Jim Lick was back working with the Violas, which I had a hard time believing. Karel and I both agreed last night to expect to see more guys from Florida within a week to challenge us even if the Violas were involved.

"We have it under control, doctor," I said. "How's the Zyptorin trial going?" I decided not to let our doctor know about our killing of the two guys last night. It might have sent him over the edge, and we needed Dr. Johnson to be clear headed about everything.

Dr. Johnson sat back down in his chair. "It looks like it's going to wrap up in late March or early April."

"Did this guy ask about the trial?" I asked.

“Yes, I told him what I know about the timing of the information flow from the trial,” Dr. Johnson replied. He cleared his throat.

I walked a little closer to the doctor. “Well, if you get harassed again by some people, just tell them you will cooperate, okay.”

“Alright, but I thought you said you had it under control. Is the bald portly guy coming back?”

“When is your next meeting?”

“February 5th, but he didn’t ask me about that.”

I had been holding off from talking with Fred because he couldn’t help us and may have decided to pull the plug on everything way too early. Jim Lick and the Viola clan were too big a match for Fred and his money guy, but that’s assuming Jim and the Violas could find these two guys. We were easy to find because Mihail knew who we were and where we were going to be. Fred and the money guy were a lot more behind the scenes. Like us, Mihail never met either of them in person. Maybe Fred and the money guy weren’t that close to getting whacked after all.

One thing was for sure, if we were going to sit in our cars watching the good doctor each day from the parking lot, we were going to have to be very careful. I thought I’d give Lenny a call again - see what’s up. Oh, and we needed to find Mihail to take him out, hopefully before the Calvary arrived from Florida. What a mess! That Jim Lick was still alive was a huge mistake on our part and it was definitely coming back to bite us in the ass.

“Well, you keep doing business as usual and this will all be over before you know it,” I replied.

Dr. Johnson looked at the clock above his desk. The office was sparkly clean and orderly.

A nurse poked her head into the office, before looking strangely at me. “Dr. Johnson, Mr. Montane is ready to see you. He was looking like he has strep, so I’ll get the swab ready just in case.”

“I will be right in, Mary,” Dr. Johnson said.

He stood up and stretched out his right hand like he wanted to shake my hand. I just stared at him for a second.

“We’re not friends, Dr. Johnson,” I said coolly. What the hell was that? Was this guy cracking up on me?

Dr. Johnson smiled strangely and quickly put his hand down. “Yeah, I suppose not.”

“But don’t worry, Doctor, we’re now watching your office from the parking lot,” I said. “Maybe we can catch this guy stalking you.” I picked up a pen on his desk to examine it. It was from a resort in Las Vegas.

I didn’t know if the doctor believed we were already watching from the parking lot or not, but I thought it wise to act like I didn’t purposely let these bozos from Florida meet with him in the garage yesterday afternoon. Even worse, I didn’t want the doctor to view us as failing to notice the guy harassing him in the garage. So, we weren’t there watching him yesterday, end of story.

I put the pen down and left the doctor to see his patient. The woman behind the check in desk raised her eyebrows at me as I walked by on the way out of the practice.

“Have a great weekend, Honey!” I yelled out to her.

“Next time, can you please call?” she shouted back.

Yeah, I’ll be sure to do that.

I walked out into the lobby of the building and headed back to our car. It would have been nice if we could park in the garage, yet I saw a card scanner activated gate. I decided that we

were parked too far away from the garage to keep a good watch on things. The lot was not even half full, but it was late on a Friday. I hoped we could find a spot close to the garage starting Monday morning. We knew the bozos from Florida were lurking around the garage yesterday because we had gotten a heads up about them from Lenny. The next wave of heavies, though, might have come without such a nice heads up. And we didn't want anybody harassing Dr. Johnson without us controlling the situation.

"Bud, we need to find out where Mihail is staying," I told Karel while climbing into the passenger seat.

"I just heard he is in the city for the weekend."

I lit up a cigarette. "Move us closer to the garage," I said.

"What kind of guns do you have in the trunk?" I asked.

"Pretty much what we had in Philadelphia – haven't I been telling you we need an Uzi?"

"Man, you drive around with one of those and you are just begging for a cop to pull you over and nail you for holding one of those suckers," I told my fire power friendly partner. "We didn't need big firepower to take out those two yahoos yesterday, but that axe sure was handy in the storage unit."

What we did need was a pair of binoculars to see better into that garage. If we were to be surprised by a new crew the next week - that was a big if because I planned on avoiding being surprised - they would probably hang out in the garage during the late afternoon waiting for Dr. Johnson like that idiot did yesterday. We would have no way to tell someone apart if they walked into the building, but if someone walked into that garage, we would be ready to rumble. Another possible thing – we should have told Dr. Johnson this - was for the doctor to park out in the parking lot and avoid the garage all together. The more I thought about it, that was probably what he would do.

Karel was smiling. “You know, I don’t like the idea of us splitting up in unprotected cars. Why can’t we do that yellow page and foam thing with the right windows in one of the cars and sit together?”

He was referring to bulletproofing the car by stuffing yellow pages in the side panels of the car, filling the tires with insulation foam and replacing the glass windows with laminated glass. We had done this a few times while working for the Violas when we needed to quickly bulletproof a car. While the laminated glass is pricey, the other stuff isn’t and this technique will let the car escape a spray of bullets with the passengers safe inside. I remembered one of the cousins in the Viola family making two of us sit in the quickly bulletproofed car while he shot a round of gunfire into the car. That was real fun.

“You know, buddy, I like that idea,” I said, slapping Karel on the back. I figured we wouldn’t need to do this if we got the same inside information from Miami that we got last week for the next crew of guys coming after us. Still, this was good preparation in case we weren’t able to get advance warning next week. And anything was possible.

“I guess we have some shopping to do tomorrow,” Karel said.

“You bet.”

It occurred to me just then that the storage unit was a good place to do the work on one of the cars. We got a double wide unit.

Friday, January 10th
7:30pm
Nick Johnson

“So, what do you make of this drug trial you’re on?” Rod Sullivan asked me.

