

ROUGH DRAFT

JAMES W. HALL



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“Lots of action, some of it gruesome, and an intriguing plot.”

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“ROUGH DRAFT is good, old-fashioned, hideously violent fun ... Remarkably original ... The creepy hitman Hal is one of Hall’s best psychos.”

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—Sue Grafton

“BODY LANGUAGE is a sizzling tale of sex, blood, and obsession.”

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“Hall is back in top form ... A high-priority purchase for thriller fans.”

—*Library Journal*

ALSO BY JAMES W.HALL

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ROUGH DRAFT

JAMES W. HALL



St. Martin's Paperbacks

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In memory of my father, J. Noble Hall Jr.,
my best reader, my biggest fan.
You were something else, Daddy-O.

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“Pray look better, sir ... those things yonder are no giants, but windmills”

—MIGUEL DE CERVANTES

**ROUGH
DRAFT**

PROLOGUE

“He changed his story,” Hannah Keller said, looking back toward the TV cameras. “Now Mr. Marquez is claiming he was not insane at the time he threw his daughter out the third-story window.”

There was the usual clamor of questions. Hannah waited till they’d died out and responded to the one she was prepared to answer.

“Mr. Marquez has now told our investigators that his daughter was crying constantly for three days and three nights and he believed she was possessed by the devil and that’s why he tossed her out of his apartment window.”

“The devil?” The *Herald* reporter in the front row smiled thinly. “So is Mr. Marquez claiming he murdered his daughter as a form of exorcism?”

It got a snicker from a few of the other reporters, but the remark wouldn’t make the evening news. Too cynical even for Miami. Anyway, this wasn’t going to be a lead story. Child killing wasn’t the grabber it once was, too common, an urban cliché. In the *Herald* the Marquez girl would get less than a paragraph. It probably wouldn’t even make TV.

Hannah Keller glanced at her watch, straightened her papers on the podium. She was tall and wide-shouldered, blond, green-eyed, with strong cheekbones. She was under no illusions about why the brass had offered her a two-step pay increase to leave homicide and stand before the cameras every day. They wanted an appealing face to divert the TV viewing public from the latest criminal outrage. Though she’d loved homicide, the raise was too large to ignore. So late last year, the bright boys upstairs got their prominent cheekbones, and Hannah started taking home five hundred more a month.

Tom Berry, the *Herald* guy, had his hand up again. Hannah scanned the group of reporters, pretended she didn’t see him.

“So if there’s nothing else,” she said.

Berry stood up. He raked his hand through his shaggy hair.

“Got anything new on J. J. Fielding?”

Hannah closed her eyes, summoning her patience.

“Okay, okay,” Berry said. “So you’re pissed off at me. Hey, I’m sorry, Hannah, I was just doing my job.”

Hannah looked out toward the video cameras at the rear of the room. She never knew which snippets they were going to use. This sentence, that one. Whatever suited their purpose. She had to assume that anything she said might wind up on the evening news, the official word of the Miami Police Department. Holding her tongue had become her major professional skill.

“Mr. Fielding is now a fugitive from justice. As you know, last Friday U.S. federal marshals attempted to serve Fielding with an indictment on fourteen counts of money laundering, but because someone in the U.S. Attorney’s office chose to leak the news to our friend here, Mr. Berry, and Mr. Berry and his editors decided to run the story without consulting the U.S. Attorney’s office, Mr. J. J. Fielding managed to drop out of sight before the marshals could serve their warrants.”

“And that’s all?” Berry was still on his feet. “Nothing new?”

“Well, there is one thing,” Hannah said.

Some of the reporters were flipping their notebooks closed, checking their beepers.

“Before Mr. Fielding disappeared, he managed to divert a sizable sum from a couple of accounts on Nation’s Trust.”

“How sizable?” Berry said.

