

DEALIN' WITH
THE
DEAD...

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE BY
MARK CROCKETT
AUTHOR OF TURKEY STUFFER



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A Novel

**by
Mark Crockett**

CHAPTER 1

His thin veneer of yoga-induced calm was cracked by a thunderous rumble as scores of heavy metal doors slid open on their tracks. Twenty-eight-year-old Monticello Turquoise—prisoner number 63815-28—sat in the lotus position on the top bunk of his two-man cell. Further wounding his calm was the loud clank as the doors locked open, followed by three shrill rings over the section's public address system. Sighing, he unfolded his legs and dropped lightly to the floor. Trailing his obese, wheezing cellmate, Turquoise stepped outside the cell to his usual position to the right of the rusty bars for the first count of the day. Neither man moved for the next hour, a common occurrence when there had been “a problem.”

One of the other long-time prisoners, Keith Jackson, stumbled out of his one-man cell with visible signs that he'd been beaten to a bloody mess. The guards stopped everything until Keith, his head wrapped in a blood-soaked T-shirt, could be escorted off the tier to the prison infirmary. Finishing the count with all three hundred eight men present and accounted for, the silent PA system barked alive again.

“Tier One to the Chow Hall.”

The ninety-nine men who comprised Monticello's level made a sloppy left turn as one unit and shuffled across the thick metal grating toward the open stairwell at the end of their platform. As the group lumbered forward, Monticello glanced at the line of sweat along his cellmate's frayed denim collar. Frowning in concern, he noticed that the splotch continued to grow bigger as his cellmate lumbered in front of him. A quick glance up the tier assured that the

nearest guard was far out of earshot and had his back turned to the prisoners. Still, Monticello's question was barely above a whisper and was delivered through slit lips.

“Harry-O, you cool?”

Several phlegm-laden coughs shook the heavy man in front of Monticello before he jerked his head “no.” Both knew the coughs were loud enough to draw the attention of the hack halfway up the tier.

“Quiet back there. Keep moving.”

It wasn't until minutes later, after they'd passed the guard and were at the bottom of the stairwell, that Monticello got a murmured reply.

“Talk at chow.”

Fifteen minutes later, as he made his way through the chow line, Monticello received the first nasty surprise of the day. Sneering at him from behind steaming, stainless steel troughs of dung-colored, pungent food was the man whom Monticello had stomped into a five-day stay in the prison infirmary two weeks earlier. Without hesitating, Monticello continued down the line pushing his tray in front of him as he locked eyes with one of two men who had tried to rape him in the shower. It was that man, Michael Bey, who dropped his eyes first. Unfortunately, what Monticello missed during their stare down were the actions of one of the servers in the food line. The prisoner scooped up a lumpy mound of grits and, cutting his eyes quickly both ways, dropped several small pills into the ladle. A moment later the mass was plopped onto Monticello's plate.

Unaware, the slim bank robber didn't look back as he scanned the large cafeteria for his friend and, seeing him waving, made his way to the small, two-person table bolted to the far

wall. The big man spoke to him between coughs before Monticello had a good chance to sit down.

“Monty, watch your back next few days. I know you saw that weasel Michael. Bastard’s nuts, is what I know.”

Monticello dug into his rapidly congealing food, grimacing at the waxy texture as he chewed it before answering.

“Tell me something I don’t know. How you holdin’ up? You look like shit.”

“I feel like shit. New meds they got me on for this sugar’s kickin’ my ass. Dose must be off. And this chest cold’s ‘bout ta kill me if the sugar don’t. I’m supposed ta see the doc today for another checkup. He’s gonna look at my foot again, see if he can save it.”

Monticello stopped eating and looked across the table at the man who was like a father to him. Harry Orderman had been his cellmate—and only friend—since Turquoise had come to Coffield Prison just outside of Tennessee Colony, Texas, three years before. Watching diabetes kill his friend pieces at a time added to the growing mountain of hell that was Monticello’s incarceration.

Mopping the ever-present sweat from his face, Harry tossed the wet lump of napkins onto his untouched tray of slop. His deep voice was kind when he spoke to his long-haired cellmate.

“Monty, don’t fret none ‘bout me, boy. This place ain’t kilt me in twelve years, and I ain’t gonna drop now. So quit lookin’ like ya lost yer puppy.”

Though embarrassed, Monticello recovered quickly. “Hey, I just don’t wanna break in a new roommate—took me forever to train *you*.”

“So you say.”

Struggling with his food and suffering through a few more bites, Monticello pushed the empty tray away and burped. A weak smile touched Harry's lips as he shook his head.

"You swallow that stuff like it's steak and eggs 'stead of warmed-over grease. Stomach must be made outta lead."

Monticello belched again before answering. "Couldn't make it to Mickey D's yesterday before last count. Gotta keep my strength up for the jump over the wall this afternoon when the guards ain't lookin'," he kidded as he patted his flat stomach.

"Yeah, you and me both, boy."

Two loud clangs signaled the end of chow. Both men grabbed their trays from the table and joined the snaking line of men to the waist-high conveyor belt that carried plastic dishes to the kitchen. Monticello smirked at his partner's untouched food.

"Man, they need to wrap that shit up and give it to you for lunch. You do this every damn morning."

Harry tossed his tray the short distance to the belt. When it hit the rubber-coated surface, a solid block of jelled grits bounced out of its compartment and stuck to the stainless steel wall beside the track. Looking back, both men saw that it was still plastered to the metal as they reached the exit doors. A short laugh erupted from Harry as they stepped outside.

"Betcha I won't get that one back," Harry said.

* * * * *

Michael Bey slammed the scrap-laden breakfast troughs onto the large tables next to tub-sized sinks in the rear of the prison kitchen. Several inmates washing other trays were splattered by bits of slimy food and water from the flung metal. Not one of them looked up from what they were doing. Even the lone guard in the kitchen, who rushed over to investigate the noise, stopped

cold when he saw who was causing the commotion. Turning away, the guard quickly left the area.

Bey was the prisoner trustee in charge of the kitchen crew, but the reason he was given a wide berth was because of his tight connections with some very bad people who ran the “White Russians,” Bofield’s largest and most powerful Neo-Nazi gang. Throwing the last breakfast tray onto the metal table, Bey’s forceful motions caused the teetering stack of trays to crash to the floor. Bey was yelling at the top of his lungs before the clanging stopped.

“Pick that shit up!”

Everyone anywhere near the disaster dropped what he was doing and quickly restacked the pans without complaint. Bey had already stormed to the far side of the kitchen as the dishwashers finished clearing up his mess. He kicked open a side exit door (its alarm was disabled at least once a week by any number of inmates) and blocked it open with a two-gallon can of tomato paste. In the fenced-in courtyard a moment later, Bey was sucking on a smoldering cigarette with enough force to collapse a lung.

Having seen Monticello Turquoise was the catalyst for his latest tantrum. Gingerly touching the area that remained numb on the side of his skull, he recalled how Monticello had repeatedly rammed his head into the shower room floor, knocking him into a day-long coma and a week-long stay in the prison infirmary.

Somehow Monticello had known he and Rosco were coming for him in the shower. And the bastard had been ready for them. Using a long, white sweat sock filled with bars of soap, the naked man had spun around to face Rosco before the big man could grab him. Swinging the cloth like a bat, Monticello had made it connect dead-on with Rosco’s temple. Both Rosco and the now-broken bars of soap bounced as they hit the water covering the slick tiled floor. Rushing

in behind Rosco, Bey had slipped across the floor as he'd tried to grab Monticello's genitals. Bey missed his mark, resulting in his face running into a soap-covered backhand slap that instantly blinded him. That's when, after kicking his feet out from under him, Monticello had tried to make Bey's head one with the concrete tiled shower floor.

The next thing Bey remembered was waking up two beds down from Rosco, whose head was covered in wads of thick bandages. Bey cringed at the memory of the beginnings of a bout of double vision complimented by an insufferable four-day migraine.

Finishing his smoke, he flicked it into a nearby wall where it exploded in a shower of sparks. All he'd wanted was a piece of ass, that's it. A little brown-eye every now and then and he would have been happy. But the punk wanted to act tough and play him for a fool. Shit, it'd been almost two weeks, and Rosco's brain was *still* scrambled. The idiot's speech was so slow and garbled that you couldn't understand a word he said.

