

GLENN COOPER



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JAMES ROLLINS,

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SECRET OF THE SEVENTH SON

Glenn Cooper

Secret of the Seventh Son

 HarperCollins e-books

Contents

[May 21, 2009, New York City](#)

[A Year Earlier, Cambridge, Massachusetts](#)

[May 22, 2009, Staten Island, New York](#)

[June 10, 2009, New York City](#)

[February 12, 1947, London](#)

[July 10, 1947, Washington, D.C](#)

[June 11, 2009, New York City](#)

[Seven Months Earlier, Beverly Hills, California](#)

[June 23, 2009, New York City](#)

[6 Julius 777, Vectis, Britannia](#)

[March 19, 2009, Las Vegas](#)

[June 23, 2009, City Island, New York](#)

[17 September 782, Vectis, Britannia](#)

[June 25, 2009, Las Vegas](#)

[June 28, 2009, Las Vegas](#)

[6 July 795, Vectis, Britannia](#)

[July 15, 2009, New York City](#)

[July 28, 2009, Las Vegas](#)

[12 October 799, Vectis, Britannia](#)

[January 30, 1947, Isle of Wight, England](#)

[July 29, 2009, New York City](#)

[July 30, 2009, Los Angeles](#)

[July 31, 2009, Los Angeles](#)

[August 1, 2009, Los Angeles](#)

[8 January 1297, Isle of Wight, England](#)

[August 1, 2009, Los Angeles](#)

[9 January 1297, Isle of Wight](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by Glenn Cooper](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

[MAY 21, 2009](#)
[NEW YORK CITY](#)

David Swisher spun the track ball of his BlackBerry until he found the e-mail from the CFO of one of his clients. The guy wanted to find a time to come down from Hartford to talk about a debt financing. Routine stuff, the kind of business he saved for his ride home. He thumb-typed a reply while the Town Car jerked up Park Avenue in stop-and-go traffic.

A chime announced the arrival of a new e-mail. It was from his wife: *I've got a surprise for you.* He texted back: *Excellent! Can't wait.*

Outside the window of his limo the sidewalks were busy with New Yorkers intoxicated with the first blush of spring weather. The bleached evening light and the warm weightless air quickened the steps and lifted their spirits. Men with jackets on their thumbs and rolled-up sleeves felt the breeze on their bare forearms, and women in short diaphanous skirts felt it against their thighs. The sap was rising, for sure. Hormones, locked-up like ships trapped in arctic ice, started flowing free in the spring thaw. There would be action tonight in the city. From a high floor of an apartment tower, someone was exuberantly playing Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* on a stereo, and the notes wafted down from open windows and fused with the cacophony of the city.

All this was unnoticed by David, who concentrated on his little glowing LCD screen. And he too was unnoticed, veiled by a tinted window--a thirty-six-year-old investment banker, plainly affluent with a good head of hair, a lightweight wool suit from Barneys, and a scowl plastered on from a deal that had done nothing for his career, his ego, or his bank account.

The taxi stopped at his building on Park and 81st, and walking the fourteen feet from the curb to the door he realized the weather was pleasant. By way of celebration he breathed one full measure of atmosphere into his lungs then managed to smile at his doorman. "How're you doing, Pete?"

"Just fine, Mr. Swisher. How'd the markets do today?"

"Fucking bloodbath." He swept past. "Keep your money under your mattress." Their little joke.

His nine room co-op on a high floor cost him a shade under four and three-quarters when he bought it shortly after 9/11. A steal. The markets were nervous, the sellers were nervous, even though this was a gem, a white-glove building, a prewar with twelve-foot ceilings, eat-in kitchen, and a working fireplace. On Park! He liked to buy in at the bottom of a market, any market. This way he got more space than a childless couple needed, but it was a trophy that got wows from his family, which always made him feel pretty damn good. Besides, it was worth well over seven-five now, even in a fire sale, so all in all a great deal for Swish, he reminded himself frequently.

The mailbox was empty. He called back over his shoulder, "Hey, Pete, did my wife come home already?"

"About ten minutes ago."

That was the surprise.

Her briefcase was on the hall table, sitting on a pile of mail. He closed the door noiselessly and

tried to tiptoe, maybe sneak up behind her, cup her breasts in his hands and press up against her rum. His idea of fun. The Italian marble blew his plan when even his supple dress loafers tapped and echoed enough to betray him.

"David? That you?"

"Yeah. You're home early," he called. "How come?"

From the kitchen: "My deposition got pushed."

The dog heard his voice and ran at full throttle from a guest bedroom at the far end of the apartment, its little paws skidding on the marble, sending the poodle crashing into the wall like a hockey player.

"Bloomberg!" David shouted. "How's my little baby!" He put his case down and picked up the white fluff ball, who licked at his face with its pink piston tongue while furiously wagging its bobbed tail. "Don't pee on Daddy's tie! Don't you do that. Good boy, good boy. Honey, was Bloomie walked?"

"Pete said Ricardo walked him at four."

He put the dog down and went for the mail, sorting it into piles in his obsessive kind of way: Bills. Statements. Junk. Personal. His catalogues. Her catalogues. Magazines. Postcard?

A plain white postcard with his name and address printed in black type. He flipped it over.

There was a typed date: May 22, 2009. And next to it an image that instantly disturbed him: the unmistakable outline of a coffin, about an inch tall, hand-drawn in ink.

"Helen! Did you see this?"

His wife came into the hall, high heels clipping on the stone, perfectly turned out in a pale turquoise Armani suit with a double strand of cultured pearls resting just above a hint of cleavage, her matching pearl earrings playing peekaboo under salon-styled hair. A handsome-looking woman anyone would agree.

"See what?" she asked.

"This."

She looked it over. "Who sent it?"

"There's no return address," he said.

"It's postmarked Las Vegas. Who do you know in Vegas?"

"Christ, I don't know. I've done business there--I can't think of anyone offhand."

"Maybe it's a promotion for something, like a teaser ad," she suggested, handing it back to him. "Tomorrow there'll be something else in the mail that'll explain it."

He bought it. She was smart and usually figured things out. But still. "It's in bad taste. Fucking coffin. I mean, please."

"Don't let it put you in a mood. We're both home at a civilized time. How great is that? Want to go to Tutti's?"

He put the postcard onto the junk stack and grabbed her ass. "Before or after we fool around?" He asked, hoping the answer was "After."

The postcard bugged David on and off all evening, though he didn't bring it up again. He thought about it while they waited for dessert, he thought about when they got home right after he came inside he thought about it when he took Bloomie for a quick pee outside the building before they turned in for the night. And it was the last thing he thought about before he fell asleep as Helen read beside him, the bluish glow of her clip-on book light faintly illuminating the black edges of the master bedroom. Coffins bothered the hell out of him. When he was nine, his five-year-old brother died of a Wilms tumor, and Barry's little polished mahogany coffin--sitting on a pedestal in the memorial chapel--haunted him still. Whoever sent that postcard was a shithead, plain and simple.