The TV guys were shutting down their cameras, a couple of on-screen reporters were on their cell phones already, checking their next assignment. Nobody cared about money laundering, some banker who’d been playing footsie with the cocaine cartel. A decade or two earlier it was hot stuff, but it wasn’t fashionable anymore, didn’t have the lapel-grabbing power these guys needed.

Hannah shuffled her papers.

“How sizable, Hannah?”

She kept her voice deadpan, a little understatement for this heard-it-all group.

“I believe the amount is somewhere in the neighborhood of four hundred and sixty-three million dollars, which would make J. J. Fielding’s embezzlement the largest in U.S. history.”

Berry stared up at her, his mouth sagging.

Hannah said, “As a result of their investigation, the U.S. Attorney’s office has frozen several accounts that Fielding was managing, small offshore companies apparently fronts for the drug cartel.”

“Frozen for how long?” a TV woman asked from the rear of the room. Everyone perked up now.

“Indefinitely,” Hannah said.

“Neat trick,” said Berry. “Your dad seizes their assets, so now the only way the cartel can get their money back is to go after Fielding. Track him down, do the government’s job for them.”

Hannah looked at him for a long moment. Then lifted her eyes and gazed out at the others.

“So, if there’s nothing else,” she said, “I’ll see you all again tomorrow.”

Hannah was walking back to her office when Tom Berry trotted up beside her.

“Hey, that was cute, Hannah. Like an afterthought, dropping that bombshell.”

“Glad you liked it.”

Tom was shorter than Hannah by almost half a foot and had to trot to stay up with her stride.

“So, I was wondering, Hannah, maybe you’d be willing to put a word in for me, help me get a chance to speak to your father?”

She halted abruptly and swung around.

“Jesus, I don’t believe you. You actually think I’m going to arrange an interview with my dad? Man, you don’t get it, do you?”

“I know, I know. You’re pissed off at me, your dad is pissed off. Hey, everybody I know is pissed off at me. I’m used to it. All I want to do is ask Assistant U.S. Attorney Keller a few questions, try to get the complete story on this. It’s going to be national now, Hannah. The largest embezzlement in U.S. history. Man, we’re talking major news event here.”

“What you mean is, you think this could be your ticket to the big time. The *Post*, the *Times*.”

“Well, yeah, sure, it’s got big-time potential. But the point is, your father, he’s going to be the key guy on this. And he won’t return my calls.”

“You’re amazing, Tom. Dad spent an entire year digging up the evidence he needed to put Fielding away, and you, in one stupid, greedy, me-first story, shoot the whole thing down. And now you expect him to talk to you, give you an inside track?”

“If you asked him, he would. Come on, Hannah. I know you’re mad at me at the moment, but, hey, we’re on the same side. I want to see Fielding captured, your dad wants to see him captured. If I can

do this story right, it might help.”

“Bullshit, Tom. Bullshit. I’m not doing it. You want to talk to my dad, you’ll have to find some other way.”

She headed on down the corridor. Tom called out, a last pleading. But she kept on going.

Back at her office, Gisela Ortega was sitting in her chair, grinning at her as she entered the room.

“What?”

“What do you mean, what?” Gisela said.

“That grin. What happened, somebody ask you to get married?”

Gisela was wearing a pale yellow dress with small roses printed on it. One of the quietest outfits she owned. She had short black hair and bright green eyes. She’d been working as Public Information Officer for six years, an old-timer by Miami PD standards. Showed Hannah the ropes two years ago when she transferred in from homicide.

“Nobody asked for my hand,” Gisela said. “I’m grinning about you, not me.”

“Oh, you heard about my little show downstairs?”

She shook her head. Grinning wider.

“Okay, so what is it, Gisela? Tell me. Don’t do this. I hate guessing games.”

“You got a phone call.”

“Yeah?”

“Some guy, he was very nice. He sounded young. Very hip.”

“He saw me on TV and wanted a date.”

She shook her head. Really pleased with herself.

“He said he had good news for you, and I told him you were busy and I was your best friend so it was okay to tell me. I am your best friend, aren’t I, Hannah?”