Fuck this, he thought as he walked back into the kitchen and looked for someone to yell at while everyone else got ready for the noontime meal. He found his victim quickly—a skinny, red-haired kid who didn't look a day over nineteen. Bey angled toward him in a fast walk as inmates scattered out of his way. Slapping the kid hard on a bony shoulder, Bey spun the boy around. Anger puddled out of the boy's face and he paled as he looked up to the man standing a head taller than he.

“Yes...sir?”

Bey jerked a thumb toward the rear of the kitchen. “Need a hand in the cooler. Give me some help.”

“I'm...I'm supposed ta finish...”

“*I wasn't askin'*, bitch.”

The kid looked around—as if anyone would help him.

“What? You lose somethin’? Need directions?”

Giving the child a shove, Bey smirked as he followed the slumping figure in front of him. Glancing down at the boy’s concave ass, Bey licked his lips as he kneaded his growing hard-on.

Damn! I love the skinny ones, he thought with anticipation.

Nodding to one of his cronies, a ripped and bald steroid juicer standing six-foot-eight, Bey’s smile broadened as he and the second con fell in step behind his prey. Hearing a second set of footfalls, the boy slowed and looked meekly over his shoulder. A slap across the back of his head from Bey got him moving again.

The boy stopped in front of the refrigerator’s seven-foot stainless steel door. Bey pushed the boy aside as he took a small set of keys from his pants pocket and found the one he wanted. He unlocked the fist-sized padlock and set the chunk of metal on a small shelf nearby. Bey swung the thick door open as his henchman settled onto a stack of fifty-pound bags of rice. Grabbing the now terrified man-child by a thin arm, Bey pushed him into the room-sized cooler.

“The cheese is in the back. Get some margarine, too.”

Bey looked at the bodybuilder and spoke in a low tone. “Give me ten minutes.”

The big man nodded as Bey stepped into the cooler. Before the door fully closed, Bey stuck his head back out. His buddy leaned forward to hear Bey’s whispered words. “Yo, you want a taste of this when I’m done?”

The man laughed softly and nodded. “Hell, yeah.”

“Then you better give me fifteen minutes to open it up good for your nigger dick.”

The giant chuckled as the insulated door clicked shut. His smile got wider when, almost immediately after the door closed, he heard muted thumping from inside the room.

* * * * *

The brightness of the mid-morning sun, along with the drug overdose he had unwittingly ingested with his breakfast, kept a river of tears running from Monticello's eyes. He wiped them away with his shirt sleeve as he and Harry-O walked the recreation yard. Scratching at what seemed to be an ever-present rash on his arm, Monticello kept one eye on his fellow prisoners and the other on his friend. Remembering Bey's angry stare at breakfast, Monticello knew that it would be sooner rather than later that he could expect some payback from Bey for the beating he'd inflicted on the man. And Bey carried far too much weight in the joint for Monticello to take any retaliation lightly.

Monticello's mouth, suddenly too full of spit, almost made him gag. Looking at the medium-sized puddle he'd just hawked out, Monticello wondered if he was getting sick.

"Asshole at four o'clock," Harry-O announced.

Looking up, Monticello felt a chill in the one hundred ten degree heat as he saw Rosco Thomason, the other man he'd beaten in the shower, ambling toward them. The side of convict's head that Monticello had pulverized two week before had a fine covering of stubble around the scabs that covered the reddish brown two-inch wide indenture. That's where doctors had removed a half-dollar-sized plug of pulverized bone and replaced it with a small sheet of stainless steel. Monticello's pounding heartbeat stepped down a notch when he saw that no one joined Rosco and that the man's steps were slow and unsteady. It took a dozen more measured footfalls before Monticello was looking up at a man a head taller and at least fifty hard pounds heavier. Harry-O broke the stalemate with a soft chuckle.

"New haircut, Rosco?"

The big man's quick turnaround to Harry-O caused him to wobble for a moment. Squeezing his eyes shut, Rosco slowly slid his feet shoulder-width apart before slowly reopening his bloodshot eyes.

When he spoke, the words came out slow and thick.

"Oh...you...a...funny...motherfucker...now."

Harry-O's laughter was more relaxed and louder. "Naw, bro, you the joker here. Heard your head ain't as hard as you thought it was."

Using small steps, Rosco shuffled around until he faced Monticello. Standing an arm's length from the man, Monticello watched as he swayed in little jerks from left to right. Rosco's trembling hand poked hard on the bank robber's chest.

"Your...ass...is...mine."

"And your ass needs a walker," Monticello spat back. Stepping directly to Rosco, he placed his hand flat on the man's chest and shoved. Rosco, his arms wheeling, tumbled like a felled tree. Harry-O and Monticello walked away as Rosco, curled in the fetal position, retched in loud liquid grunts as he lay on the dusty, hard-packed ground. He had made it to his knees by the time the two friends found a bit of shade against a wall at the far side of the yard.

Mopping his face with one hand, Harry-O slapped Monticello's arm with the other.

"Brother, you a cruel man, but I like your style."

Monticello, dizzy from a sudden wave of nausea, still managed a grin. "What can I say? Vertigo's a bitch."

Both men stood in silence for several minutes as they watched the blast furnace heat turn the air into dust devils around the nearly deserted yard. Next to no one had ventured out into the

huge white-baked exercise yard, and the few men who did were, like Monticello and Harry-O, hugging the wall for whatever piece of shade it offered.

A liquid rumbling through Monticello's gut added to an overall feeling of weakness that, if not for the wall behind him, would have toppled him to the ground. His vision blurred and doubled as he willed himself not to faint.

Monticello's physical problems were directly related to the overdose of oral pyridostigmine he had been fed at breakfast. Commonly used to treat myasthenia gravis—a muscle disorder—it was one of several drugs regularly smuggled into the prison that found its way into his meals on a weekly basis via the kitchen inmates and bribed guards. Both the prisoners and the drugs did their jobs extremely well.

Feeling something loose moving inside him, Monticello pinched closed a loud, gaseous fart before it could be followed by something more solid. He looked toward his friend as he spoke. "Harry-O, I gotta..."

Harry-O was gone.

It took a moment of frantic searching before Monticello looked down. That's when he saw his friend, the heavy lids of his eyes half open and glazed over as he slumped in a crumbled heap at the base of the wall. Bending to him, Monticello's stomach muscles knotted hard enough for him to moan aloud at the pressure. Grabbing Harry-O's meaty arm, he cursed, tugged and pulled the semiconscious man to his feet. Sheets of sweat poured off Monticello as he held his friend upright. His own muscles started twitching and uncontrollable tears flooded his eyes.

What's wrong with me? Monticello thought in bewilderment.

It was then, as water blurred his vision and he began to hack, he saw a dark blob close to the wall moving casually toward him. Holding Harry-O upright with his own body, Monticello felt the larger man start to tremble.

God, Harry, he thought, please don't die.

He waved weakly at the figure as it began walking faster. "Here! Help us!"

The person stopped right beside Monticello and slowly looked back over his shoulder. Instantly, a frigid rush of adrenaline stiffened Monticello, but it was already too late. The man easily blocked Monticello's wild swings and, grabbing an arm, spun him around, slamming him into the wall's rough stone surface. Pressed as close as a lover, the man whispered in Monticello's ear as he held him still.

"A present from Brother Bey. Long live the White Russians."

With practiced speed, the inmate stabbed Monticello three times in the side before dropping the crude metal shiv and hurrying away. The last thing Monticello felt, through a spinning wall of pain and roaring darkness, was the release of his bowels as he shat his pants...

CHAPTER 2

The two bad tabs of Ecstasy that Pearly Fredrickson had downed twenty minutes earlier were stampeding roughshod through his system and taking a toll on his reality, ripping away chunks of consciousness at a time.

I'm not gonna make it, he thought.

Pearly held his pistol in latex-gloved hands and gripped the gun at shoulder height as the others fanned out across the bank lobby. Monticello Turquoise's bellowed time check sounded muffled and miles away as Pearly's hearing and vision began to fail.

"Fifteen seconds!"