He killed the alarm clock about fifteen minutes before it would have sounded off at 5:00 A.M.

The poodle jumped off the bed and started doing its nutty first-thing-in-the-morning running in circle routine.

"Okay, okay," he whispered. "I'm coming!" Helen slept on. Bankers went into the office hours before lawyers, so the morning dog walk was his.

A few minutes later David said hello to the night doorman as Bloomberg tugged him on his leash into the predawn chill. He zipped his track suit top all the way to his throat before heading north for their usual circuit--up to 82nd, where the dog invariably did most of his business, east to Lex, hit the early-bird Starbucks, then back to 81st and home. Park Avenue was seldom empty, and this morning a fair number of cabs and delivery trucks rolled by.

His mind was perpetually motoring; he found the concept of "chilling" ludicrous. He was always working some angle, but as he approached 82nd Street, he wasn't centered on any particular topic more an unedited hodgepodge of work-related to-dos. The postcard, thankfully, was forgotten. Making the turn onto the ominously dark tree-lined street, his city-slicker survival skills almost made him alter his route--he briefly considered carrying on up to 83rd--but his trading-floor macho wouldn't let him wimp out.

Instead he crossed over to the north side of 82nd Street so he could keep an eye on the dark-skinned kid milling on the sidewalk about a third of the way down the block. If the kid crossed the street too, he'd know he was in trouble and he would pick up Bloomie and make a run for it. He had run track in school. He was still fast from pickup B-ball. His Nike's were laced nice and tight. So, fuck it, worst case scenario, he'd still be okay.

The kid started walking in his direction on the opposite side of the block, a lanky fellow with a hoodie up so David couldn't see his eyes. He hoped a car would come along or another pedestrian, but the street stayed quiet, two men and a dog, so still, he could hear the kid's new sneakers squeaking on the pavement. The brownstones were dark, their occupants dreaming. The only doorman building was nearer to Lexington. His heart rate ramped up as they drew level. No eye contact. No eye contact. He kept going. The kid kept going, and the gap between them widened.

He allowed himself an over-the-shoulder glance and exhaled when he saw the kid turning onto Park, disappearing around the corner. I'm a fucking wuss, he thought. And a prejudiced one too.

Halfway down the block, Bloomie sniffed at his favorite spot and started to squat. David couldn't understand why he hadn't heard the kid until he was almost on him. Maybe he'd been distracted thinking about his first appointment with the head of capital markets, or watching the dog find his spot, or remembering the way Helen had flung off her bra last night, or maybe the kid had made an art of urban stealth running. But it was all academic.

David was punched in the temple and went down hard on his knees, momentarily fascinated more than afraid, by the unexpected violence. The punch made his head soupy. He watched Bloomie finish his poop. He heard something about money and felt hands going through his pockets. He saw a blade near his face. He felt his watch slipping off, then his ring. Then he remembered the postcard that goddamned postcard, and heard himself asking, "Did you send it?" He thought he heard the kid answer, "Yeah, I sent it, motherfucker."

A YEAR EARLIER

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

Will Piper arrived early to get a drink on board before the others arrived. The crowded restaurant, on Harvard Square, was called OM, and Will shrugged his heavy shoulders at the trendy eclectic Asian ambience. It wasn't his kind of place but the lounge had a bar and the bartender had ice cubes and scotch so it met his minimum requirements. He looked askance at the artistically rough-cut stonewall behind the bar, the bright flat-screen installations of video art and the neon-blue lights, and asked himself, What am I doing here?

As early as a month ago, the probability of him attending his twenty-fifth college reunion was zero, and yet here he was, back at Harvard with hundreds of forty-seven-and forty-eight-year-olds wondering where the prime cut of their lives had gone. Jim Zeckendorf, good lawyer that he was, relentlessly cajoled and hounded him and the others via e-mail until they all acquiesced. Not that Will signed up for the full monty. Nobody was going to make him march with the class of 1983 in Tercentenary Theater. But he agreed to drive up from New York to have dinner with his roommates, stay over at Jim's house in Weston, and head back in the morning. He'd be damned if he was going to blow more than two vacation days on ghosts from the past.

Will's glass was empty before the bartender was done filling the next order. He rattled the ice to get the guy's attention and attracted a woman instead. She was standing behind him, waving a twenty at the bartender, a splendid-looking brunette in her thirties. He smelled her spiced fragrance before she leaned over his broad back and asked, "When you get him, can you get me a chard?"

He half turned, and her cashmere bosom was at eye level, as was the twenty dollar bill, dangling from slender fingers. He addressed her breasts, "I'll get it for you," then rotated his neck to see a prettily faced woman with mauve eye shadow and red glossy lips, just the way he liked them. He picked up strong availability vibes.

She withdrew the money with a lilting, "Thanks," and inserted herself into the tight space made by sliding his stool a couple of inches.

In a few minutes Will felt a tap on his shoulder and heard, "Told you we'd find him at the bar." Zeckendorf had a big grin on his smooth, almost feminine face. He still had enough hair to pull off a curly Jewfro, and Will had a flashback to his first day in Harvard Yard in 1979, a big blond oaf from the Florida panhandle, flopping around like a bonita on the deck of a boat meeting a skinny bushy-haired kid with the self-assured swagger of a local who was bred to wear crimson. Zeckendorf's wife was at his side, or at least Will assumed that the surprisingly matronly woman with thick haunches was the same twiglike bride he last saw at their wedding in 1988.

The Zeckendorfs had Alex Dinnerstein and his girlfriend in tow. Alex had a tight diminutive body and a flawless tan that made him seem the youngest of the roomies, and he flaunted his fitness and panache with an expensive European-cut suit and a fancy pocket handkerchief, white and bright like his teeth. His gelled hair was as straight and black as it was freshman year and Will pegged him as

dyer--to each his own. Dr. Dinnerstein had to keep young for the sweet thing on his arm, a model at least twenty years their junior, a long-legged beauty with a very special figure who almost made Will forget his new friend, who had been left awkwardly sipping at her glass of wine.

Zeckendorf noticed the lady's discomfort. "Will, are you going to introduce us?"

Will smiled sheepishly and muttered, "We haven't gotten that far," eliciting a knowing snort from Alex.

The woman said, "I'm Gillian. I hope you all enjoy your reunion." She started moving away, and Will wordlessly pressed one of his cards into her hand.

She glanced at it and the flicker across her face revealed surprise: SPECIAL AGENT WILL PIPER, FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION.

When she was gone, Alex made a show of patting Will down and hamming, "Probably never met a Harvard man packing heat, eh, buddy? Is that a Beretta in your pocket or are you happy to see me?"

"Fuck off, Alex. Good to see you too."

Zeckendorf herded them up the stairs toward the restaurant then realized they were one short. "Anyone seen Shackleton?"

"You sure he's still alive?" Alex asked.

"Circumstantial evidence," Zeckendorf answered. "E-mails."