Rod and his wife Tammy were hosting a dinner party for two other couples: Walt and Marian Reynolds and Michael and Ruth Shepherd. Rod was one of the Urologists in my building and we had lunch together about twice a month. Many of my patients were also being treated by Rod’s practice.

I would have loved to warn Rod right then and there about the chaos that I was about to bring onto our medical building with my crime scene. His practice was going to take a hit with me being gone, and he would be smart to find another internal medicine doctor to move into my space. Except, I couldn’t think of anybody.

“Well we’ll see if Zyptrin is all that it’s cracked up to be,” I said. “I sure hope it is – it would help people a lot.”

Walt walked up to us. “Are you guys talking shop again?”

Mr. Reynolds was a home builder in Northern and Central New Jersey. He built the house we all were standing in that night.

“Well, let’s talk your shop talk, Walt.” Rod replied.

I couldn’t believe I was here tonight because what happened this afternoon was huge. At least for this meeting with Oleg, I had a few seconds to gather my thoughts before seeing him. I knew I now had forced the Czechs to watch me from the parking lot – how was I supposed to know they weren’t already doing so?

For sure, Oleg was going to ask me about this other guy threatening me, so I figured I would beat him to it. If I had waited for Oleg to bring it up, it might have sounded like I was making up the story of me and this guy in the garage two nights ago. Instead, Oleg really took my story to heart. He looked way troubled while I was telling him about my encounter in the garage. Troubled, as in, his eyes got a little bigger and his cheeks tightened.

“You know, Walt, there is a crack in the powder room ceiling – I’m kidding!” Rod slammed Walt in the back. Walt didn’t seem to find this so funny.

I didn’t know the Shepherds, as they moved next door to Rod a month ago from California. Their house was castle-normous, so Michael must have done something lucrative for a job. He looked to be a few years younger me, maybe three not more than five. I didn’t like going to dinner parties with people that I’d never met. It never failed – I always got put next to them during dinner.

The ladies were in the kitchen, and we were standing next to Rod’s bar in his family room off the kitchen. Last month, Rod had a kegerator installed.

Oleg and I probably wouldn’t run into each other again before I disappeared, which, according to my latest plan, was calling for me to disappear the next Thursday evening. Melanie had to leave a little before 5pm that day and Mary was leaving at 5pm sharp since we didn’t have patients scheduled after 4:45. While Melanie never stayed late, Mary worked well past 5pm and usually walked out with me at 5:45, except for times when she had to leave early. This happened about three times a month. Both Mary and Melanie parked in the garage so Oleg probably wouldn’t notice them leaving. I planned to keep to this 5:45 schedule for the first three days of that next week. That way, the Czechs wouldn’t think anything of it when they saw that I was still inside the building at 5:30pm on Thursday.

“So, Walt, is that you’re project out in Mendham?” I asked. I knew that it was; Walt loved to talk about his new home projects, though.

“You are right sir! The first three homes are going up for sale in two months,” Walt replied. “We should have nearly fifteen homes in that area when we are done.”

Michael Shepherd rubbed his chin. “What’s the price range of the homes?”

I knew that Walt didn’t deal with the highest priced homes and that he seemed pretty conservative by most home builder standards.

“\$875,000 to \$1.1 million and all of the lots are sold,” Walt responded. “It’s been a decent year given the economy and all of that. Last week, I sold the last lot to a couple that used to work for Enron. They told me that they sold out a year before Enron imploded.”

“Lucky for them,” Michael said.

I had a plan to deal with Oleg in the parking lot next Thursday night, and I was pretty sure all of my ducks were in a row for my travel plans plus the things I would need at the New Mexico resort. William knew to pick me up on Marsh Street at 5:40pm - I had already bought the bus ticket in cash. I planned on carrying \$1,000 in cash on me for the trip just in case I ran into a pinch.

“What type of physician are you Nick?” Michael Shepherd asked me.

“I’m an internal medicine doc,” I replied with a smile.

“And a well loved one at that,” Rod inserted. “All of my referrals from his office rave about Dr. Nick.”

I had totally forgotten about tonight until I got home and Susan told me to get freshened up. What I really wanted to do was to sit in my home office...think more about what Oleg had said to me three hours earlier. It was hard to do that while trying to keep up with a social

conversation at a dinner party. It was too bad, because I usually enjoyed these kind of events, minus the ‘not knowing some of the people’ part.

Susan was smiling away in the kitchen, which was good to see since her afternoon was a despairing one. Susan received a new tint for her hair this morning, only to hear negative comments from Joan. I didn’t know why she stopped by Joan’s house after the hair cut – maybe she was looking for an ounce of approval after all these years – and I could tell that she spent much of the afternoon crying over the comments. I hated when Joan pulled that crap. It was always a mystery to me how mothers can be so cruel to their daughters while treating their sons as saints.

Susan was having a great week until this moment with her mother, with Hallmark calling on Monday wanting to discuss a consulting job. When Hunter’s Mill was bought out by Hallmark, Susan lasted less than two months before leaving with the buy-out. Her corporate boss for those two months, Meg Sonoma, was in Kansas City and was now in charge of all marketing for Hallmark. She wanted Susan to help out with brand strategy or something like that. Susan wouldn’t have to travel and the pay they talked about looked solid, so my wife was ecstatic to say the least.

Susan had been with Hunter’s Mill for 24 years before Hallmark bought the company in 2001. After this, Hallmark was looking to consolidate corporate positions and Susan was offered a buyout package equal to 18 months of salary. Susan saw the writing on the wall. She realized that if she didn’t take the offer, she wouldn’t last another year with Hallmark running the show. After a few weeks of thinking things over, Susan and I agreed that she would take the buyout package.

“I guess I didn’t realize how much I wanted to get back into the game,” Susan told me that night. “Ever since you got on to the Zyptorin committee, I wanted some of that success for

me. For all of the doors that now seem to be opening for your career, those same doors seemed shut for me.”