“You won’t be much longer if you keep doing this.”

“The guy’s name was Max Chonin. Does that ring a bell?”

Hannah looked at the far wall. A photo of her mom and dad on a cruise they’d taken last summer. Both of them wrapped in sheets for some goofy shipboard toga party.

Hannah shook her head.

“Never heard of him.”

“Literary agent. New York City.”

Hannah smiled.

“Oh, that guy,” she said, feeling her pulse jump. “What? He wants to represent my book?”

“No,” Gisela said. “Guess again.”

“Gisela, stop it. Just tell me.”

“He sold your book.”

“What?”

“He sold your book, *First Light*”.

“He couldn’t have. I just sent it to the guy two weeks ago. He was going to look at it, tell me what he thought.”

“He got it, gave it to some hotshot publisher he knows, and the guy wants to buy it. That is, of course, if you’re interested.”

“Really!”

Gisela kept on grinning. “Really,” she said. “Really, really, really.”

“My God. I don’t believe it.”

“And that’s not even the best part,” Gisela said.

Hannah stepped over to the visitor’s chair and sat down. Her knees were mush. She’d sold her goddamn book. Her novel about a female police officer who does secret after-hours crime fighting. A year of writing it in the early morning before Randall got up and went to school and she headed off to work. Using her police stories, the droll talk, some of the macabre events that were the daily reality around this city.

“Okay,” Hannah said. “I’m ready, I’m sitting down. What’s the best part?”

“Well, he didn’t tell me the exact figure, but he said he didn’t think you were going to need to keep taking shit from reporters anymore unless you really wanted to.”

Hannah was stopped at a light on Bayshore. Dialing her mother for the fourth time and for the fourth time getting no answer. She’d already called her father’s office and was told he hadn’t come to work that morning.

It was noon and the traffic was light through Coconut Grove.

She went back to her driving, heading up the steep hill into the heart of the Grove, then down the long shady avenue past the big stone churches and private schools and Mediterranean villas.

Ed Keller had probably decided to take the day off, still reeling from Berry’s article and disgusted by the information leak in his office that had cost him a year’s work. He and Randall would no doubt be snook-fishing on the bay. For the last month since school let out, her six-year-old son had been spending his days with his grandparents while Hannah was at work. “Club Granddad” is what Ed Keller called it. He was happy as hell to take charge of the boy, spoil him any way he and Martha could dream up. They’d been covering Hannah’s day-care needs since her marriage broke up six years ago. Her Prince Charming turned out to be a child molester. First year of marriage, the son of a bitch was caught in the backseat of a car raping a fifteen-year-old high school girl. So much for Hannah’s good judgment in men.

She pulled into the driveway of her parents’ Gables-by-the-Sea ranch style and parked. Her father’s Buick was still at the curb. Her mother’s fifteen-year-old Mercedes was in the garage, the door up.

Hannah was shivering. Her hands were cold even though it had to be near ninety degrees. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d been so excited. Maybe when Randall was born, holding him that first time. But that was the only time even close.

She hadn’t called the agent back yet to get the details. She wanted to save that, do it in front of her parents. They’d be whooping with excitement. That’s who they were. They rooted for her at every step. Her biggest fans. And both of them were book lovers. Big-time readers. It’s where she’d caught the fever, a kid growing up in this very house. Bedtime stories were her earliest memories, *Jack and the Beanstalk*, her father playing the parts, doing voices. Her mother’s quiet melodious voice reading *Black Beauty*. When she told them the news, Ed would drive off to the liquor store, buy the most expensive bottle of champagne they had, and the family would sit around on the deck all afternoon howling over Hannah’s triumph. Middle of the day, it didn’t matter. That’s who they were, parents of a daughter who could do no wrong. And boy did they love to celebrate.

The kitchen door was open. Hannah stepped inside and saw immediately that something was wrong. A burner on the gas stove was fluttering its blue flame. A pan of grits had tumbled onto the floor and

spilled across the tile. They looked as hard and cold as white rubber.