"He won't show. He hated us," Alex claimed.

"He hated you," Will said. "You're the one who duct-taped him to his fucking bed."

"You were there too if I recall," Alex sniggered.

The restaurant was buzzing with affluent chatter, a mood-lit museum space with Nepalese statuary and a Buddha-embedded wall. Their table overlooking Winthrop Street was waiting but not empty. There was a solitary man at one end, nervously fingering his napkin.

"Hey, look who's here!" Zeckendorf called out.

Mark Shackleton looked up as if he'd been dreading the moment. His small closely spaced eyes, partially concealed by the bill of a Lakers cap, darted from side to side, scanning them. Will recognized Mark instantly, even though it had been more like twenty-eight years, since he pretty much lost touch with him the minute freshman year was over. The same zero-fat face that made his head look like a deep-socketed, high-domed meatless skull, the same tension-banded lips and sharp nose. Mark hadn't looked like a teenager even when he was one; he just grew into his natural middle-aged state.

The four roommates were an odd-duck sort of grouping: Will, the easygoing jock from Florida; Jim, the fast-talking prep-school kid from Brookline; Alex, the sex-mad premed from Wisconsin; and Mark, the reclusive computer nerd, from nearby Lexington. They had been squeezed into a quad at Holworthy at the northern pole of leafy Harvard Yard, two tiny bedrooms with bunks and a common room with half-decent furniture, thanks to Zeckendorf's rich parents. Will was the last to arrive at the dorm that September, as he'd been ensconced with the football team for preseason training. By then Alex and Jim had paired up, and when he lugged his duffel bag over the threshold, the two of them snorted and pointed to the other bedroom, where he found Mark stiffly planted on the lower bunk, claiming it, afraid to move.

"Hey, how're you doin'?" Will had asked the kid while sprouting a big southern smile on his chiseled face. "How much ya weigh there, Mark?"

"One forty," Mark answered suspiciously as he struggled to make eye contact with the boy towering over him.

"Well, I register at two twenty-five in my shorts. You sure you want my heavy ass a couple of feet over your head on that rickety old bunk bed?"

Mark had sighed deeply, wordlessly ceded his claim, and the pecking order was thus permanent.

established.

~~They fell into the random chaotic conversation of reunionites, excavating memories, laughing~~ embarrassments, dredging up indiscretions and foibles. The two women were their audience, the excuse for exposition and elaboration. Zeckendorf and Alex, who had remained fast friends, acted as emcees, ping-ponging the banter like a couple of stand-ups extracting laughs at a comedy club. Will wasn't as fast with a quip but his quiet, slowly spoken recollections of their dysfunctional year had them rapt. Only Mark was quiet, politely smiling when they laughed, drinking his beer and picking up his Asian fusion food. Zeckendorf's wife had been tasked by her husband to snap pictures, and she was obliged by circling the table, posing them and flashing.

Freshman roommate groups are like an unstable chemical compound. As soon as the environment changes, the bonds break and the molecules fly apart. In sophomore year Will went to Adams House to room with other football players, Zeckendorf and Alex kept together and went to Leverett House and Mark got a single at Currier. Will occasionally saw Zeckendorf in a government class, but they basically disappeared into their own worlds. After graduation, Zeckendorf and Alex stayed in Boston and the two of them reached out to Will from time to time, usually triggered by reading about him in the papers or catching him on TV. None of them spent a moment thinking about Mark. He faded away and had it not been for Zeckendorf's sense of occasion and Mark's inclusion of his gmail address in the reunion book, he would have remained a piece of the past to them.

Alex was loudly going on about some freshman escapade involving twins from Lesley College, a night that allegedly set him on a lifelong path of gynecology, when his date shifted the conversation to Will. Alex's increasingly tipsy clowning was wearing on her and she kept glancing at the large sandy-haired man who was steadily drinking scotch across from her, seemingly without inebriation. "So how did you get involved with the FBI?" the model asked him before Alex could launch into another tale about himself.

"Well, I wasn't good enough at football to go pro."

"No, really." She seemed genuinely interested.

"I don't know," Will answered softly. "I didn't have a whole lot of direction after I graduated. My buddies here knew what they wanted: Alex and med school, Zeck and law school, Mark had grad school at MIT, right?" Mark nodded. "I spent a few years knocking around back in Florida, doing some teaching and coaching and then a position opened up in a county sheriff's office down there."

"Your father was in law enforcement," Zeckendorf recalled.

"Deputy sheriff in Panama City."

"Is he still alive?" Zeckendorf's wife asked.

"No, he passed a long time ago." He had a swallow of scotch. "I guess it was in my blood and the path of least resistance and all that so I went with it. After a while it made the chief uncomfortable that he had a smart-ass Harvard dude as a deputy and he had me apply to Quantico to get me the hell out of there. That was it, and in the blink of an eye I'm staring retirement in the face."

"When do you hit your twenty?" Zeckendorf asked.

"Little over two years."

"Then what?"

"Other than fishing, I don't have a clue."

Alex was busily pouring another bottle of wine. "Do you have any idea how famous this asshole is?" he asked his date.

She bit. "No, how famous are you?"

"I'm not."

"Bullshit!" Alex exclaimed. "Our man here is like the most successful serial killer profiler in the history of the FBI!"

"No, no, that's certainly not true," Will strongly demurred.

~~"How many have you caught over the years?" Zeckendorf asked.~~

"I don't know. A few, I guess."

"A few! That's like saying I've done a few pelvic exams," Alex exclaimed. "They say you're the man--infallible."

"I think you're referring to the Pope."

"C'mon, I read somewhere you can psychoanalyze someone in under a half a minute."

"I don't need that long to figure you out, buddy, but seriously, you shouldn't believe everything you read."

Alex nudged his date. "Take my word for it--watch out for this guy. He's a phenom."

Will was anxious to change the subject. His career had taken a few nonsuperlative turns, and he didn't feel much like dwelling on past glories. "I guess we've all done pretty well considering our shaky start, Zeck's a big-time corporate lawyer, Alex is a professor of medicine...God help us, but let's talk about Mark here. What have you been up to all these years?"

Before Mark could wet his lips for a reply, Alex pounced, slipping into his ancient role as torturer of the geek. "Yeah, let's hear it. Shackleton is probably some kind of dot-com billionaire with his own 737 and a basketball team. Did you go on to invent the cell phone or something like that? I mean you were always writing stuff in that notebook of yours, always with the closed bedroom door. What were you doing in there, sport, besides going through back issues of Playboy and boxes of Kleenex?"

Will and Zeckendorf couldn't suppress a yuk because back then the kid always did seem to buy a whole lot of Kleenex. But straightaway Will felt a pang of guilt when Mark impaled him with a barb *et tu, Brute?* kind of look.

"I'm in computer security," Mark half whispered into his plate. "Unfortunately, I'm not a billionaire." He looked up and added hopefully, "I also do some writing on the side."