Susan was surprised that Meg wanted her help because Meg didn't want anything to do with her when the Hunter's Mill deal closed. Susan wasn't included in important meetings and her ideas for how Hallmark could help Hunter's Mill were dismissed by Meg without explanation. Meg did call Susan the day before Susan was to leave with the buyout to wish her well. Still, Susan left the company thinking her days with Meg Sonoma were over for good.

All I could tell my wife was to go for it, she deserved it. But I really wanted to tell her that now was probably not the best time to go back to work given that I was going to do my best, in less than a week, to make her believe that I was dead.

“Maybe we can now share your office,” Susan said with a smile and a soft punch to the stomach.

I didn't respond to that one.

For the past year, Susan had seemed content with a simpler life of upping the care of Stanley and helping out at the St. John center. Our marriage was in the best shape in years. I was afraid this damn Zyptorin trial was the gift that kept on giving and had gotten Susan to be envious of my success. The irony here was killing me.

Maybe I was just being too cynically stupid, though. Susan was a very smart and effective business woman and her talents certainly were not being used to the fullest level since leaving Hallmark.

Tom was spending the evening at home - Charlie would surely make his way over. They were great kids.

“Hey Nick, what is Norman Watson like?” Rod asked. “I hear he's running your Zyptorin committee.”

I had no idea how Rod found that out since Urologists don't spend much time talking with Cardiologists, even the ones that share a building like they did at my work. He probably read it in one of the medical periodicals.

"He's old, that's for sure," I replied. "But he's a good leader that is determined to give Balentor a fair shake."

I liked Norm, but I was not going to miss this damn trial. I'd been to three meetings and the last two had been pure hell; The games Bob Linder played – like telling Oleg he had left the committee – probably got him killed, so I was stuck going to these meetings. Stuck doing a lot of things I didn't want to do.

I really didn't believe anybody on the committee was behind this Czech problem of mine because it didn't make any sense for one of them to force me to reveal trial information that would be known by all committee members. They could just supply Fred with the trial result and press release date themselves. What would they need me for?

"Boys, we have plenty of appetizers in here!" Tammy Sullivan shouted over to us.

Tammy made these Swedish meat balls with a sweet barbecue sauce – I could eat the whole tray. By keeping the appetizers in the kitchen, Tammy hoped to draw the men into the same room as the women, and it was pretty effective, though we all knew what she was doing. Tammy and Rod usually threw a dinner party twice a year.

"Right, Tom might be able to do some consulting for Distal Pharmaceutical," Susan was telling Tammy as we walked into the kitchen.

I didn't have the foggiest clue where she got idea, but that was way off base. I thought about correcting Susan except that would have been a bad idea since getting her pissed at me before dinner would certainly lead to a feud later. I never told her about David's arrangement

with Distal. Maybe she heard something at our holiday party a few weeks ago. I doubted heavily that any pharmaceutical company had a consulting deal with an Internal Medicine physician.

“Well, we’ll see...this whole thing could be one and done for me,” I told the group.

“Michael, Ruth is telling us about your golf career,” Susan said loudly. She poured some more wine in her glass. I had every reason to get ripped tonight but someone needed to drive home. This was nothing new for us. Susan could drink me under table any time of day.

He turned beat red and started to rub the back of his neck. “Yeah, my bad back forced me off the tour two years ago.”

As I was hearing this, I was wondering what tour he was talking about. But I didn’t want to sound like an idiot, so I would have to wait to see if that part of the information came up some other way.

“Yeah, it took me a few weeks to figure out just who my new neighbor was,” Rod told everybody. “You won the Phoenix Open nine years ago and had many top five finishes.”

Michael couldn’t have looked any more uncomfortable and took a long sip from his beer bottle. I felt bad for the guy. It sounded like he was on the PGA tour but, honest, I had never heard of Michael Shepherd. I followed golf a little, but not enough to know more than twenty or thirty players each year. I only watched the majors on television.

Ruth stepped in. “That’s enough - Michael has always hated the attention that being a super golfer brought him.”

Friday, January 10th
11:20pm
Nick Johnson

The phone was ringing as we stepped out onto the garage floor. The dinner party lasted about 45 minutes too long, though we did have a good time. Once he loosened up with a few drinks, Michael told PGA golf stories that I could never have imagined on my own. Apparently, Michael knew a home builder in Florida that he could hook Walt up with.

“Who the hell is calling us know?” I said to Susan. “Did you leave your purse at the Sullivans?”

Susan held her purse up. “Nope, have it right here.”

I raced into the house to pick the phone up before it rolled to voice mail.

“Hello?” I said not sure if the voice mail had picked up.

“Nick, it’s Larry Higgins. Your son Tom is over at our house and needs a ride home. He can explain the mess that he has made.”

“Uh, okay,” I responded. “I’ll be there in five minutes.” I hung the phone up and spun to Susan who was now standing in our kitchen with a worried look on her face.

“Is Tom okay?” she whispered loudly.

“I think so,” I said. “It sounds like Tom got into a bit of trouble at Larry Higgins’ house.”

“What?” Susan screamed.

I started walking back toward the garage. “I don’t think you should come,” I told my wife. “Let me get the facts and we’ll all deal with this when we get home.”

Susan rushed up behind me. “Well, you apologize like there is no tomorrow to Larry and Gail.”

I really thought Susan would put up more of a fight to go along with me, so it must have been the alcohol and the hour of the night talking for her.

All the different ways to make a mess at a party ran through my mind. Tom must have gotten way drunk – Larry’s voice sounded very pissed off - so it had to be big. Maybe he threw up in their living room or something. Maybe he broke some china. Too many maybe’s. That got my heart racing to unhealthy levels for that hour.

“Oh man.” I rubbed my forehead and drove the car out of our neighborhood. The Higgins lived about a ¼ mile to the north on Midland Drive. It was starting to snow lightly with the wind picking up quite a bit. I had always heard that most every high school student got into some kind of alcohol related trouble at least once. Was this Tom’s time? I didn’t know Larry that well, but I had a feeling that I was about to get to know him a whole lot more. I just hoped he was somewhat rational and calm.