Pearly strained through double vision to see Butterboy and Flatback as they vaulted through different teller windows and disappeared behind the shiny marble counter. Monticello had already forced three of the bank's seven customers to lie face down on the floor. Confused and uneasy, Pearly saw a shifting blob point to him.

"Get those people *down!*" Monticello yelled.

Pearly's gun wobbled at the semicircle of frightened people in front of him.

"Get...down."

The boy, a round-faced kid who didn't look old enough to drive, dropped his hands, his checkbook and his ass to the floor in a move so smooth it looked like his body was poured onto the polished surface. The ancient matron standing beside the boy, clutching a painfully bright plastic tote bag inscribed with "Vegas—You Gotta Love It!" to her slack breasts, almost beat the

youngster down. The last person, a thickset bald CPA lookalike, slowly lowered his hands to his sides, but remained standing.

“Thirty seconds!”

Pearly blinked twice to clear his vision, his gun jackknifing from side to side as he began to sway.

“Put the gun down,” the man said quietly.

Pearly did one better. In a drug-induced seizure, he collapsed just as the plain-clothed security officer’s gun cleared the man’s fanny pack. The officer turned toward Monticello’s back.

Twenty-four-year-old Monticello Turquoise spun off balance in response to the officer’s shout, his gun jerking upward, before the words fully left the rent-a-cop’s mouth.

“Drop it...now!”

Monticello’s turn stopped short of one hundred eighty degrees as the man who belonged to the voice leveled his gun at the ski-masked robber and fired. Twin screams of thunder stopped time at the Mikini Branch of Sun Valley National Bank in San Antonio, Texas, as Monticello fired back. It wouldn’t be until later that night that Monticello would notice the three-inch gash and his newly designed haircut, courtesy of the bullet that sliced away a lump of flesh and two inches of the long blonde hair along his temple.

The rent-a-cop fared worse.

Propelled forward at eleven hundred feet per second, the twelve-grain jacketed slug fired from Monticello’s Python .357 Magnum plowed an expanding canyon through the forehead of ex-cop Atticus Roose and left a fist-sized exit hole out of the back of his head. The long fingers of Roose’s right hand convulsed and closed on the trigger of his 9mm Beretta as he fell.

Monticello was already diving to the floor when the shot whizzed past him. In the moment it took Monticello to roll upright, both Butterboy and Flatback had their guns trained on the guard's collapsed and twitching body. All three sets of eyes snapped from the fallen guard to Pearly's thrashing body at the same time.

"Is he hit?" Flatback asked.

Monticello had already covered half the distance to Pearly when he shouted to the others. "Grab and go. He's with me."

Butterboy vaulted over the low counter as Flatback disappeared behind it. Two stuffed tan canvas bags sailed through the teller's window a moment before Flatback's skinny self followed. He stopped short of picking up the second money-stuffed bag when he saw that the bag had landed in a puddle of blood.

"Boss."

Monticello's quick pat down of Pearly turned up no bullet holes, leaving him puzzled as to what had dropped the skinny man.

"Boss!"

Monticello had his quivering cohort on his feet when he looked toward his shouting partner. Glancing downward from Flatback's pointing hand, Monticello had to lock his knees to remain standing. A dark burgundy sea of blood was flowing from the neck wound on the slack body of an impeccably dressed slight black man.

"Shit!"

In his five years of robbing a total of twenty-one banks, the last four and a half years of which had been with his current hand-picked crew, Monticello was proud of the fact that not a single person had been so much as scratched in any of their two-minute heists. That trend had

just ended in the worst possible way. Monticello's voice carried a calm he didn't feel as he half-carried a now recovering Pearly to the bank's exit door.

"Take it and go."

Lifting the bag from the ooze, Flatback slammed the stuffed cloth against the bank counter to remove the blood that was dripping. The two crimson splotches it left made him gag under his ski mask as he followed Monticello through the bank's double glass doors.

Jesus, we're fucked, Monticello thought as he ran outside.

Sweeping the bank quickly with his gun as he backed out, Butterboy let off a shot at the ceiling and then sprinted through the door. Despite the botched robbery that resulted in the death of two people, Monticello and his crew fled the bank ten seconds shy of two minutes...and four minutes eight seconds before the first police car—summoned by a frantic 911 call from a hysterical teller—arrived with its siren blaring.

* * * * *

It took a moment before it registered that the woman standing next to Monticello was talking to him.

"Sir, we'll be landing shortly. Will you move your seat into the upright position, please?"

"Yes...of course."

A push of a button on the side of his armrest brought Monticello's coach seat upright. His other hand was tracing the shallow furrow the rent-a-cop's bullet had made at his temple. He was still rubbing it when the attendant returned minutes later.

"I think you have time for one more drink if you'd like one." She finished her sentence with a brilliant smile and discernible wink, but Monticello was completely oblivious to the pretty woman's attempt to flirt.

He didn't look up when he answered. "No, thank you."

Staring across the two empty seats beside him, he watched the early evening lights of Montreal, Canada, speed beneath his flight as it made its final approach to Aéroport de Montréal-Dorval, the main airfield southwest of the city. Sounds of the engines whining, the thud of the landing, the attendants' request for all passengers to remain seated until the plane came to a complete stop were all distant stimuli that he reacted to automatically.

Taking his travel bag from the overhead storage compartment, Monticello moved like a sleepwalker off the plane and entered the chilled corridor that led to the terminal. He barely acknowledged the cheery "Goodnight" offered by the cabin attendants.

Since he and his crew had left Texas five hours earlier, each on tickets to all points of North America that Monticello had purchased with cash months before, his every thought had been bullied aside by the one-reel movie looping through his head—the splatter of blood and brains that had showered the pillar directly behind the rent-a-cop he'd killed. The movie flicked to the gummy burgundy stain on the moneybag that he'd shredded into strips before flushing it, along with the cut-up pieces of his mask and latex gloves, down the toilet of the hotel where he'd stayed.

Physically they got away clean. Mentally, Monticello was nowhere near as fortunate.

The near-empty bus he took into the city was claustrophobic because of his thoughts. Exiting the shuttle at the stop near the Fairmont La Reine Elizabeth Hotel, he walked fifteen minutes south, passing several closed tourist trap boutiques before reaching a mostly deserted side street.

He found his car in the monthly pay lot adjacent to the shops and opened the trunk, threw in his bag, then slammed the lid closed hard enough to rock the sports car's small frame. Five minutes later, he was still standing, keys in hand, at the unopened driver's side door.

"Fuck, I need a drink," he said aloud.

Pocketing the keys, Monticello turned and walked back in the direction from which he'd come. He didn't stop until he opened the doors to the Fairmont La Reine Elizabeth. Two minutes later, he pulled back a stool at the hotel's bar.

"Bonsoir Monsieur. Que désirez vous?"

"Un double Johnny Walker Black et le menu, s'il vous plaît."

Both drink and menu were in front of him a moment later.

"Voudriez vous patienter quelques moments avant de placer votre commande?"

"Je vais attendre, mais apportez moi un autre verre."

Monticello never got around to ordering dinner that night. But there were drinks. Lots of drinks. And not one ounce of the potent spirits dulled the memories of the guard's head exploding in front of him. Nor the sounds of the two gunshots that had reverberated in the bank lobby.

He didn't remember when he paid his bar tab or when he checked into the Fairmont. The haze of alcohol muted the world around him, but not the one within. When the shaking started, as he sat numbly on his bed, his body slid off the flowered bedspread and plopped limply onto the floor. That's where he would stay, rocking himself with his arms locked around him, until he fell into a restless slumber.

* * * * *

"In breaking news, the Dow is up for the second..."

Touching a button on the desk panel, Crystal Silhouette silenced the chatter of the four forty-seven inch television monitors—three tuned to network and cable news stations; the last to a local affiliate—that were embedded in a wall of polished rosewood standing ten feet from her desk. Her mind focused on the speech she was typing into her laptop, which is why she didn't hear the soft knock on her office door until it was repeated a second time.

“What?”

Her eyes never left the scene in front of her, nor her fingers their keys, as she addressed her secretary when he entered the room.

“Yes, Daniel?”

Stopping just opposite her smoked glass and ebony desk, Daniel slid several thick, color-coded folders to his boss.