"You work at a company?" Will asked politely, trying to redeem himself.

"I worked for a few of them but now I'm like you, I guess. I work for the government."

"Really. Where?"

"Nevada."

"You live in Vegas, right?" Zeckendorf said.

Mark nodded, clearly disappointed no one had keyed onto his comment about writing.

"Which branch?" Will asked, and when his reply was a mute stare, he added, "Of the government?"

Mark's angular Adam's apple moved as he swallowed. "It's a lab. It's kind of classified."

"Shack's got a secret!" Alex shouted gleefully. "Give him another drink! Loosen his lips!"

Zeckendorf looked fascinated. "Come on, Mark, can't you tell us something about it?"

"Sorry."

Alex leaned in. "I bet a certain someone from the FBI could find out what you're up to."

"I don't think so," Mark replied with a dram of smugness.

Zeckendorf wouldn't let it go and thought out loud, "Nevada, Nevada--the only secret government lab I've ever heard of in Nevada is out in the desert...at what's called...Area 51?" He waited for a denial but got a good long poker face instead. "Tell me you don't work at Area 51!"

Mark hesitated then said slyly, "I can't tell you that."

"Wow," the model said, impressed. "Isn't that where they study UFOs and things like that?"

Mark smiled like the Mona Lisa, enigmatically.

"If he told you, he'd have to kill you," Will said.

Mark vigorously shook his head, his eyes lowered and turning humorless. There was a reed-dryness in his throat that Will found disquieting. "No. If I told you, other people would kill you."

MAY 22, 2009

STATEN ISLAND, NEW YORK

Consuela Lopez was worn-out and in pain. She was at the stern of the Staten Island ferry, sitting at her usual home-bound spot near the exit so she could disembark quickly. If she missed the 10:45 P.M. number 51 bus, she had a long wait at the bus station at St. George Terminal for the next one. The nine-thousand-horsepower diesel engines sent vibrations through her slight body, making her sleep but she was too suspicious of her fellow passengers to close her eyes lest her pocketbook disappear.

She propped her swollen left ankle on the plastic bench but rested her heel on a newspaper. Putting her shoe directly on the bench would be rude and disrespectful. She had sprained her ankle when she tripped on her own vacuum cleaner cord. She was an office cleaner in lower Manhattan and this was the end of a long day and a long week. It was a blessing that the accident happened on Friday so she'd have the weekend to recover. She couldn't afford to miss a day of work and prayed that she would be fine by Monday. If she was still in pain on Saturday night, she would go to early mass on Sunday and beg the Virgin Mary to help her heal quickly. She also wanted to show Father Rochas the odd postcard she had received and allay her fears about it.

Consuela was a plain-looking woman who spoke little English, but she was young and had a nice figure, and so was always on guard against advances. A few rows away, facing her, an Hispanic youth in a gray sweatshirt kept smiling at her, and although she was initially uncomfortable, something about his white teeth and animated eyes induced her to give him a polite smile in return. That was all it took. He introduced himself and spent the last ten minutes of the journey seated beside her sympathizing with her injury.

When the ferry docked she limped off, resisting his offer of support. He attentively followed a few paces behind even though she was moving at a turtle's pace. He offered her a ride home but she declined--it was out of the question. But since the ferry was a few minutes late and her egress was so slow, she missed her bus and reconsidered. He seemed like a nice guy. He was funny and respectful. She accepted, and when he left to get his car from the parking garage, she crossed herself for insurance.

As they neared the turnoff to her house on Fingerboard Road, his mood hardened and she became worried. The worry turned to fear as he sped past her street and ignored her protestations. He kept driving mutely on Bay Street until he made a hard left, heading for the Arthur Von Briesen Park.

At the end of the dark road she was crying and he was shouting and waving a folding knife. He forced her out of the car and pulled her by the arm, threatening to hurt her if she called out. He no longer cared about her sore ankle. He pulled her at running speed through the bushes toward the water. She winced in pain but was too frightened to make a noise.

The dark massive superstructure of the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge was ahead of them, like some sort of malevolent presence. There wasn't a soul in sight. In a wooded clearing, he threw her onto the ground and harshly pulled her pocketbook from her grasp. She started sobbing and he told her to shut

up. He rifled through her belongings and pocketed the few dollars she had. Then he found the plain white postcard addressed to her with a hand-drawn picture of a coffin and the date, May 22, 2009. He looked at it and smiled sadistically.

"Usted me piensa le envio esto?" he asked. Do you think I sent you this?

"No se," she sobbed, shaking her head.

"Bien, le estoy enviando esto," he said, laughing and un-buckling his belt. Well, I'm sending you this.

JUNE 10, 2009

NEW YORK CITY

Will assumed she'd still be gone, and his suspicions were confirmed the second he opened the door and dropped his roller bag and briefcase.

The apartment remained in its pre-Jennifer state. The scented candles. Gone. The place mats on the dining room table. Gone. The frilly throw pillows. Gone. Her clothes, shoes, cosmetic toothbrush. Gone. He finished his whirlwind tour of the one bedroom layout and opened the refrigerator door. Even those stupid bottles of vitamin water. Gone.

He had completed a two-day out-of-town course in sensitivity training mandated at his last performance review. If she had unexpectedly returned, he would have tried out some new techniques on her, but Jennifer was still--gone.

He loosened his tie, kicked off his shoes, and opened the small liquor cabinet under the TV set. Her envelope was tucked under his bottle of Johnnie Walker Black, the same place he had found it the day she did a runner on him. On it, she had written *Fuck You* in her distinctive feminine scrawl. He poured a large one, propped his feet on the coffee table, and for old times' sake reread the letter that revealed things about himself he already knew. A clatter distracted him midway through, a framed picture toppled by his big toe. Zeckendorf had sent it: the freshman roommates at their reunion the previous summer. Another year--gone.

An hour later, hazy with booze, he was flooded with one of Jennifer's sentiments: you are flawed beyond repair.

Flawed beyond repair, he thought. An interesting concept. Unfixable. Unredeemable. No chance for rehabilitation or meaningful improvement.

He switched on the Mets game and fell asleep on the sofa.

Flawed or not, he was at his desk by 8:00 A.M. the next morning, digging through his Outlook in-box. He banged out a few replies then sent an e-mail to his supervisor, Sue Sanchez, thanking her for having the managerial prowess and foresight to recommend him for the seminar he had just attended. His sensitivity had increased about forty-seven percent, he reckoned, and he expected she would see immediate and measurable results. He signed it, *Sensitively, Will*, and clicked Send.

In thirty seconds his phone rang. Sanchez's line.

"Welcome home, Will," she said, oozing treacle.

"Great to be back, Susan," he said, his southern accent flattened by all the years spent away from the Florida panhandle.

"Why don't you come and see me, okay?"

"When would be good for you, Susan?" he asked earnestly.

"Now!" She hung up.