I pulled up to the Higgins house... everything seemed quiet - no police or ambulance – which was a good sign. I re-entered the freezing night after parking my car as close to the front walk as possible. About halfway up the walk, Larry came storming out of the house with Tom close behind and looking at the ground the whole way. There was a 25 mile per hour wind racing up the front yard and smacking us as we met.

“My wife is too hysterical,” Larry shouted over the wind. “That’s why we’re out here.”

“Okay...”

Larry glanced over at Tom. “I don’t know how to say this gently, but your son somehow managed to throw up all over our king sized bed in our master bedroom.”

I let this sink in for a few seconds, giving a Larry a chance to mention any other problems Tom had caused that night. Nothing more came out of his mouth.

“Well, we will replace any damaged items and I’ll have to find a good punishment for my son.” What else could I say because I just told him that I was going to buy a new mattress and linens as well as whatever else they needed?

The front door flew open and Gail poked her head outside. She was still crying. The spit wrapped words flying out of her mouth were illuminated by the floodlights shining on this frazzled woman. “Nick, we’ll have to spend the night at the Headquarters Plaza hotel and get a cleaning crew in here tomorrow morning! This is unbelievable...did Larry tell you that I’m sick?”

Gail quickly pulled her head back inside the house, clearly not interested in an apology from me just then.

Standing there shivering, I decided to get a little bold. “Larry, let me ask you...where were you and Gail tonight?”

Larry looked at me like I had no right to be asking snooping questions. Maybe I didn’t but I still didn’t understand how this party happened. And, this close to midnight in the howling wind, I needed to put all of this into context.

“Gail and I were in the city for some Broadway shows, but Gail fell ill and we decided to cancel the trip and return home this evening.”

I glanced over at Tom who was still staring at the ground.

“And you two returned home to find a party in your house.”

“That’s right.” Larry sniffed loudly. He was trying mightily to not show that he was freezing his ass off. I had no so much ambition.

“Tom, get into the car,” I said. “Larry, I will contact you tomorrow and pay for all damages and hassles like your hotel and cleaning service costs.”

“Alright, that sounds fair.” Larry turned and started walking back to the house. He quickly pulled his jacket tighter.

I got back into the car where Tom was humming a song and apparently still quite drunk. Susan and I weren't stupid - we knew there would be parties, but not like this.

"Dad, I'm really sorry," Tom pleaded. "I don't know how this happened."

"How much have you had to drink?" I realized that he likely threw most of it up onto Larry and Gail's bed. How he ended up there I didn't think I'd ever know.

"I don't know, several beers and a couple shots."

Susan rarely raised her voice at Tom but tonight was going to be different, possibly. I'd always been the yeller in the house and, if Tom were more sober, yelling might have been more effective.

I figured I had to give him some bombastic wisdom right then, so I launched into.

"Well, I hope you got that out of your system," I said to start. "Look, I remember getting drunk with my high school buddies, so I could sort of relate. But I never caused the kind of problem that you caused tonight, which is forcing Jenny's parents to buy a new mattress for their bed, actually, we're paying for it, which means you will be paying us in due time."

As I was saying these words, I knew they were just that, words. I was a fraud at that moment because I wouldn't be around to see any of his punishment through. There shouldn't have been any self hate over my predicament, yet it was horribly difficult not to at this moment. Tom needed solid parents right then, and he had six days of that left.

Tom and I didn't say anything else for the rest of the short ride, giving my mind a chance to race. It was no longer snowing. I'd have to bring my checkbook over to Larry's the next day, though it wasn't about the money. I just couldn't believe Tom had pulled this stunt less than a week before my crime scene act.

I rubbed my eyes and wondered how I was going to get any sleep that night. Maybe Susan had gone to bed.

As we pulled into the garage, Susan opened the door. "I called Gail and asked her what happened. How could you Tom?"

Tom slinked out of the car, no longer humming a song.

"Hon, let's all go to bed and talk about in the morning," I said to Susan. "Tom could use some sobering up."

Susan kinked her head to the side. "Are you sure?"

Nodding my head, I firmed my lips in affirmation. Susan had her night gown on and exhaustion was quickly embracing me.

When we all got back into the house, Tom scampered up the stairs to his room without saying a word. Susan and I embraced in the front foyer.

"We'll come up with the right punishment," I informed my wife.

Susan gave me peck on the cheek. "I know, but this is so embarrassing...I mean, I didn't know Gail all that well, but she is pretty connected."

We kissed for a few seconds. I could taste the white wine.

I looked deeply into Susan's eyes, and saw that she was not exactly sober, either.

"Hmmm...well, we're going to make it right the best we can, okay?"

"I sure hope that you're right." Susan put her head on my right shoulder.

With that, we strolled upstairs and made love. I wondered if that was going to be our last time for a long while.

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Saturday, January 11th
7:15am
Nick Johnson

“Good morning, sunshine,” I said firmly to my son, while raising the shades as loud as I could. His room had smelled better.

Tom moaned deeply and pulled the pillow over his head.

“Up, Up, Up!” I shouted. “No time for hangovers.” I yanked the sheets off from the bed.

Tom and I would be at the Higgins house by 8am sharp. He had time for a quick shower and breakfast.

“Oh, come on!” Tom screamed.

I leaned into him, whispering angrily. “You get your butt out of bed right now, young man. You made a big problem for the Higgins family and now that is your problem. We start correcting everything in 45 minutes.”

I had no idea if Larry and Gail would be at the house at 8am, but Tom needed a rude awakening nonetheless. Susan planned on calling them at 7:50.

Tom slowly climbed out of bed and headed to the bathroom while I went back downstairs, already showered and shaved for the day. Susan was still asleep. She had missed her early morning run for the first time in months.

I started mixing some pancake batter when Tom’s shower started running upstairs - It was 7:20 - and I hoped Susan arose to make that 7:50 call to the Higgins house. The overnight hotel plan for Gail and Larry was a tad extreme because they had a six bedroom house with just two kids. I thought the oldest child was in college, too, so they had ample space to work with. Still, I was not going to argue with them if they wanted to pay for a \$300 hotel stay at the friggin’ Headquarters Plaza. It occurred to me that I should offer to pay for that as well.