“Final financial report for the quarter is on top. You need to sign off on it. Final listing from Research and Development, including scheduled updates, for next year's products is the blue folder. It requires two signatures. Two requests, one from Manufacturing Headquarters, the other from the Main Lab, for anticipated dates for next month's Project Manager's Roundtable in Houston. The rest is mail.”

Crystal's fingers stopped flying across the keyboard as she looked at the four-inch pile of paper and cardboard. With a soft sigh, she started pounding the keys again.

“It must be Monday,” she said without enthusiasm.

“I take it you'll want lunch here. The usual?”

“Yes.”

Ten minutes later the president and CEO of Transgress Software was signing the first batch of reports when her phone rang. Without looking up, Crystal touched a button on her

desktop control panel that sent the call to her voicemail. Not a minute passed before her cell phone rang at the precise moment someone knocked on her door. Reaching into the purse she'd placed behind her, Crystal pulled out the phone as she responded to the knock.

“Come in.”

The phone was on its way to her ear when her arm motion was halted by the scene in front of her. Her secretary was standing in front of Thomas MacDonald, Crystal's day shift chief of Security for the site. Behind him were two uniformed police officers, one a woman. The phone continued ringing as she held it near her ear.

“Ms. Silhouette, I...”

“One moment, Tom.” She pressed the green button on her phone as she raised it to her ear and responded with a quick, “Yes?”

“Crystal, it's Harrison. I'm...”

“Hold on, Harry.” Touching the phone's mute button, she looked to her security chief. “Thomas, what's happened?”

Thomas looked at his boss, then glanced at the suit-and-tie that marched to the front of their small group.

“Ms. Silhouette, I'm Lieutenant Theodore Post of the...”

A wave of her hand stopped the cop in mid-sentence.

“Thomas, what's the problem?”

Before the older black man could speak, the cop she'd silenced cut in.

“Ms. Silhouette, I...”

This time, it was the angry scowl on her dark brown face that shut the cop's mouth. She returned her gaze to Thomas and nodded to her employee.

“Thomas?”

“Ms. Silhouette, Leonard...um, your brother...was shot and, well, he was killed in a bank robbery gone bad.”

Harrison Packard, she thought, *he tried to tell me.*

She clicked the cell phone off of mute.

“Harry?”

“Christ, Crystal, I’m...”

“I know. I’ll call you later.” Turning the unit off, she gently placed it on her desk as she stood and retrieved her purse from the low shelf behind her. Picking up the cell phone as she walked around her desk, she dropped it into her bag as she moved toward the group.

“Daniel, route all essential calls to my cell phone. Everything else hold ‘til...Friday. Tell whoever else I’m out of the office and can’t be reached. Not a word more. Have a car meet me downstairs. *Go.*”

“Yes, ma’am.” Leaving the office immediately, Daniel closed the door behind him.

The remaining people parted as Crystal walked through them to a glossy, black wood panel on the wall near the monitors. She pushed a slight groove near the middle of the board, and it opened inward, revealing a shallow closet. Crystal removed a full-length black leather coat and folded it over her arm. Staring at the adjacent wall of TVs, she moved to the nearest one and tapped a button at the base of the set. All the monitors changed to the local station. Touching a second button, she listened as the sound returned and the picture showed the face of her only sibling, his image displayed from a stock photo off of the company website.

“...early this morning. One of the people killed was local software magnate Leonard Silhouette, COO and co-owner—with his twin sister Crystal—of Transgress Software, the fourth

largest computer software company in the U.S. and the largest black-owned software firm in the world. Transgress Software, with more than sixty-one thousand employees worldwide...”

Pushing a button on the wall panel, Crystal turned off all the sets.

“Lieutenant Post?”

“Yes, Ms. Silhouette?”

“You ride with me.” Opening the door to her office, she stepped out as the others quickly followed.

CHAPTER 3

“Harry, I’m sorry... I need an answer from you in the next day or so. I’m really sorry.”

The ancient doctor, his face already a roadmap of deep wrinkles, was further pinched by the bad news he’d just given his jailhouse patient. Shuffling papers in the thick file he held to avoid looking at Harry’s defeated frown, the prison doctor walked away from the table on which Harry sat.

“I need to get your consent forms,” the doctor muttered. “I’ll be back in a minute.”

Harry didn’t hear him. He didn’t see him push back the forest green, cheap plastic curtain that closed off the tiny examination cubicle he occupied. He was instead transfixed on what was left of his swollen, mutilated foot—the limb the doctor had just told him would have to come off.

To his knee...

Looking at his reflection in the full-length mirror mounted on the room’s closed door, Harry couldn’t take his eyes away from his bloated, mangled reflection. With four hundred sixty one pounds spread across his 5’11” frame, the only way he could see his entire body was this way and included the jarring sight of his toeless feet.

Five years.

That’s how long it took him to lose the toes, along with an inch of petrified flesh and blackened bone behind each appendage. Every operation—every chunk of flesh he’d lost through surgeries performed by the same feeble physician who was examining him today—left him feeling more like a sideshow freak. Long thick tube socks usually covered the lower part of

his legs, which were always swollen with stagnant fluids and dark with necrosis. The grayed cloth was always stained dark brown where his toes used to be. The constant bumping, along with the pressure from walking, kept the area raw and unable to heal.

But no pain.

That sensation had abandoned both limbs after he lost the second toe on each. The only thing close to experiencing any type of feeling was the constant itching that crept higher up his legs as the lower parts of his limbs died.

The doctor shuffled back into the compartment and held a thin folder in his right hand. “Your papers,” he said, holding out the stained, recycled cardboard.

Seeing the mottled blue-tinged hand that trembled as it held the document out to him scared Harry more than anything he could remember in his twelve years in prison.

“Doc, can I have a minute, please?”

The doctor set the papers on the table next to Harry and left without a word, closing the curtain behind him.

Harry forced his slumping body upright and fought back his growing fear. The feeling of helplessness choked him, and he moved himself closer to the edge of the table on which he sat. Harry leaned forward as far as he could without falling from his perch and reached his huge hands to one damaged leg. He moved his hands as far down as his bulk would allow, grasped the area just above his ankle, and squeezed—compressing flesh with hands that had knocked men out with a single punch. Cable-thick fingers cracked as they entwined around purple flesh. After a minute and greedily gulping a lungful of air, Harry let go and sat up with a piteous moan.

He didn't feel anything in his leg.

His chest heaving, he stared in the mirror as the deep indentures in his leg slowly refilled with fluid.

When the doctor returned a few minutes later, the old man was quiet as he quickly entered the cubical and, standing just inside, closed the curtain. The doctor stood as far from the exam table as possible and was silent as he averted his eyes from Harry Orderman as his patient, his face buried in ham-like hands, shook the examination table with his sobs...

* * * * *

Monticello tested the short length of chain that kept him handcuffed to the bed when the door to his hospital room opened. He wasn't surprised. He'd been expecting this visit for the last day or so.

Letting his arm fall the brief distance to the sheets, he watched the older, uniformed prison guard take the room's only chair, a putty-colored folding unit with rust on the seat, and move it to his bedside.

Setting a cracked black plastic briefcase at his feet, Rodney Arrington, senior security shift commander for Monticello's section of the prison, got down to business.

"Hello, Mr. Turquoise. I'm..."

"I know who you are. I'm not interested. Send me back to my cell."

Arrington's bored look turned into a small grin as he reached for his cheap briefcase. He popped open the tin locks on either side, and his sarcasm was thick when he spoke.

"Bad mutherfucka, huh? Heard your ass wasn't so tough when they brought you in, Bubba."

Monticello was quiet as the guard searched through the open case.

Finding what he wanted, Arrington tossed two sheets of poorly copied forms onto the bed. He followed them with a government-issued pen.

“These are...”

Monticello immediately started signing.

“When can I go back to my cell?”

“Cut me off again, shithead, and it’ll hurt.”

Monticello stayed silent as Arrington closed the briefcase.

Satisfied that he’d been understood, the guard continued. “Upon signing that Protected Segregation Waiver, you’ll release Bofield from any and all responsibilities should your sorry ass be less lucky in the future. Do you understand, inmate?”