She was sitting behind his old desk in his old office, which had a nice view of the Statue of Liberty thanks to Mohammed Atta, but that didn't irritate him as much as the puckered expression on

her taut olive face. Sanchez was an obsessive exerciser who read service manuals and management self-help books while she worked out. She always appealed to him physically, but that sour mug and nasal officious tone with its Latina twang doused his interest.

Hastily, she said, "Sit. We need to have a chat, Will."

"Susan, if you're planning on chewing me out, I'm prepared to handle it professionally. Rule number six--or was it number four?: 'when you feel you are being provoked, do not act precipitously. Stop and consider the consequences of your actions, then choose your words carefully, respectful of the reactions of the person or persons who have challenged you.' Pretty good, huh? I got a certificate. He smiled and folded his hands across his nascent paunch.

"I'm so not in the mood for your BS today," she said wearily. "I've got a problem and I need you to help me solve it." Management-speak for: you're about to get shafted.

"For you? Anything. As long as it doesn't involve nudity or mess up my last fourteen months."

She sighed, then paused, giving Will the impression she was taking rule number four or six to heart. He was aware that she considered him her number one problem child. Everyone in the office knew the score:

Will Piper. Forty-eight, nine years Sanchez's senior. Formerly her boss, before getting busted from his management grade back to Special Agent. Formerly breath-catchingly handsome, a six-plu footer with I-beam shoulders, electric-blue eyes, and boyishly rumpled sandy hair, before alcohol and inactivity gave his flesh the consistency and pallor of rising bread dough. Formerly a hotshot, before becoming a glib pain-in-the-ass clock-watcher.

She just spat it out. "John Mueller had a stroke two days ago. The doctors say he's going to recover but he'll be on medical leave. His absence, particularly now, is a problem for the office. Benjamin, Ronald, and I have discussed this."

Will marveled at the news. "Mueller? He's younger than you are! Fricking marathon runner. How the hell did *he* have a stroke?"

"He had a hole in his heart no one picked up before," she said. "A small blood clot from his leg floated through and went up to his brain. That's what I was told. Pretty scary how that could happen."

Will loathed Mueller. Smug, wiry shithead. Everything by the book. Totally insufferable, though the SOB still made snarky comments to his face about his blow-up--insulated, the bastard supposed, by his leper status. Hope he walks and talks like a retard for the rest of his life, was the first notion that came to mind. "Christ, that's too bad," he said instead.

"We need you to take the Doomsday case."

It took almost supernatural strength to prevent himself from telling her to screw herself.

It should have been his case from the start. In fact it was nothing short of outrageous that it had been offered to him the day it hit the office. Here he was, one of the most accomplished serial killing experts in the Bureau's recent history, passed over for a marquee case right in his jurisdiction. It was a measure of how damaged his career was, he supposed. At the time, the snub stung like hell, but he gotten over it quickly enough and come to believe he had dodged a bullet.

He was on the homestretch. Retirement was like a glistening watery mirage in the desert, just out of reach. He was done with ambition and striving, he was done with office politics, he was done with murders and death. He was tired and lonely and stuck in a city he disliked. He wanted to go home. With a pension.

He chewed on the bad piece of news. Doomsday had rapidly become the office's highest profile case, the kind that demanded an intensity he hadn't brought to the table in years. Long days and blow weekends weren't the issue. Thanks to Jennifer, he had all the time in the world. The problem was the mirror, because--as he would tell anyone who asked--he simply no longer gave a damn. You needed raging ambition to solve a serial killing case, and that flame had long ago sputtered and die

Luck was important too, but in his experience, you succeeded by busting your hump and creating the environment for luck to do its capricious thing.

Beyond that, Mueller's partner was a young Special Agent, only three years out of Quantico, who was so imbued with devout ambition and agency rectitude that he likened her to a religious fanatic. He had observed her hustling around the twenty-third floor, speed-walking through the corridors, profoundly humorless and sanctimonious, taking herself so seriously it made him ill.

He leaned forward, almost ashen. "Look, Susan," he began, his voice rising, "this is not a good idea. That ship has sailed. You should have asked me to do the case a few weeks ago, but you know what? It was the right call. At this point, it's not good for me, it's not good for Nancy, it's not good for the office, the Bureau, the taxpayers, the victims, and the goddamned future victims! You know it and I know it!"

She got up to shut the door then sat back in her chair and crossed her legs. The rasp of her pantyhose rubbing against itself momentarily distracted him from his rant. "Yes, I'll keep my voice down," he volunteered, "but most of all, it's terrible for you. You're in the chute. You've got Major Thefts and Violent Crimes, the branch with the second-highest visibility in New York! This Doomsday asshole gets caught on your watch, you move up. You're a woman, you're ethnic, a few years you're an assistant director at Quantico, maybe a Supervisory Special Agent in D.C. The sky's the limit. Don't fuck it up by involving me, that's my friendly advice."

She gave him a stare to freeze mud. "I certainly appreciate this reverse mentoring, Will, but I don't think I want to rely on career advice from a man who is sliding down the org chart. Believe me, I don't love this idea, but we've gone over it internally. Benjamin and Ronald refuse to move anyone from Counterterrorism, and there's no one else in White Collar or Organized Crime who's done this kind of case. They don't want someone parachuting in from D.C. or another office. It makes them look bad. This is New York, not Cleveland. We're supposed to have a deep bench. You've got the right background--the wrong personality, which you're going to have to work on, but the right background. It's yours. It's going to be your last big case, Will. You're going out with a bang. Think of it that way and cheer up."

He took another run at it. "If we catch this guy tomorrow, which we won't, I'll be history by the time this thing goes to trial."

"So you'll come back to testify. By then the per diem will probably look pretty good."

"Very funny. What about Nancy? I'll poison her. You want her to be the sacrificial lamb?"

"She's a pistol. She can handle herself and she can handle you."

He stopped arguing, sullen. "What about the shit I'm working on?"

"I'll spread it around. No problem."

That was it, it was over. It wasn't a democracy, and quitting or getting fired were not options. Fourteen months. Fourteen fucking months.

Within a couple of hours his life had changed. The office manager showed up with orange moving crates and had his active case files packed and moved out of his cubicle. In their place, Mueller's Doomsday files arrived, boxes of documents compiled in the weeks before a sticky clump of platelets turned a few milliliters of his brain into mush. Will stared at them as if they were stinking piles of dung and drank another cup of overstewed coffee before deigning to open one, randomly plucking a folder.

He heard her clearing her throat at the cubicle entrance before he saw her.

"Hi," Nancy said. "I guess we're going to be working together."

Nancy Lipinski was stuffed into a charcoal-gray suit. It was a half size too small and it pinched her waist enough to force her belly to bulge slightly but unattractively over the waistband. She w

pint-sized, five feet three inches in stocking feet, but Will's assessment was that she needed to drop some pounds everywhere, even from her rounded soft face. Were there cheekbones under there? She wasn't the kind of hard-body grad Quantico typically spit out. He wondered how she'd passed muster at the academy's Physical Training Unit. They busted it down there and didn't cut the gals any slack. Admittedly, she wasn't unattractive. Her practical collar-length russet hair, makeup, and gloss were all put together well enough to complement a delicately shaped nose, pretty lips, and lively hazel eyes, and on another woman her cologne would have done the trick for him. It was her plaintive look that set him off. Could she really have become attached to a zero like Mueller?