The shower upstairs stopped, meaning Tom would be downstairs in five minutes. I poured the pancake batter onto the griddle. Gail and Larry would, of course, insist on picking out their own mattress and linens, so I simply planned on cutting a sizeable check. The wind was really howling outside which sucked because we had heard that it was supposed to be a high of 18 degrees that day.

Tom walked into the kitchen - his wet hair was frozen bound as soon as we stepped into the garage - and he just stared at the pancakes.

“I’m not hungry,” Tom mumbled. “Where’s our Aspirin?”

I pointed to the cabinet above the microwave where we kept band aids, Chapstick, and various pain relievers on a shelf up there. I realized that I had too many pancakes on the griddle – oh well. Zeke used to be handy for that.

Tom opened the Aspirin bottle and took out two tablets. He poured a glass of water before sitting at the kitchen table.

“Hangovers are hell, huh,” I told my son.

I was never much of a problem for Mom and Dad. Once I got into high school, they travelled about one weekend a month to various destinations. I was left to fend for myself in our enormous house and it wasn’t long before I threw my first party, then my second, my third....though, no one damaged the house or threw up in places other than the toilet. Someone did throw up in the sink once but I yelled loud enough that my friends got the message. I believed my parents knew about the parties from our neighbors yet they never said anything. If Mom’s precious china case was destroyed or even far less damage to the house had happened, my parents would have stepped in mightily. But I cleaned up obsessively and my mother appreciated coming home to a house cleaner than the one she left two days prior.

Susan emerged from the hallway. “Good. You two are up and ready to go.”

“Tom, we are heading over to the Higgins house in 15 minutes and you are going to apologize to them,” I said sternly. “Then you are going to offer your services for chores at Mr. Higgins’ discretion for the next six months.”

Tom’s jaw dropped. “You’re kidding, right? There were 40 kids in that house last night...”

“No one else barfed in the master bedroom,” Susan inserted coolly.

My son’s head dropped. “I think I’m gonna hurl right now.” Tom took a deep breath and walked into the family room.

“Gail, oh good, you’re home,” Susan said on the phone. “Can Tom and Nick swing by in ten minutes? Good, I’ll tell them.”

I grabbed my checkbook. “What does a quality king sized mattress cost?” I asked Susan. She shrugged her shoulders.

“They should be able to find one for under \$1,000, I would imagine.” Susan responded. “Linens will be an extra \$500 or so if they don’t need a new bedspread. That would be more.”

We didn’t expect Tom to assess whether the Higgins were going to replace the bed spread. What a pain! Tom got up from the kitchen table.

“I’ll meet you in the car,” he said. It would have been so cool to be inside that boy’s mind at that moment. Just how sorry was he? I’d settle for really embarrassed. I grabbed my coat and headed out to the garage.

I found the fanny pack that I planned on wearing on the bus. With Melanie leaving at 5pm, that meant a change, around 5:05, from my work clothes and into my bus clothes. The plan was to throw my work clothes in a plastic bag and leave the bag with William. I thought about

placing my trip cash and my old credit cards in my socks in case I got mugged on the bus, but that was a little extreme. Instead, my latest idea was to leave my wallet in my desk. If something were to happen to me on the trip, it would be bad to have my wallet found out west somewhere. That would certainly raise questions. Also, if I was surprised by an intruder in my office, my coat wouldn't be on me and I wouldn't be carrying my wallet in my back pocket. The coat had to stay in the office with the wallet. Along with the change of clothes, I had to bring an extra coat and a pair of shoes to the office on Thursday, but hadn't figured out yet how to bring all of those things to the office without the girls noticing. Oleg wouldn't be able to see me inside the parking garage – I had studied the optimal position in the garage where no one from the lot could see me - so there was no worry about that. Bottom Line: I needed to make everything about that coming Thursday look as normal as possible. Just another day as Dr. Nick Johnson.

A final run-through was scheduled with William on Tuesday night. He was going to need reminding to keep his mouth quiet, no matter how tempting to tell anyone in my family the real story. Not that he knew any of them, but crazier things had happened. If Susan or anybody in the family got wind of the truth, the whole town would know within a week. Given how plugged in Oleg's criminal network was, he would probably have learned of my whereabouts in the first two days. The real paranoid part of me was telling me that Oleg had people on my bus heading west. But I knew that was highly unlikely.

Tom didn't say anything on the way over to the Higgins house. We pulled up to the home, with me half expecting to see carpet, upholstery, and god knows what else cleaning services running in and out of the front door. Nobody or a vehicle was in sight, though. Larry answered the door.

“Hello guys, come in, please,” Larry said to us. We walked in to find the Higgins kids sitting at the kitchen table, looking completely miserable. Gail was standing at the far end of table, by the door to the two story deck with her arms angrily folded.

“It would appear that there is much blame to go around, starting with my own children,” Larry started. He glared over at the kitchen table.

I felt a need to step in, warranted or not. “Larry and Gail, I will replace all damaged items. I think Tom has something to say.”

Tom looked at me with his mouth open in shock, then gathered his composure.

“Um...I am really sorry for what happened and the problems I have caused for you.”

Larry smiled crookedly like he had gas. “Guys, we appreciate that. Can we split the cost, though? My kids need to contribute to some of it.”

An obnoxious exhale bursted from Jenny Higgins. Gail walked over to her and whispered something in her daughter’s ear.

“And Tom will be available for the next six months for any chores you want around your home,” I inserted.

Larry laughed. “Oh, that won’t be necessary. My own kids can be my slaves through next summer.” He turned to Troy. “Troy, it’s a good thing you go to school so nearby.”

We all agreed that Gail would call Susan with the replacement cost tally by the end of that day, though part of me knew that Tom was getting off far too easy. The other half reminded of the hell that I was about to put him through.

Saturday, January 11th
7:15am
Oleg Yashkov

“I hear you’re looking for me,” the voice said calmly over the phone. It belonged to Mihail.

“Yeah, we have,” I said with a clenched fist. “Somebody else has been talking to our doctor friend about doing the same kind of deal.”