Monticello didn’t answer as he scribbled the last of four signatures on the second form. Transferring both forms to his outside chained hand, he placed the pen on top and held them out to Arrington.

“Sure ya don’t wanna hang out with the Cho-Mo’s?” the guard asked with a sneer.

“Here’s your paperwork,” Monticello replied without emotion.

The guard chuckled as he stood up and snatched the sheets from Monticello’s hand. He didn’t bother to pick up the pen when it fell to the floor. “Suit yourself.”

The guard stopped at the door before opening it. “Hey, inmate.”

“What?”

“Have a fucked day.”

* * * * *

A collapsed lung and punctured liver, complications from his wounds, kept Monticello in the small hospital twenty miles outside of Tennessee Colony, Texas, for three weeks. His healing was hastened by the absence of the drugs that had been slipped into his meals at Bofield.

In the time it took him to recover, Chaka de la Moore's people hadn't been able to find anyone on staff, through their discreet inquiries, willing to turn a blind eye to tampering with Monticello's meds.

Three days after Monticello saw Arrington, the medical staff deemed him well enough to return to prison, and he was processed in after the second count of the morning.

He didn't get to see Harry-O until late that afternoon. Both men kept their feelings in check as they quickly greeted each other like long lost brothers. Monticello didn't comment on his friend's gray pallor and more noticeable limp. They both caught up on each other's lives and enjoyed the other's company before climbing into their bunks and retired earlier than usual.

* * * * *

Ain't no turnin' back now, Harry thought.

Feeling lightheaded, he knew he didn't have much time before he blacked out.

At somewhere around 2 a.m., he rolled out of his bunk as quickly and quietly as possible. Sitting upright in a tent-like, yellowed-with-age tee shirt and equally huge boxers, the dejected man listened to the sounds of the sleeping prison that surrounded him. He listened to Monticello's repetitive snoring and knew he'd miss everything about his friend.

The last guard had made his rounds ten minutes earlier and briefly shined a flashlight into the cell. Harry feigned sleep until the guard moved on. There wouldn't be another guard for two hours.

Harry's resolve was interrupted by an intense sparkle of pinpoint light in front of his eyes. He rubbed his face, pinching both cheeks hard to stay focused. Easing across the floor, Harry-O moved to the foot of the bed. He picked up both of Monticello's high top work boots and removed their long shoelaces, setting each boot back at the base of the bed.

"Monty, I'm sorry," he whispered to his best friend.

Tying the laces together, Harry fashioned a slipknot noose and secured one end to the lone water pipe that jutted from the wall and snaked its way down to the rear of their shared toilet. The pale man sat down on the metal commode and placed the noose around his throat, tightening it until it was snug around his thick neck.

He waited.

Harry-O had faked taking his insulin for the last two days, weaning himself to the edge of consciousness to force himself to go through with his suicide.

He just couldn't take another operation. No more cutting away a piece of him at a time.

He came to prison on a ten-to-twelve-year sentence for attempted vehicular homicide while in the commission of a felony. (He'd hit and critically wounded a bicycle cop after robbing a liquor store.) Fights and troublemaking in his early years had inflated his time by five years and some change. The added years, coupled with his debilitating diabetes, gave him a death sentence he had finally chosen not to wait out.

He looked at his bloated body. Fluid retention from the drugs he'd taken for the last six years had pushed his weight up by a hundred and forty pounds. Breathing was a constant struggle and he always hurt.

Harry-O was simply tired of living—and no longer afraid of death.

Though he'd made his decision to end his life two weeks earlier, he'd held off on his plan until Monticello had returned from the hospital. He wanted to—needed to—talk to his friend before he left this world.

Monticello stirred in his sleep and, for a moment, Harry held his breath as he looked at his cellmate in the dim light. For the first time in many years, he prayed.

Don't let him wake up, God. Don't let him stop me.

Turning himself to the wall, Monticello continued to sleep.

Harry leaned forward and felt the cord tighten around his neck. He slipped one finger under the shoelace and loosened it a bit.

This gotta work.

Twenty minutes later, clusters of tremors stole away Harry-O's consciousness. The moment he was out his large body slumped forward. The slipknot worked perfectly...

* * * * *

It was the smell that awakened Monticello. Groggy with sleep, he looked at his cellmate's slumped figure sitting on the toilet.

“God damn, Harry! Flush, will you?”

Turning to the wall, Monticello wrapped the thin pillow around his face to keep out the smell. It was a full minute before he turned back to Harry.

“Jesus, Harry, this shit ain't funny...”

Fully awake now, Monticello pushed himself up on one elbow.

“*Harry?*”

In his haste to get out of bed, Monticello's feet tangled in the threadbare sheet that had covered him. The fall from the top bunk to the rough concrete floor knocked the breath out of

him and, banging his head on the floor, split it open where his forehead hit. Gasping for air and seeing double in the dim light, Monticello reached out for Harry's arm. His hand retracted for a moment when he felt the cold slackness of the flesh beneath the sweat soaked tee shirt.

Monticello screamed as he pushed his friend's flaccid body upright.

“Guard! Guard! Here!”

Monticello's cries were answered by other awakening inmates as Lance Rodriguez, the night shift guard, ran toward his cell as other inmates shouted.

“Shut the fuck up!”

“Quiet, asshole!”

“Have a nightmare, fucker?”

The guard came to a halt in front of Cell 492 and froze at the sight of Monticello, who had taken the noose from around Harry's neck and had lowered his friend to the floor. The con was frantically administering CPR to the lump of convict that lay sprawled on the concrete. Fumbling with his radio, the guard shouted louder than the men around him as he called for backup.

“Inmate down, inmate down! Lance Rodriguez, La Salle Section, Cell Number 492. Extraction team needed *now!*”

Monticello was working Harry so hard and his adrenaline was so high that he didn't hear the guard's shouts.

“Inmate, step away. Step away now.”

Sobbing, Monticello forced air into dead lungs. His face, smeared with Harry's vomit and blood from his own head wound, was brick red from exertion.

“Inmate, *step back*. That's an order.”

The open stairway that snaked down the level rumbled as the body-armored five-man extraction team sprinted up the metal-grated steps. They reached the cell as Monticello, now exhausted, plopped to the floor next to Harry's body. The sergeant in charge pulled up the Plexiglas face shield up as he stepped to the cell door.

"Inmate, back to the door, hands behind you."

Monticello, his eyes glazed, stared at the body in front of him.

"Inmate, last warning. *Back up to the door, hands behind you!*"

Monticello, finally hearing the command, struggled to his feet. Backing to the cell door, his hands crossed behind him, he stuck them through the open slot near the front of the door. The sergeant grabbed his limp wrists and handcuffed them.

Nodding to the guard beside him, the sergeant held onto the chain between the cuffs as his partner spoke into his radio.

"Extraction Team to Central, open Cell Door 492."

Monticello felt more than heard the heavy door slide open behind him. His eyes never left Harry's body as he was grabbed by two more of the black fatigue-wearing men and pulled from the cell. He didn't resist. As two men held him face first to the wall next to his cell, another fastened leg irons to his ankles.

Entering the small room, Rodriguez stood over Harry's body as his eyes swept the cell.

"Central, extraction complete. We need a gurney and a couple of guys up here; this dead guy's a whale."

The sergeant grabbed Monticello's lower arm and turned him around. His face shield, down again, made his voice sound hollow when he spoke.

"Wanna tell me what happened?"

Monticello, his face blank, stared at the man.

“C’mon, buddy, what happened here?”

Monticello answered in a voice so low the sergeant had to lean in close to hear him.

“I didn’t kill him... Harry was my friend.”

Jerking his head toward the open stairwell, the sergeant walked behind the two men who were guiding Monticello forward. He reached into the breast pocket of his tunic and removed a thick plastic card. Leaving two of his men at the cell with the night shift guard, he shook his head when he spoke.

“Yeah, that’s what they all say...”

As the group moved toward the stairway, the sergeant looked at the small card and read Monticello his Miranda rights...

* * * * *

“I can write up the report any way you like. Just tell me how you want it, ma’am.”

Lance Rodriguez spoke softly into the cell phone in the locked guard’s bathroom off of the La Salle Section of Bofield. It was an hour before he went off shift and the first time he’d had a moment to himself since the mayhem earlier in his shift. Though the room was empty of anyone save himself, he kept checking the door as he whispered into the phone.