"What are you going to do?" he said rhetorically.

"Is this a good time?"

"Look, Nancy, I've hardly cracked a box. Why don't you give me a couple of hours, later this afternoon maybe, and we can start talking?"

"That's okay, Will. I just wanted to let you know that even though I'm upset about John, I'm going to keep working my tail off on this case. We've never worked together but I've studied some of your cases and I know the contribution you've made to the field. I'm always looking for ways to improve, so your feedback's going to be extremely important to me..."

Will felt he had to nip this kind of wretched talk in the bud. "You a fan of *Seinfeld*?" he asked.

"The TV show?"

He nodded.

"I mean I'm aware of it," she replied suspiciously.

"The people who created the show made the ground rules for the characters, and those ground rules set it apart from all the other sitcoms. Do you want to know those rules? Because they're going to apply to you and me."

"Sure, Will!" she said brightly, apparently ready to absorb a lesson.

"The rules were--no learning and no hugging. I'll see you later, Nancy," he deadpanned.

As she stood there, looking like she was deciding whether to retreat or respond, they both heard quick light footsteps approaching, a woman trying to run in heels. "Sue alert," Will called out melodramatically. "Sounds like she's got something we don't have."

Around their shop, information endowed the bearer with temporary power, and Sue Sanchez seemed to get a jazzy rush from knowing something before anyone else.

"Good, you're both here," she said, shoos Nancy inside the cube. "There's been another one on Number seven, up in the Bronx." She was giddy, borderline juvenile. "Get up there before the Fortieth Precinct screws it up."

Will threw his arms into the air, exasperated. "Jesus, Susan, I don't know a goddamned thing about the first six yet. Gimme a break!"

Bang. Nancy chimed in brightly, "Hey, just pretend this is number one! No biggie! Anyway, I'll catch you up on the way."

"Like I said, Will," Sue said, cracking an evil grin, "she's a pistol."

Will picked up one of the department's standard-issue black Ford Explorers. He pulled away from the underground garage at 26 Liberty Plaza and navigated the one-ways until he was pointing north, heading up the FDR Drive in the fast lane. The car was detailed and running smooth, the traffic wasn't bad, and usually he enjoyed a nice run out of the office. If he'd been alone, he would have tuned WFAN and satisfied his sports jones, but he wasn't. Nancy Lipinski was in the passenger seat, notebook in hand, lecturing him as they passed under the Roosevelt Island tramway, its gondolas slowly gliding high above the choppy black waters of the East River.

She was as excited as a perv at a porn convention. This was her first serial murder case, the

champagne of homicides, the defining moment in her prepubescent career. She pulled the assignment because she was Sue's pet and had worked with Mueller before. The two of them got along famously. Nancy ready and willing to fortify his brittle ego. *John, you're so smart! John, do you have photographic memory? John, I wish I could conduct an interview like you.*

Will struggled to pay attention. It was relatively painless to get three weeks of data spoon-fed but his mind wandered and his head was still fogged up from his late night tryst with Johnnie Walker. Still, he knew he could get into the groove in a heartbeat. Over two decades, he had taken the lead on eight major serial killing cases and kibitzed in countless others.

The first was in Indianapolis, during his inaugural field assignment, when he wasn't much older than Nancy. The perp was a twisted psycho who liked to put out cigarettes on his victims' eyelids until a discarded stub broke the case. When his second wife, Evie, got into grad school at Duke, he pulled a transfer to Raleigh, and sure enough, another crackpot with a straight razor started killing women in and around Asheville. Nine agonizing months and five diced-up victims later, he nailed that creep to the wall. All of a sudden, he had a reputation; he was a de facto specialist. They bumped him, messily divorced him again, to headquarters to work Violent Crimes in a group headed by Hal Sheridan, the man who had trained a generation of agents how to profile serial killers.

Sheridan was a cold fish, emotionally detached and tightly wound to the point where he was the butt of an office joke: if a killing spree broke out in Virginia, Hal would have to be on the hot list. He doled out the national cases carefully, matching the criminal's mind to the mind of his agent. Sheridan gave him cases involving extreme brutality and torture, killers who directed massive rage at women. Go figure.

Nancy's recitations began to penetrate his fog. The facts, he had to acknowledge, were pretty damned interesting. He knew the broad strokes from the media. Who didn't? It was *the* story. Predictably, the perp's moniker, the Domsday Killer, came from the press. The *Post* nabbed the honors. It's blood rival, the *Daily News*, resisted for a few days, countering with the headline POSTCARDS FROM HELL, but soon capitulated and started blaring Domsday all over the front page.

According to Nancy, the postcards did not have common fingerprints; the sender probably used fiber-free, possibly latex utility gloves. There were a few nonvictim, nonrelated prints on a couple of the cards, and cooperating FBI field offices were in the process of working up postal workers in the Las Vegas to New York delivery chain. The postcards themselves were plain white three-by-five inch cards available in thousands of retail outlets. They were printed on an HP Photosmart ink-jet printer, one of tens of thousands in circulation, fed in twice to print each side. The font was from the standard Microsoft Word pull-down menu. The ink-drawn coffin outlines were probably all done by the same hand using a black Pentel pen, ultrafine point, one of millions in circulation. The stamps were all the same, forty-one-cent American flag designs, one of hundreds of millions in circulation, the back peel-and-stick, DNA free. The six cards were mailed on May 18 and cleared through the central USA mail processing center in Las Vegas.

"So the guy would have had plenty of time to fly from Vegas to New York but it would have been a stretch for him to drive or take a train," Will interjected. He caught her by surprise since she was sure he'd been listening. "Have you gotten passenger lists for all direct and connecting flights from Las Vegas arriving at LaGuardia, Kennedy, and Newark between the eighteenth and twenty-first?"

She looked up from her notebook. "I asked John if we should do that! He told me it wasn't worth the trouble because someone could have mailed them for the killer."

Will honked at a Camry going too slowly for his liking, then aggressively passed on the right when it didn't yield. He couldn't mask his sarcasm. "Surprise! Mueller was wrong. Serial killers almost never have accomplices. Sometimes they'll kill in pairs, like the D.C. snipers or the Phoenix

shooters, but that's rare as hell. Getting logistical support to set up the crimes? That'd be a first. The guys are lone wolves."

She was scribbling.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"Taking notes on what you said."

Christ, this isn't school, he thought. "Since your pen is uncapped, take this down too," he said caustically. "In case the killer did do a cross-country dash, check for speeding tickets along major routes."

She nodded, then asked cautiously, "Do you want to hear more?"