“We’re talking about Dr. Nick Johnson, right?”

I swallowed hard, as now I knew he was a threat, how else would he know the doctor’s name?

“How do you know his name?” I asked trying to keep my voice calm.

“What, am I stupid?” he asked. “After the Philly mess, I told Fred that I wanted in on whatever the hell you guys were working and he agreed. I think maybe he thought I would run to the cops, who knows...”

Funny how I didn’t hear that from Fred.

“You think what happened to those people in Philly can’t happen to you?” I screamed into the cell phone.

“What are you talking about, you crazy asshole?” Mihail asked with a mocking tone.

“We are on the same team here... wait a minute, you think that I’m involved with this other group talking to Dr. Johnson?”

“You’re a dead man,” I told him. “If I see you anywhere around the doctor again, I will take you out.”

“Listen, for the last time, we are on the same side,” Mihail yelled. “Talk to Fred.”

I hung up the phone and shook Karel who was sleeping in the front seat.

Thursday, January 16th
7:45am
Nick Johnson

“Hey, Melanie, hope you’re having a good morning,” I said as cheerfully as possible while walking through my practice’s main door.

Melanie put down a stack of papers. “Hello, Nick. It’s a full house today,” she warned. “Folks are not happy we’re closing a little early - Oh! I forgot! Greg Smith spent the night in the ER and they think it’s the gallbladder.”

I started walking down the hallway. “Alright, have Julie call Radiology and set up an ultrasound this morning.”

If Melanie noticed the duffel bag I was carrying she didn’t say anything. It was a little trickier sneaking it out of the house 15 minutes ago because Susan was walking around the first floor talking on her cell phone. That meant sneaking it downstairs when she was in the kitchen and out into the garage when she was in the living room. I went back into the house and waited for Susan to end the call; it sounded like lunch plans with one of Susan’s girlfriends.

Tom was in the kitchen hovered over a bowl of Cheerios. I grabbed Susan’s hands, led her over to Tom, hugged the two of them and told them I loved them. That was the best I could do. I tried not to think during that moment that this was the last time I was going to see them for two years – I might have melted down right there in the kitchen – so I made it quick. I thought about doing our ‘Go Johnson’ jig, but Tom would have revolted, having barely talked to us all week. He did ask me a Biology question last evening, as he had done throughout this year, and I took the opportunity to say that his mother and I would love him no matter what. Teenagers have a hard time believing that at times and this was no exception for Tom. He basically shut down after listening to my Biology answer. Still, I thought he had a quiz today.

Susan and I had been walking inside the Morris County Mall the past few nights. She was going to take that consulting deal with Hallmark for a host of reasons, but Susan brought up one that I hadn't considered: Joan was driving Susan crazy and she felt like she needed something else to keep her focus. That made sense.

Two years was a long time and I kept wondering if maybe a shorter timeframe made more sense. A dream haunted me a few weeks back where I returned to Skyline Drive after two years only to find Susan re-married. I let that thought rattle around in my head for a day or two before I concluded that this was pretty unlikely. I couldn't see her doing that until Tom was settled in college and he would still be in high school in two years.

There was the chance that the health of my mother or Joan deteriorated over the next two years, yet they appeared to be reasonably healthy today. This whole plan of mine could be a house of cards, built on incorrect assumptions of the risks, but Oleg had a way of forcing the issue.

I didn't see Oleg all weekend – I could count on one hand the number of times he had been visible on Skyline Drive - and I was starting to worry that I hadn't sold the idea of a competitor to Oleg as well as previously thought. On Monday morning, however, there he and his Czech friend were, just up the street and ready to follow me to work. Maybe they didn't think that this new guy would bother me at home. Except I had already told Oleg that some strange guy had talked with Susan at our front door, so that kind of thinking didn't add up.

The Czechs had visibly followed me to work all week, in the same front row spot closest to the parking ramp. I made sure to locate them in the lot as I walked through the garage each morning. On Thursday, they were right on schedule.

Each day this week, Oleg and his partner left the parking lot to go somewhere at 11:50am and returned at 12:25pm. I presumed this was their lunch break. Whatever the reason, they were consistently gone during this time and Thursday was no different.

This was great to see. There were two inches of snow on the ground. William warned me about snow tracks because he told me that one set of tracks in the snow, coming out of the staff entrance and heading to the office complex on Marsh Street, would look suspicious. Especially given the crime scene that I was looking to create.

But how was I going to create two or more tracks in the snow with Oleg watching the building? If I left through the staff door in broad daylight, there was a decent chance of him spotting me and ruining everything. The lunch schedule for the Czechs was great news, indeed.

The weather forecast called for a high of low 20s and dry all week, meaning the snow on the ground was six days old by Thursday. Mary and Melanie always went out to lunch on Thursdays and Fridays, usually out of the office from 12-1pm.

At 12pm Thursday, I hurried into a snow suit and boots three sizes too big, figuring I had twenty five minutes to run to the office complex on Marsh Street and get back to the office. I wanted to simulate somebody 15 pounds heavier, so I put a bowling ball in a back pack. All morning, I had stayed focused enough to talk with Greg Smith, for whom we were able to schedule surgery. Now, it was go time.

The snow was crunchy and challenging to run through. I planned on falling to the ground to the side of my tracks, to simulate a body being carried and dropped. With the back pack held against my stomach, I did a roll in the snow for a few seconds. For a brief moment, I was a carefree kid again. I got back up, put the back pack back on and continued running, realizing at that moment that I was not in as great shape as previously thought.

The return trip to my building was via a side street, so no snow tracks to be concerned with. I decided to use the back pedestrian entrance to the garage and walk through the garage to get inside my building. No sign of the Czechs from the garage at 12:22pm but they were back in their spot by the time I had changed at 12:30.

I didn't want any tough cases that afternoon, correctly predicting that my focus would be having a horrible time. By 3pm, I was operating on autopilot. My last two appointments were annual physicals of two patients in their late 30s. My day was over by 4:25pm.

A goodbye needed to be said to the girls. Melanie was cleaning up her work station.