“I was the first one there; I can pretty much say anything I want. Turquoise was out of it by the time the extraction team showed up. Those guys don’t give a shit—they’ll back anything I say...”

The dead calm of the woman’s monotone made Lance even more nervous as he listened.

“Will there be any problem from the guards who searched the cell?” she asked.

“Naw. They just tossed everything into garbage bags. It ain’t like anybody’s gonna try real hard to look into this.”

“In that case, here’s what I want you to do...”

Five minutes later, after repeating the main points of her plan, she stopped talking.

“You don’t worry none, ma’am. This here’s a done deal.”

“It had better be, Mr. Rodriguez. My employer doesn’t take failure lightly.”

Lance checked the door again as the woman continued.

“Upon copies of the prison’s final investigation being available to me—with the outcome we’ve discussed, of course—you’ll be discreetly forwarded forty thousand dollars in small bills. Is that satisfactory to you, Mr. Rodriguez?”

Jeez, he thought, *that’s more than I made last year.*

“Yeah...yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t contact me at this number again. It will be disconnected. From now on, I’ll phone you for updates. You’ve done a good job, Mr. Rodriguez. There will be something extra for you in this week’s mail.”

With that said, the connection was broken.

Shutting off the cell phone, Lance folded the small unit closed. He pulled up one pants leg and slid the phone into the custom-made holster Chaka de la Moore had given him when he started working for her a year ago. He yanked the cloth down over the holster and noticed with satisfaction that there was no telltale bulge where he’d inserted it just above his ankle. At the prison, it was instant dismissal for non-supervisory position personnel to carry cell phones onto the unit. And even management couldn’t carry them anywhere near lockup.

This infraction was the last thing on Lance's mind as he left the john. He was too busy fantasizing about the double-wide trailer on prime acreage with water and electric only an hour's ride outside the city on which that chunk of money would put a healthy down payment on.

* * * * *

Monticello didn't bother to get up from the thin mattress on the floor of his isolation unit when Security Commander Rodney Arrington, flanked by two guards, entered the cell. The seven-foot by six-foot cell was crowded with far too many bodies in the small space. And the huge smile on Arrington's face shrunk it even more, for Monticello anyway.

The commander tossed a rolled up orange jumpsuit and battered flip flops to the underwear-clad prisoner.

"We meet again, huh?"

Monticello stayed silent as he dressed in the oversized clothing.

"What? Nothing ta say, tough guy? Cat got your tongue?"

Stepping into the worn shower shoes, Monticello raised both hands in front of him.

Arrington was beaming as he turned to the guard who stood beside him.

"Cuff 'im. Legs, too."

Making Monticello face the wall, the guard shackled his hands behind him, then his ankles. Both guards held onto his arms when they turned the prisoner to face the commander. It was then that Arrington opened the thin manila folder he held under one arm. Slipping a cheap pair of reading glasses from his shirt pocket, he read from the single piece of paper in the folder.

"Monticello Turquoise, it gives me great pleasure to inform you that you have been charged with one count of first degree murder in the strangulation death of your cellmate, Harry Raymond Orderman. You will be placed in solitary confinement until the outcome of this

ongoing investigation is concluded.” Arrington closed the folder. “That shouldn’t take more than a week.”

Arrington was inches from Monticello’s face now, his smile gone and in its place a leering look of satisfaction. “You got away with killin’ those guys at the bank. You damn sure ain’t gettin’ away with *this*. I’m gonna be front row, center, when they fry your ass.”

Monticello spit in his face.

The beating was short and brutal, costing Monticello a busted lip and bruised ribs. The guards holding him on either side were the only reason he remained upright. Wiping sweat from his face, Arrington dried his hands on Monticello’s jumpsuit. The barely conscious prisoner didn’t react.

“Bet your ass you wish you hadn’t signed that waiver now, huh, buddy?”

Monticello answered with a moan.

“Take his sorry ass to solitary.”

A week later, Monticello gave up.

Speaking to his lawyer while shackled to a table in the small room, he told the attorney to drop all appeals.

“Monty, I know it’s hard...”

“Bryon, you’ve no fucking idea what hard is—it’s over. I’m tired. I’m never getting out of here, alive anyway. This shit’s over. Drop my appeals—drop everything. I want to get this over with.”

“Give me a few days, Monty. Let me...”

“No!”

Both men were quiet as Monticello tried to compose himself.

“Bryon, in the last three years, I’ve had to fight someone for my life every time I turn around. Freaks are tryin’ to rape or kill me every other fucking day. The only friend I’ve got kills himself and I get blamed for it. When I’m not sick from God-knows-what and pukin’ up my guts, my head’s on a goddamn swivel tryin’ to keep it attached. And I’ve got nine more years before they even think of parole. It’s over. They won. Please...just do it.”

Bryon Morrison looked at his client sitting across from him and silently evaluated the man during his tirade. From the looks of him, he wouldn’t make it another year, forget nine. Still, he didn’t want to let go without trying again. “Monty, how about we...”

“You’re fired.” Monticello turned to the closed door before yelling. “Guard! I’m ready.”

The guard was halfway to the table before Bryon recovered. “Okay, okay. I’ll do it.”

Monticello waved the guard away before he got to the table. The man disappeared behind the door he’d opened moments earlier. After the door shut again, Monticello slumped even further down into his dented metal chair.

“Thank you. When can you get started on the paperwork?”

“I’m in court all day tomorrow and Friday. I’ll call everyone involved and start the paperwork first thing Monday. Monty, you sure? You want me to hold off a couple days? You know, think this thing through?”

Rubbing closed eyes with shackled hands, the prisoner shook his head.

“How long will I have to wait? How long will it take before I...before I die?”

“I’m not certain...four, maybe six months. Maybe more.”

“I need a favor.”

“Name it.”

“I don’t want to see you again.”

“Monty, I said I’d do it. Christ!”

“No, no... I just need to finish this myself. I need to get ready—get my head right and keep it there, ya know? It would be easier for me if I do this alone. No distractions. Do you understand?”

Bryon could only nod.

“Thanks, Bryon, and please don’t come to the execution, okay?”

Another nod.

Monticello stood up from the chair. “Thank you. Anything you need me to sign, just send through the mail—no calls. I’ll get it right back to you.”

Calling for the guard, Monticello held out his hand to the lawyer as the guard unshackled him from the table. Both men shook hands.

“Thank you for everything...later...goodbye, Bryon.”

Bryon Morrison watched as prisoner and guard exited the drab room. It was the last time he’d ever see Monticello Turquoise alive...

* * * * *

“Mr. Lance Rodriguez, we meet again. Nice jacket.”

Lance looked up at the red-haired woman towering over the table he sat at in the food court of Valley View Mall in North Dallas, Texas. She looked completely different from the last time he’d seen her almost a year before. When she removed her sunglasses, he gasped. He didn’t remember her eyes being emerald green.

“May I sit?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure.”

Lance drank in every curve of her svelte figure as she folded it into the seat opposite of him. Even sitting, her big hair made her taller than the seated man.

“Lance... May I call you Lance?”

Hearing his name awakened the dazed man. “Sure. That’s okay.”

“Lance, stop staring. Not polite.”

“I’m sorry... I...didn’t mean...”

“I’m sure you didn’t. The report, please.”

Fumbling with his new corduroy jacket’s inner pocket, he pulled out several folded sheets—documents he’d copied that contained the final results of Monticello Turquoise’s murder investigation. Smoothing the crumbled paperwork flat, Lance quickly looked around the food court before pushing the papers across the table to her. The cheery look on Chaka de la Moore’s face brought a dopey smile to his own.

This woman is too damn fine, he thought.

“Lance?”

“Yes?”

“Could you be a little more obvious? Maybe scream, ‘Hey everybody, we’re doing something illegal over here!’ for the two or three inbreds that didn’t notice you casing the joint for cops?”

Lance’s eyes locked on the tabletop in front of him. “Baby, the heavy lifting’s done. Chill.”

Conversation stopped as she read the papers he’d given her.