"I'm listening."

It boiled down to this: the victims, four males and two females, ranged in age from eighteen to eighty-two. Three were in Manhattan, one each in Brooklyn, Staten Island, and Queens. Today's would be the first in the Bronx. All the M.O.'s were the same. The victim receives a postcard with a date one or two days in the future, each with a coffin drawn on the back, and winds up being killed on the exact date. Two stabbings, one shooting, one made to look like a heroin overdose, one crushed by a car that jumped the sidewalk in a hit and run, and one thrown out a window.

"And what did Mueller say about that?" Will asked.

"He thought the killer was trying to throw us off by not sticking to one pattern."

"And what do you think?"

"I think it's unusual. It's not what's in the textbooks."

He imagined her criminology texts, passages compulsively highlighted with yellow markers, neat marginalia, tiny lettering. "How about the victim profiles?" he asked. "Any links?"

The victims appeared to be unconnected. The computational guys in Washington were doing multidatabase matrix analysis looking for common denominators, a supercomputer version of six degrees of Kevin Bacon, but so far no hits.

"Sexual assaults?"

She flipped pages. "Just one, a thirty-two-year-old Hispanic woman, Consuela Pilar Lopez, Staten Island. She was raped and stabbed to death."

"After we finish up in the Bronx, I want to start there."

"Why?"

"You can tell a lot about a killer by the way he treats a lady."

They were on the Bruckner Expressway now, tracking east through the Bronx.

"You know where we're going?" he asked.

She found it in her notebook. "Eighty-fourth Sullivan Place."

"Thank you! I don't have a fucking clue where that is," he barked. "I know where Yankee Stadium is. Period. That's all I know about the fucking Bronx."

"Please don't swear," she said sternly, like a reprimanding middle school teacher. "I have a map." She unfolded it, studied it a moment and looked around. "We need to get off on Bruckner Boulevard."

They rode in silence for a mile. He waited for her to resume her tutorial but she stared at the road, stony-faced.

He finally looked over and saw her lower lip quivering. "What? You're mad at me for dropping the F-bomb, for fuck's sake?"

She looked at him wistfully. "You're different from John Mueller."

"Jesus," he muttered. "It took you this long to figure that out?"

Driving south on East Tremont, they passed the Forty-fifth Precinct house on Barkley Avenue, a ugly squat building with too few parking spaces for the number of squad cars packed around it. The thermometer was touching eighty and the street was teeming with Puerto Ricans, toting plastic

shopping bags, pushing baby carriages, or just strolling along with cell phones pressed against ears moving in and out of the groceries, bodegas, and cheap mom-and-pop stores. The women were showing a lot of flesh. Too many heavy chicks in halter tops and short-shorts, jiggling along in flip-flops, for his liking. Do they actually think they look foxy? he wondered. They made his passenger look like a supermodel.

Nancy was buried in the map, trying not to screw up. "From here, it's the third left," she said.

Sullivan Place was an inconvenient street for a major murder. Cruisers, unmarked vehicles, and medical examiner vans were double-parked in front of the crime scene, choking off the traffic. Will pulled up to a young cop trying to keep one lane passable and flashed his badge. "Jeez," the cop moaned. "I don't know where to put you. Can you swing around the block? Maybe there's something around the corner."

Will parroted him. "Around the corner."

"Yeah, around the block, you know take a couple of rights."

Will turned off the ignition, got out and tossed the cop the keys. Cars started honking like mad in an instant gridlock.

"Whaddya doing!" the cop hollered. "You can't leave this here!" Nancy continued to sit in the SUV, mortified.

Will called to her. "C'mon, let's get a move on. And take Officer Cuneo's badge number down in your little book in case he does anything disrespectful to government property."

The cop muttered, "Asshole."

Will was spoiling for a dust-up and this kid would do just fine. "Listen," he said, boiling over with rage, "if you like your pathetic little job then don't fuck with me! If you don't give a shit about it then take a shot. Go on! Try it!"

Two angry guys, veins bulging, face-to-face. "Will! Can we go?" Nancy implored. "We're wasting time."

The cop shook his head, climbed into the Explorer, drove it down the block and double-parked in front of a detective's car. Will, still breathing hard, winked at Nancy, "I knew he'd find us a spot."

It was a pocket-sized apartment building, three floors, six units, dirty white brickwork, slapped together in the forties. The hallway was dim and depressing, brown and black ceramic checkerboard tiling on the floors, grimy beige walls, bare yellow bulbs. All the action was in and around Apartment 1A, ground floor left. Toward the rear of the hall, near the garbage shaft, family members crowded together in multigenerational grief, a middle-aged woman wailing softly, her husband, in work boots trying to comfort her, a fully pregnant young woman, sitting on the bare floor, recovering from hyperventilation, a young girl in a Sunday dress, looking bewildered, a couple of old men in loose shirts, shaking their heads and stroking their stubble.

Will squirmed through the half-open apartment door, Nancy following. He winced at the sight of too many cooks spoiling the broth. There were at least a dozen people in an eight-hundred-square-foot space, astronomically increasing the odds of crime scene pollution. He did a quick reconnoiter with Nancy on his heels, and amazingly no one stopped them or even questioned their presence. From the living room. Old-lady furniture and bric-a-brac. Twenty-year-old TV. He took a pen from his pocket and used it to part the curtains to peer through each window, a procedure he repeated in every room. Kitchen. Spic-and-span. No dishes in the sink. Bathroom, also tidy, smelling of foot powder. Bedroom. Too crowded with chattering personnel to see much except for plump dead legs, gray and mottled, beside an unmade bed, one foot half inside a slipper.

Will bellowed, "Who's in charge here?"

Sudden silence until, "Who's asking?" A balding detective with a big gut and a tight suit separated himself from the scrum and appeared at the bedroom door.

"FBI," Will said. "I'm Special Agent Piper." Nancy looked hurt she wasn't introduced.

~~"Detective Chapman, Forty-fifth Precinct." He extended a large warm hand, the weight of a brick.~~
He smelled of onions.

"Detective, what do you say we clear this place out so we can have a nice quiet inspection of the crime scene?"

"My guys are almost done, then it's all yours."

"Let's do it now, okay? Half your men aren't wearing gloves. No one's got booties on. You're making a mess here, Detective."

"Nobody's touching nothing," Chapman said defensively. He noticed Nancy taking notes and asked nervously, "Who's she, your secretary?"

"Special Agent Lipinski," she said, waving her notebook at him sweetly. "Could I get your first name, Detective Chapman?"

Will suppressed a smile.

Chapman wasn't inclined to get territorial with the feds. He'd rant and rave, waste his time and wind up on the losing end of the proposition. Life was too short. "All right, everybody!" he announced. "We got the FBI here and they want everyone out, so pack up and let them do their thing."

"Have them leave the postcard," Will said.

Chapman reached into his breast pocket and pulled out a white card inside a Ziploc bag. "I got it right here."