Hannah came around the breakfast counter and called out for her mother.

Then she stumbled hard against the refrigerator, nearly went down. Dressed in white linen, Martha Keller was sprawled in front of the stove. There were three bullet wounds in her upper torso. Chest, lungs, stomach. The bloodstain against the white dress had taken the shape of a large, disfigured butterfly.

Hannah stood for a moment, staring at her mother's body just as she had stared at hundreds of other corpses in the last five years. Countless gunshot victims who had come to rest in the same eerie, inert pose as Martha Keller.

Hannah dropped her purse and stepped close to her mother's body and kneeled down to feel for a pulse. But there was none. The flesh was cool and her mother's eyes were open, her face holding a look that was neither frightened nor angry nor in any distress at all. She looked composed. A quiet calm, as if she were simply daydreaming there on the Mexican tiles.

Hannah rose and turned to the kitchen window. She could see her father's fishing skiff still tied to the dock in the wide canal.

She whirled around and called out her son's name. And called it out again.

She snatched up her purse and drew out her Glock nine.

She was a police officer now. Not the daughter of the deceased.

She edged to the swinging door that opened onto the living room. She pointed the pistol upward and slung aside the door and stepped across the threshold.

Twenty feet away she saw her father's legs, his body hidden by the green corduroy couch. He was wearing his blue seersucker trousers, part of an ensemble he'd worn hundreds of times before. White shirt and his blue tie with sailboats printed on it, blue-striped seersucker suit coat. His plantation owner's look.

Hannah inched across the room, panning the pistol back and forth as she moved past the two couches and overstuffed chairs. Her heart was numb, her breath tight in her lungs. Some essential muscle in her soul had short-circuited. She was only dimly aware, seeing the room as if through some weirdly distorted lens. An undersea vision, cloudy and wavering.

"Randall!" she called, and swung around to aim her pistol at the empty bedroom doorway. "Randall!"

She stepped forward, around the end of the couch.

And the pistol nearly fell from her hands. She gasped, staggered forward.

Her father was lolling on the Oriental rug, one arm trapped behind his back at an obscene angle, the other arm extended across the rug. In his hand he gripped the chrome Smith & Wesson .357 revolver the one pistol in his collection he kept loaded. His white shirt was punctured in three places and the blood had pooled around his left armpit.

His face was hidden by a glossy photograph.

She inched forward, aiming her pistol at the doorway to the den. She crouched down, blinded by tears.

"Randall!" she screamed "Randall!"

The killer had used a blue pushpin from the bulletin board in her father's study to fix the photograph to his face. He'd gouged the thumbtack into the flesh of Ed Keller's forehead to hold in place the eight-by-ten glossy of J. J. Fielding, banker, money launderer, fugitive.

“Randall!”

She pushed herself back upright and edged across the room toward the bedroom. She hopped through the door, swinging the pistol from side to side. The bed was made, the room tidy. Light streamed in through the French doors that opened onto the patio.

“It’s me, Randall. It’s Mommy.”

At the foot of the bed, the green and gold throw rug was askew as if Ed Keller had come running from the bathroom at the sound of the shots, kicked it awry. Hours ago. Breakfast time.

She moved to the bathroom, stepped inside, slung the shower curtain aside, and pointed the Glock at the bare porcelain.

She turned and went back into the bedroom and halted.

It wasn’t a noise that stopped her or a scent or anything out of place. It was some disturbance in the air, some barometric flutter her sensors had detected.

“Randall?” she said quietly. “Is that you, Randall?”

She drew aside the folding louvered door and stepped into her parents’ closet. There at the back under a pile of Hannah’s own laundry, clothes she’d brought over to her mother’s because her own washer had broken down, there beneath her jeans and blouses and underwear, in the heavy-scented mass of work clothes and after-work clothes, she saw Randall’s bare foot.