Trying to appear calm, Lance continued to keep his eyes on the tabletop—when he wasn’t stealing glances at Chaka. It was while he was watching her twist long strands of copper-

hued hair with one finger (and also marveling at the size of her expansive bust) that he noticed she was wearing thin, black leather gloves. They were the same color as the spandex turtleneck that hugged her upper body.

I wonder what she tastes like, he thought.

“You done good, Bubba...even if you do drool.”

Lance blushed a deep red.

Sitting upright, she reached a lithesome arm across the table, palm up.

“Phone and holster, please.”

Taking a small plastic bag out of his jacket pocket, he put the phone into her hand.

She opened it, saw the phone and leg strap, and dropped it all into her Prada purse.

Folding the papers in half, she stuffed the sheets into the compartment beside the package.

“Ta da! Your reward.”

Lance’s jaw dropped when he saw the small key in her gloved hand.

“Hey, you said...”

“Tsk tsk, baby boy. You expect a girl to carry fifty thousand dollars in cash in her purse?”

We live in dangerous times, my child.”

“F-fifty?”

“You’ve done excellent work. Gave you a ten grand tip.”

She quickly gave him directions to the bus station storage locker across town that held his newfound wealth. Standing up, she moved to his side of the table and bent close, her mane falling into his face. For an instant, Lance was in heaven. A quick move of her head flipped the shiny hair away.

“Sorry ‘bout that. I really need to cut this back. You need to pick up your package before midnight tonight. The lockers are closed out then. Give me ten minutes before you boogie. *Au revoir.*”

Lance watched her ass move beneath skintight black jeans until she turned out of the food court. It wasn't a second later that he launched away from the table, clutching his key in a death grip. He sprinted to the escalator on the opposite side of the food court and ran all the way to the exit on the floor below.

* * * * *

It took Chaka de la Moore four minutes to get to the public ladies restroom on the floor below. She entered the facility despite the large “Out of Order” sign taped to the door. Producing a key from her pants pocket, Chaka locked the door and moved to the first stall. She removed the green-tinted contact lenses she'd worn and dropped both lenses into the toilet. Six hairpins later, the wig fell into the still water followed by the gloves.

Pale blue eyes looked back at her from the clouded mirror as she finger-combed her short brunette hair in place. She abruptly stopped the instant she realized she hadn't changed her shirt. Correcting her oversight, she was back at the mirror after turning the turtleneck inside out. The color was now sunshine yellow.

Chaka removed a fat glass tube from her purse and carefully unscrewed the glass top, pouring the clear liquid onto the wig and gloves. A thin wisp of smoke appeared as the toilet's contents dissolved into lumpy, gray goo. She made sure to flush the toilet twice to clear all traces of her disguise. Chaka then put the tube and cap in the nearest sink and ran water over it for several minutes before carefully removing both the tube and its cap. She forcefully slammed them to the ceramic tile floor and ground all the surviving shards to dust under her three-inch

block heel. Kicking the last pile of glass dust across the floor, Moore removed the phone Lance had returned to her and flipped it open, turned it on, and then dialed a local number. The line was answered after the first ring.

“Dodo’s on his way. Wait ‘til he’s opened the locker before taking him. Make it look like an accident and make it messy. The money’s yours; call me back at my other number when you’re done. *Ultérieur.*”

It took her three additional minutes to dismantle the phone into small enough pieces to flush. She was applying lip gloss when she heard someone testing the door.

“*Uno momento, por favor,*” she said.

Unlocking the door, Chaka palmed the key as she exited the restroom. She stepped aside as an older black woman with one toddler in her arms and another clinging to her tired dress rushed past Chaka with her whining children.

Waiting until the door closed, Chaka removed the “Out of Order” sign. She folded it until it was small enough to slip into her purse. The sign shared the same compartment as Lance’s papers.

She had a couple of hours to kill before meeting her backup. It would take him that long to properly dispose of Lance. On the spur of the moment, She decided to play tourist, particularly since this was the first time she’d been to Dallas and, with her line of work, she wouldn’t take another assignment here for at least a year. No use pushing her luck. Following the signs to an elevator, she made her way to the mall information booth one floor up...

CHAPTER 4

Sitting handcuffed in the interrogation room and alone for the first time since being arrested two days earlier, Pearly Fredrickson felt a growing itch from the only thing stronger than the fear that was paralyzing him: the jones from the gorilla on his back asking in a not-so-nice way to be fed.

Pearly had stayed high from the time his plane had landed in New Orleans a week before. Part of his problem was that he'd acquired a taste for anything mind-altering to be a potent supply in his veins at all times.

The other, smaller part of what was nagging at him was the need to forget about the debacle he'd made of their last heist. Because of him, Monticello and his crew had left with far less than their usual take.

Watching cable news repeat details of the robbery every half hour over the last two days with special emphasis on the two people killed gave Pearly all the more reason to stay stoned. Not that he cared about those dead people. Heck, they had both dropped while he was flopping on the floor with foam coming out of his mouth. No, what really frightened him was the loss of guaranteed income every three to four months as part of Monticello's crew.

It was Pearly who had introduced Monticello to his motley crew of grifters and hustlers after the then twenty-year-old pool shark had cleaned Pearly out of four hundred dollars in less than two hours' worth of eight ball. Within three months of their first meeting, the quiet, skinny kid kicked the ass of every pool hall hustler Pearly could set him up with as the duo bounced up and down the eastern seaboard. And it was that same skinny kid who'd been the first one to

broach the subject of robbing banks. That discussion had started after the shared reading of a newspaper article at a truck stop outside Savannah, Georgia.

They had been on their way back to New Jersey after cleaning out most of the student population at Florida A&M and Florida State University, a trip they'd made to get out of the Jersey winter for a couple of weeks. Pearly was the one who saw the short story about Savannah's largest bank being robbed. He'd been scanning the paper for a quick place to eat when the article had jumped out at him.

"Damn fools," he'd commented, "robbin' a bank in broad daylight, no masks, no getaway car. Got caught in a friggin' gas station bathroom three blocks away. Attendant saw 'em run in with purple shit all over their clothes."

He'd handed the paper to Monticello before starting the car.

"Gel pack exploded when they left the bank. Man, you gotta be a real dipshit ta do somethin' stupid like that."

The twenty-hour ride back to Jersey was pretty much the same as the last trip they'd made the previous winter. Pearly was blabbing about get-rich-quick schemes while Monticello read one of the two or three novels he always carried with him on their road trips. The difference this particular time was that, every couple of hours, Pearly would see Monticello put down his book and re-read the newspaper article. By the time they pulled in front of Monticello's apartment building on Munn Avenue in the nicer part of East Orange, New Jersey, the Savannah paper was in tatters. Still, Monticello grabbed it when he left the car.

"Call you next week," was all he said when he took his duffel bag out of the back seat of the car.

Pearly didn't see hide nor hair of him for four months.

By the time they got back together, Pearly was pissed, broke and homeless, having lost his apartment when his roommate got a five-year tour of rock hockey at Rahway State Prison upstate for a string of B&Es. Pearly was living out of a sleeping bag in a storage room of the pool hall where he'd first met Monticello over a year before. That's when Monticello had walked into the empty game hall just before closing. He'd found Pearly in the ladies restroom playing janitor with a mop and bucket. Pearly was splashing soapy water on the puke-green painted concrete floor, his anger apparent as he flung the mop in wide arcs from wall to wall. Pearly was the first to speak.

"Where the hell you been? I thought we were partners!"

"Sorry about that," Monticello replied. "Had to work some things out."

"Oh, couldn't call, huh? No phones where you've been?"

"Been busy... Look, when you off? We need to talk."

Pearly slammed the mop into the bucket of water so hard that water spilled back onto the floor. He turned to the calm man leaning in the doorway of the women's restroom. "You left me hangin', buddy! What the fuck is there to talk about?"

Pulling a rubberbanded square of greenbacks from his jeans pocket, Monticello tossed the paper to Pearly, who dropped the mop to catch the toss.

Monticello shrugged. "Gettin' some more of these."

Pearly's mouth hung open as he counted five thousand dollars in twenties and fifties. He was speechless when he looked back to his friend.

"Figured you'd like that. It's yours. *Now* can we talk?"