When the room was clear, they inspected the body with the detective. It was getting toasty in there and the first whiffs of decay were in the air. For a gunshot victim, there was surprisingly little blood, a few clots on her matted gray hair, a streak down her left cheek where an arterial gush from her ear had formed a tributary that tracked down her neck and dripped onto moss-green carpet. She was on her back, a foot from the floral flounce of her unmade bed, dressed in a pink cotton nightdress she had probably worn a thousand times. Her eyes, already bone dry, were open and staring. Will had seen innumerable bodies, many of them brutalized beyond recognition of their humanity. This lady looked pretty good, a nice Puerto Rican grandma whom you'd think could be revived with a good shoulder shake. He checked out Nancy to gauge her reaction to the presence of death.

She was taking notes.

Chapman started in, "So the way I figure it--"

Will put up his hand, stopping him in mid-sentence. "Special Agent Lipinski, why don't you tell us what happened here?"

Her face flushed, making her cheeks appear fuller. The flush extended to her throat and disappeared under the neckline of her white blouse. She swallowed and moistened her lips with the tip of her tongue. She began slowly then picked up the tempo as she assembled her thoughts. "Well, the killer was probably here before, not necessarily inside the apartment but around the building. The security grate on one of the kitchen windows was pried loose. I'd have to take a closer look at it but I bet the window frame is rotted. Still, even hiding in the side alley, he wouldn't have gambled on doing the job all in one night, not if he wanted to make sure he hit the date on the postcard. He came back last night, went into the alley and finished pulling the grate off. Then he cut the window with a glass cutter and undid the latch from the outside. He tramped in some dirt from the alley onto the kitchen floor and the hall and right there, and there."

She pointed to two spots on the bedroom carpet, including one smudge that Chapman was standing on. He stepped away like it was radioactive.

"She must've heard something because she sat up and tried to put her slippers on. Before she could finish he was in the room and he took one shot at close range, through her left ear. It looks like it's a small-caliber round, probably a .22. The bullet's still in her cranium, there's no exit wound."

don't think there was a sexual assault here but we need to check that. Also, we need to find out anything was stolen. The place wasn't ransacked but I didn't see a pocketbook anywhere. He probably left the way he came in." She paused and scrunched her forehead. "That's it. That's what I think happened."

Will frowned at her, made her sweat for a few seconds then said, "Yeah, that's what I think happened too." Nancy looked like she'd just won a spelling bee and proudly stared down at her crepe-soled shoes. "You agree with my partner, Detective?"

Chapman shrugged. "Could very well be. Yeah, .22 handgun, I'm sure that's the weapon here."

The guy doesn't have a fucking clue, Will thought. "Do you know if anything was stolen?"

"Her daughter says her purse is missing. She's the one who found her this morning. The postcard was on the kitchen table with some other mail."

Will pointed at grandma's thighs. "Was she sexually assaulted?"

"I don't have any idea! Maybe if you hadn't kicked the M.E. out we'd know," Chapman huffed.

Will lowered himself onto his haunches and used his pen to carefully lift her nightdress. He squinted into the tent and saw undisturbed old-lady underwear. "Doesn't look like it," he said. "Let me see the postcard."

Will inspected it carefully, front and back, and handed it to Nancy. "Is that the same font used in the other ones?"

She said it was.

"It's Courier twelve point," he said.

She asked how he knew that, sounding impressed.

"I'm a font savant," he quipped. He read the name out loud. "Ida Gabriela Santiago."

According to Chapman, her daughter told him she never used her middle name.

Will stood up and stretched his back. "Okay, we're good," he said. "Keep the area sealed off until the FBI forensics team arrives. We'll be in touch if we need anything."

"You got any leads on this wacko?" Chapman asked.

Will's cell phone started ringing inside his jacket, counterintuitively playing *Ode to Joy*. When he fished for it he replied, "Jack shit, Detective, but this is only my first day on the case," then said into the phone, "This is Piper..."

He listened and shook his head a couple of times before he told the caller, "When it rains, it pours. Say, Mueller hasn't made a miraculous recovery, has he?...Too bad." He ended the call and looked up. "Ready for a long night, partner?"

Nancy nodded like a bobble-head doll. She seemed to like the appellation "partner," like it a lot.

"That was Sanchez," he told her. "We've got another postcard but this one's a little different. It's dated today but the guy's still alive."

FEBRUARY 12, 1947

LONDON

Ernest Bevin was the link, the go-between. The only cabinet member to serve in both governments. To Clement Atlee, the Labor prime minister, Bevin was the logical choice. "Ernest," Atlee had told his Foreign Secretary, the two of them seated before a hot coal fire at Downing Street, "speak to Churchill. Tell him I'm personally asking for his help." Sweat beaded on Atlee's bald head, and Bevin watched with discomfort as a rivulet ran down his high forehead onto his hawklike nose.

Assignment accepted. No questions asked, no reservations tendered. Bevin was a soldier, an old-line labor leader, one of the founders of Britain's largest trade union, the TGWU. Always the pragmatist, prewar, he was one of the few Labor politicians to cooperate with the Conservative government of Winston Churchill and align himself against the pacifist wing in the Labor Party.

In 1940, when Churchill readied the nation for war and formed an all-party coalition government, he made Bevin Minister for Labor and National Service, giving him a broad portfolio involving the domestic wartime economy. Shrewdly, Bevin struck a balance between military and domestic needs and created his own army of fifty thousand men diverted from the armed forces to work the coal mines: Bevin Boys. Churchill thought the world of him.

Then the shocker. Just weeks after VE day, basking in triumphant victory, the man the Russians called the British Bulldog lost the 1945 general election in a landslide drubbing by Clement Atlee's Labor Party, tossed aside by an electorate that did not trust him to rebuild the nation. The man who had said, "We shall defend our island whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall never surrender," limped from the grand stage in surrender, depressed and dispirited. Churchill moodily led the opposition after his defeat, but took most of his pleasure from his beloved Chartwell House, where he wrote poetry, painted watercolors, and tossed bread to the black swans.

Now, a year and a half later, Bevin, Prime Minister Atlee's Foreign Secretary, sat deep underground awaiting his former boss. It was cold, and Bevin kept his overcoat buttoned over his winter-weight vested suit. He was a solid man, thinning gray hair swept back and pomaded, fleshed-faced with incipient jowls. He had chosen this clandestine meeting spot purposely, to send a psychological message. The subject matter would be important. Secret. Come now, without delay.

The message was not lost on Churchill, who barged in, glanced about unsentimentally and declared, "Why would you ask me to come back to this godforsaken place?"

Bevin rose and with a wave of his hand dismissed the high-ranking military man who had accompanied Churchill. "Were you in Kent?"

"Yes, I was in Kent!" Churchill paused. "I never thought I'd set foot in here again."

"I won't ask for your coat. It's chilly."

"It always was so," Churchill replied.

The two men shook hands dispassionately then sat down, Bevin steering Churchill to a spot where

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