"Hey, good job today!" I patted Melanie on the back. She gave me a funny look as if I never told her that, which was so not true. Mary was upfront at the patient check in counter - if I told her good job and patted her on the back, she would certainly know something was up. I walked up to Mary's work area.

"Got evening plans?" I smiled forcibly.

"Oh, nothing special...it's pasta night at our house," Mary said. "You got plans?"

"Nope - I got some things to take care of here, but I should be able to get out of here by 5:45." Slapping the counter, I walked back down the hallway, thinking there was everything needed for tonight in my office: two vials of my blood, anesthetic, hand-wipes for my hands and the stitching tray. The two vials of my blood would need to be carried out with me. I leaned out the office door and told Mary to leave when Melanie did.

Who would find the crime scene first? Susan would probably call the police after a few hours of frantically trying to reach me, yet I didn't know what the police would say. She could also call Mary and they could come down here to the office. Or Susan could just go to bed only to wake up in a panic tomorrow morning. If the police or one of the girls found the crime scene that was fine, anybody but Susan.

Sitting in my cloth desk chair, I gazed out the window, amazed for a second just how clear the sky was. The girls met up at Mary's area. They started laughing, followed by the noise of the front door opening and closing. They were gone. I pulled out the anesthetic kit from a clear plastic bag that I had brought, took my slacks off and injected the anesthetic into my upper left thigh. It took about three minutes to kick in. It was 4:57pm. I had practiced with the hand wipes and they did an okay job of getting the blood off my hands. Still, one could still see the stain if they looked closely, but I didn't expect to be holding out my right palm any time soon.

I brought the blood vials over to my desk, sprang up to the exam table, and got the knife ready. I held my left leg out to start digging in the knife. Two tiny flesh pieces meant for forensics to catch were pulled out; they stayed on the knife which was now lying on the stitching tray. I stitched in three stitches just to be sure. In two hours, the soreness would be incredible, but I planned to be on the bus by then. I gave the wound a few minutes to settle down. Still, it was not a really deep wound, so the blood was manageable. I checked the white paper that I had been sitting on, and there was no sign of blood; it got tossed anyway. One vial of the blood should have been enough for the job. The clock read 5:17pm - it would be pretty dark outside in another twenty minutes.

I needed to make sure no blood was spilled on the carpet while putting the blood on my right hand, because a huge blood spot would look suspicious, according to William. An eye dropper worked great to spread out the blood smoothly on my hand. And I only needed to refresh my right hand with blood once.

The cell phone that Susan knew of was on my desk. I dialed the numbers 9 and 1, then dropped the phone on the floor with its face wide open, using the heel of my shoe to smash the phone. The thinking here was that I attempted to dial 9-1-1 while being attacked, but couldn't execute the task.

I moved over the desk chair with my left hand and squeezed the eye dropper to place the blood on my right hand. This hand grabbed the top of the desk chair, tipping it over onto the floor. I took the knife off the stitching tray and placed the flesh pieces on the top of the desk chair in the finger part of the handprint.

The first blood vial was a little under half filled. After scooching on my butt over to the door and refilling my right hand with the blood, I left a handprint on the carpet in my office, on the office door frame and on one of the hallway walls out by the staff door. I then stood up, without my right hand touching anything else, and walked back into my office. I pulled out a few hand-wipes from the pack that was going into the clear plastic bag along with the knife, blood vials, and eye dropper. My right hand was wiped and the stitching tray was placed back inside the medical cabinet. Nothing else was visible, yet I took a few moments anyway to scan the office. The clock read 5:31pm. I continued wiping my right hand.

My travel outfit was lying on my desk, so I grabbed it, moved into the hallway and changed clothes. My wallet was sitting inside my work coat pocket with \$57 in cash plus all credit cards inside. I pulled the bus ticket from the duffel bag and put it in the front pocket of my jeans. \$500 was the figure settled on for travel emergency cash, with most of this ending up being tucked inside my right foot tube sock. It felt strange but safe down there. The clock: 5:40pm.

The nice thing about a prepaid cell phone was the cash payment option, requiring no ID which was hugely important for my next move. I pulled this prepaid phone from my front pocket and dialed 9-1-1, getting my best lady voice ready.

“9-1-1 what’s the emergency?” the operator asked.

“I’m hearing gun shots from the parking lot of Colonial Medical Center,” I yelled into the phone. “Please hurry!”

“There are six officers at that location right now, maam,” the operator said coolly.

I ran to the lobby window to look outside. Three police cars had surrounded Oleg's car and I could see Oleg's partner being led away in handcuffs. No sign of Oleg, though.

Instead of trying to put on my really poor lady voice one last time, I simply hung up the phone and kept staring outside. Who had called the police because the last time I checked, it wasn't a crime to sit in a parked car? No one had any proof against the crimes Oleg and his gang committed but me, and I thought it to be rather fitting that I was sitting in the complete darkness of my lobby. As I wondered if I should go talk with one of the police officers, a sharp rap on the lobby door scared the crap out of me. It was one of the officers.

"Hello, officer," I said after opening the lobby door. "What's going on outside?"

The officer took a step inside the lobby. "Are you Nick Johnson?"

"Yes, how do you know my name?"

"I have been instructed to inform you that Peter Hansen and his family were placed in the Federal Witness Protection program this afternoon," the officer announced. "Three hours ago, Julio Viola was arrested along with several members of his organization, and this is the last roundup."

My head was spinning madly as I tried to soak all of this in. I was just a little cog in this vast criminal network, so little that it took the Feds several hours after Julio's arrest to deal with my small problem, namely Oleg and his partner. I didn't know what Peter had on the cartel, but it had to be good, damn good.

"So you arrested the two guys in the parking lot?" I asked.

The officer shot me a puzzled look. "No, just the one that was in the car."

Thursday, January 16th
8:00 p.m.
Peter Hansen

I started planning the federal protection idea the day after Darryl was killed back in the middle of November. Between the two taped phone conversations with Julio and two traceable money laundering efforts, the feds thought that we had enough to put Julio away on U.S. soil.