And that's how it had begun almost five years before. They'd talked the night away in Monticello's hotel room and were still in deep discussion when the sun had come up. In the time

Monticello had disappeared, he'd planned and participated in four bank robberies in Ohio and Michigan. His share of the booty after a three-way split totaled over two hundred thousand dollars.

Monticello had summarized his story by getting to the point. "I got two guys I can trust and could use another. Want in?"

* * * * *

Pearly's trip down memory lane was squashed when the beefy plain-clothed detective came into the room, followed by a partner who was even more rotund than the first cop. The slim folder in the hand of the detective who was bringing up the rear—along with the grim look on his face—immediately reactivated Pearly's dormant sweat glands. As the fat cop bent over the table, his look transformed into an even nastier grin.

I'm fucked, Pearly thought.

"Mr. Smith... Funny, you don't look like a Smith to me," the cop sneered as he turned to his partner who was leaning against the back wall.

"Yo, Eric, didn't I just tell you this dirt bag didn't look like a Smith?"

"Sure did. Guess I owe you a cuppa coffee."

The detective opened the file before continuing. "A dumb shit, maybe, but not a Smith," he said as he winked at Pearly, "eh, Fredrickson?"

Pearly stayed quiet as his perspiration problem increased.

"Says right here you ain't too smart. Did a year at Rahway in Jersey. Fencing stolen property. Year after you got out, got busted for drugs. Unsmart. Two more years upstate...you like it inside, loser?"

The detective leaning on the wall answered for him. “He must. Anyone dumb enough to buy an ounce of smack from an undercover cop can’t be no Einstein, Bill.”

“Got a sweet tooth, pal? You look a little sick,” Bill interjected.

The gorilla on his back got bigger as Pearly tried to speak. “I wanna... I need ta...”

Bill finished his sentence for him. “What? Make a phone call? Talk to a lawyer? Sure you can, buddy. Gonna take a minute, though. I think the phones are out in this part of the building. It’s a darn shame. Maybe we forgot to pay the bill this month, you think?”

Eric, still leaning against the wall, laughed.

“You know,” Bill continued, “this drug charge is the third strike for you. Judges down here don’t like you East Coast boys tramping around here with your nasty habits. Upsets the good local folks. And you lyin’ to Eric and me ‘bout your name—they *really* hate that. I’m bettin’ on twelve to fifteen, what with your intent to distribute and all.”

“I...I wanna lawyer.”

“Sure you do.”

Eric pushed off the wall as the other detective stood. Closing the folder, Bill tapped the cardboard on the tabletop and sneered, “Gotta go, scumbag.” Both cops headed for the door.

“When do I see a lawyer? When do I get my phone call?”

Eric stopped at the door, holding it open as a uniformed cop moved past him toward Pearly. The young cop grabbed Pearly’s right arm and pulled the shackled man to his feet.

“I dunno...might be a day or two.” Holding up the file, Bill shook it at Pearly. “I mean, what with your paperwork gettin’ lost and all...”

Both detectives laughed as Pearly was marched away.

* * * * *

“That’s it, Turquoise. No more...it’s over.”

“I know, Frankie. I understand.”

“Your package is there. I took six percent, ‘cause half the world’s looking for y’all. I gotta cover my ass. Jesus, Monty...a cop and that rich guy?”

Ex-cop, Monticello thought, *as if that means anything*.

Frankie continued. “I gotta go. Good luck and, for Christ’s sake, lay low.”

Monticello shut off his cell phone and tossed it on the coffee table in front of him. It landed on the week-and-a-half-thick stack of newspapers he’d collected that had run the story of their botched robbery. In all the stories—including three that made the front page of national papers—the ex-cop’s death was but a brief afterthought.

Leonard David Silhouette was another story. He and his twin sister Crystal were worth close to eight billion dollars—each—due to their majority share of Transgress Software, a company they’d built together over the last sixteen years.

The elder by all of two minutes, Leonard Silhouette had started the firm in the late ‘70s when he was twenty-one with money borrowed from their parents—both of whom died in a car accident two years later. All the newspaper stories labeled Leonard as the more gregarious of the two, chairing nonprofit boards and constantly being in the news for giving away millions to charity. On the other hand, Crystal was said to be the driving force—and backbone—of the company. After graduating at the top of her class with a law degree from Rutgers University in New Jersey, she’d joined their then small firm as chief legal counsel.

Standing at the window of his condo overlooking the Saint Lawrence River in the distance, Monticello looked south toward the U.S. border. He knew he should never go back.

And with the call from Frankie Lowe saying he was out and wanted no more gigs, that pretty much nailed the coffin shut.

Frankie was a “washer,” a money launderer. For a fee (usually four percent of the take), he’d push, shift and filter dirty money until it came out clean. The former savings and loan vice president and financial counselor never said how he got into the business, and Monticello had never asked. He had met him through Flatback and Butterboy when they’d started robbing banks years ago. With Frankie bowing out, there was no way Monticello could continue. His situation was way too hot to look for, and more importantly, trust another washer.

But, before closing down shop, he had one last run to make. Donning a light jacket, he grabbed his keys and headed out the door into a hazy and chilly Montreal night...

* * * * *

The dot painted on the plain white postcard was green.

Folding the empty envelope in half, Monticello put it in his jacket pocket.

Frankie never sent any paperwork directly to anyone. He would send a postcard. The predetermined color on the card would tell the recipient which mailbox (out of the dozen or so Frankie had spread around the U.S., all under false names) to access and retrieve their package. When Monticello started using Frankie’s services years ago, he was issued four color-coded keys and the corresponding addresses to each of the lockboxes. The box for the postcard he now held in his hand was located at a postal store in a strip mall near downtown Detroit. Frankie also let it be known that you had a three-day limit to pick up whatever he sent you after you received a card. Frankie knew that people running those places could get nosy if mail hung around too long.

Credit card in hand, Monticello was dialing the number for airline reservations even before he cleared the door to the empty postal station. Three hours later, he was boarding a United Airlines redeye flight to Michigan.

* * * * *

“I really need your help on this one, man. Call me back when you get this message.”

Hanging up the phone, Pearly looked at one of his handlers as the young agent hunkered over a jungle of thin cables and wires gyrating from the FBI’s phone tapping equipment. Pearly looked up from the small boxes of machinery around him as the federal agent removed the set of earphones from his head and dropped them on the only clear spot on the table.

“The call’s good,” the agent said to the other men in the room.

Andy Cleanse, the FBI agent in charge, noticeably relaxed, bringing the level of tension in the room down a bit.

Pearly, unaware that he was holding his breath, let out a whoosh of air himself.

“Hey guys,” Pearly said, “I told you it would be cool.”

The other men in the room, all law officers, gave Pearly a look likened to someone finding shit on their shoes.

Pearly’s nervous smile widened as he shrugged. Getting up from the sofa, Pearly headed for the small apartments kitchen.

“Anyone want a beer?” he asked.

No one answered him.

What a difference a day makes, he thought as he opened the fridge.

In the space of three days, Pearly had pulled off the biggest con of his career and secured the best get-out-of-jail card imaginable. All it had cost was a few well-placed lies...and selling his partner, Monticello Turquoise, down the river.

Pearly walked back into the room, a bottle of Bud in his hand, and downed a gulp, as everyone tried to look busy.

“Anyone wanna play cards? Watch some TV?”

His handlers ignored him.

“Okay...maybe later.”

Settling into a loveseat in front of the TV, Pearly used the remote to flip through channels until he found a basketball game.

Ratting out Monticello caused him no lack of sleep. It was either old Monty or a very long time in prison for Pearly, courtesy of his third strike. No contest. Hell, he would have given up Flatback and Butterboy too, if he'd known where they were. He'd been in his tenth day of lockup, sick from withdrawal and with no hope of seeing sunlight unless it was filtered through meshed-wire windows when, in the middle of puking his guts out, he'd had a revelation.

A big one.

It took him another day to meet with the detectives who had arrested him, handcuffed to the same chair he'd sat in with them days before.

Then he'd dropped his bomb.

“Monticello Turquoise.”

“Mono...who?” Detective Eric Wittstrom asked with a dose of sarcasm.

By the end of Pearly's twenty minute-long sermon, both cops were slack-jawed, with their mouths literally hanging open. Pearly had given them just enough to get them interested,

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