Martin had me do a total of six money laundering wire transactions while under the cartel's control - the last two were phoned in by Martin. I had a complete record of the account numbers, each wire transaction, and, most importantly, the point of origin for the money. With the feds documenting these transactions, they found proof of the cartel's laundering efforts. My testimony was to focus on how Julio and Martin took over my firm plus information on the Linder murders and the Nick Johnson shakedown.

Upon discovery in the third week of November that Martin's cell phone had been disconnected, I freaked. Two days later, my first meeting with the feds took place. Jorge hadn't moved into the PLH office yet but it was only a matter of time. Somebody else was laundering money for the cartel before Julio came to me, and I never had the nerve to ask Martin what happened to them. It couldn't have been pretty, though. I knew way too much about Julio's money, so my family didn't have a chance.

In early December, I decided to tell Claire everything. She didn't get too upset until I told her about the witness protection program. We were sitting in our family room - the kids were at separate sleepovers. There was no way I was going to drop the bomb on her at a restaurant and risk a mighty scene in public. Claire was ordinarily a very easy going person but this was no ordinary problem. And it was too much to ask anyone to take in while sitting in a quiet, public setting like a restaurant. That said, by now, I was convinced that our home was bugged, so we spent most of the night whispering in each other's ears.

I broke up the information and made sure to tell my wife each piece slowly so as not to lose her. I made sure to highlight Detective Murphy's suspicious visit to my office less than two weeks ago. Our world was crashing mightily down on us and we had to act aggressively to survive. In my mind, I pictured Claire getting so freaked out about Julio, that the idea of federal protection would practically come from her. It didn't quite work out that way.

"The feds can just arrest Julio when he meets with you in January," Claire said. "Then you won't have to deal with him again and none of your clients will ever know the difference."

Julio wanted to have lunch at Todd's steakhouse on January 16th and firmly requested my family's attendance.

"The Viola cartel is more than Julio, so they will come after us right away," I told my wife. "Believe that, honey. These are the same people who killed Darryl over the very weak potential of him stirring up trouble for me, and I can only imagine what they have done with poor Martin."

Claire ran her fingers through her hair before bursting into tears. "We have attachments here that we cannot walk away from...this will destroy us...the kids!"

I pulled Claire's fingers from her hair and held them out in front of her. "That may be so, but I'd so much prefer that we manage the destruction than the Viola drug cartel."

For the remainder of the night, I kept pounding away at the idea that testifying against Julio and his cartel was near suicide. Our only hope was to accept witness protection. There was no rosy exit from this problem - either I or Julio was going to prison for a long time - but we'd all be dead within 24 hours of my testimony in the courtroom if we didn't let the feds protect us.

Detective Murphy's visit with me offered a clear affirmation of my decision to open up to the feds. Jonathan and his accusations weren't going away, plus I knew that it wouldn't take too long for Julio to learn of this accelerating problem. A big part of me expected Jonathan to be

taken out already, despite the convincing heat that would rain down on PHL from all authorities if, suddenly, a third person tied to my firm died tragically.

The feds spent weeks planning the logistics surrounding the arrest of Julio. Even though I had met Julio in the past, it was well over a year ago and it was a struggle to give the feds a solid enough description of his physical features. They were certain that the lunch would be moved to an unknown location because Julio had to know that he was a wanted man. He would not let the whole world know where he was dining. The big problem with this was his wish to meet Claire and the kids. The feds thought about replacing Claire with a female agent in case we were driven to a new lunch location, but I told them that Julio must have gotten a picture of my whole family from the Cartel's watching my house for several months.

What we all did know was that somebody from the cartel was going to meet us at Todd's, though whether Julio would be in the car that person arrived in was anybody's guess. So, the feds couldn't just take the vehicle that pulled up to the restaurant.

In the end, it was decided that every member of my family would be outfitted with a tiny GPS locator in the likely event that the lunch location was moved from Todd's. Even so, I insisted that Claire and the kids wait inside the restaurant – why involve them if I didn't need to – because, let's say I met the cartel car outside of Todd's and I got told to get in the car. If my whole family was together, inside or outside of the restaurant, we all got into that car.

At 11:40 this morning, I waited outside of the restaurant, fully expecting a black town car to pull up and whisk me away to a new location. I planned on telling Julio that my family was in the restaurant and I had no idea we were not eating at Todd's. At least ten fed vehicles were in the area, waiting to move to wherever the GPS took them.

“Peter, why are you standing out here?” the voice asked me from behind.

I turned to find Julio holding open the door to the restaurant.

“Julio, what a surprise,” I said, knowing that the feds were listening to every word. “Have you met my family?”

He lowered his eyebrow. “Of course, how else would I know you were waiting for...”

The bullets whisked by my left ear and struck Julio right there in the doorway to Todd’s. I hit the ground while, at the same time, spinning around to the street to see who was shooting. A red sports car sped away from the scene, but not before me spotting the shooter in the front passenger seat. It was Martin.

Julio’s security guards rushed out to the scene, firing shots at the sports car far down the street. Moments later, an army of feds screamed in. After a short gun battle with Julio’s security team, the feds were able to secure the area and send proper medical attention to Julio.

He was lucky. Struck three times, twice in the right shoulder and once in the right ear, Julio was going to live but the feds had him in custody.

Claire and the kids were crying when I walked back into Todd’s. The team of witness protection personnel surrounding them were making it perfectly clear that the Hansen family would soon be no longer. We had talked about it endlessly, drafted every kind of scenario for how all of this was going to shake out. Yet the moment was here and no preparation could check the flood of emotions. We all leaned in for a family hug, at which point I began to cry. The past eighteen months were filled with countless ‘if only’s’ – if only I hadn’t gone on that damn party boat while in Miami, if only I hadn’t bet Julio’s money on that heart drug, if only Nick Johnson had kept clear of the Zyptorin study, if only Darryl hadn’t talked with Brad Dellan, if only Brad didn’t have new money to send my way – but it was what it was. My family desperately needed me to stay focused on the future, no matter crappy things looked.

At least we had a future.