“Randall?” she whispered.

The pistol dropped from her hand.

“Randall?”

She fell onto the pile of laundry, throwing aside the cotton jerseys and denim. And Randall looked up at her with the dull, unfocused flatness of the blind. His unruly blond hair was damp with sweat. His white skin flushed, the freckles on his cheek seemed to be glowing.

“I was fishing,” he said, his voice empty.

“Randall, are you all right?” She inspected his limbs, his torso. Then drew him to her, hugged his small, perfect body against hers.

“I was on the seawall,” he said, his mouth near her ear. “I was fishing.”

“Don’t,” she whispered. “We can talk later.”

“I saw them go in the kitchen door. Three men.”

She relaxed her hold on him. He lifted his head, stared up at his grandparents’ clothes hanging above him.

“Two short men and one tall,” he said.

He drew out of the embrace and spoke as if in a trance. A few words, a pause, his eyes detached.

“They had on white pants. White shirts. And white hats. Like painters. Like house painters. I thought they were doing work for Granddad. Then I came inside and I found them lying on the floor. There was blood all over. They’re dead, aren’t they, Mommy? Granddaddy and Nana are dead.”

She nodded.

“But you’re all right, Randall. You’re going to be just fine.”

“I was fishing,” he said. “There were three of them. They looked like house painters.”

“It’s okay, it’s okay, Randall.”

His body was rigid. Face slack, eyes filmed over, Randall stared off at some invisible spot in the air. His lips pursed as if he were blowing bubbles of silence.

And those were the last words he spoke. For days he did not utter a sound. Those days stretched into silent, agonizing weeks. Hannah rarely left his side. For long hours, he curled up in her lap and the two of them rocked. His eyes were disengaged. He sat in the living room and gazed out the window. He lay in bed beside her and peered up at the ceiling. He sat motionless in the bow of his skiff while Hannah steered them up and down his favorite mangrove canals and pointed out the great blue herons, the ospreys. Sometimes he turned his head in the direction she pointed, but his eyes were empty.

He ate little, slept not at all. His blood pressure fluctuated wildly. The first psychiatrist Hannah took him to prescribed a mild antianxiety drug, but it had no effect. The next two psychiatrists told her that she should simply stay on her present course, give Randall as much love and reassurance as she could. Keep talking to him in normal tones, touch him gently and often. Be there for him when he was ready to speak. This was a trance that only he could break and only when he was ready.

After three weeks of Randall's silence, Hannah had almost given up, resigned to life with a mute son, a boy stunted forever. Destroyed because his mother hadn't been there to protect him.

Then one morning at breakfast as she set a plate of blueberry pancakes before him, he looked up and said, "Hi."

She held back the tears. Pretended it was a perfectly ordinary moment.

"Hi," she said. But Randall would say no more for the next hour.

Midmorning they were sitting on the dock, watching the mangrove snappers cruise beneath their dangling legs. Hannah's pulse was wild. Randall looked over at her and said, "I'm sorry, Mom."

"Sorry?" she said. "You haven't done anything, Randall. Nothing at all."

She hugged him against her chest and wept.

A month and a half after the murders, the FBI's forensics people were still nowhere. Dozens of hair and fiber samples at the scene, but nothing useful. No usable fingerprints, no DNA samples. Particles of sand in the carpet, dirt, pebbles, sandspurs, smudges of dog shit, leaves, twigs. Everything and nothing.

According to the ballistics reports and the trajectory studies done later by the FBI, a single pistol was used, a thirty-two caliber, and all three shots were fired by a person taller than six feet. Beyond that, there was no physical trace of the shooter and his accomplices, nothing but the molecules of the breath still circulating in the room and that photograph tacked to her father's forehead.

Frank Sheffield, the FBI's lead investigator on the case, dismissed the photo as a red herring. Too obvious, too convenient to be believed. According to Frank, the three men had walked into the study, grabbed the first item they saw that might incriminate some other party, and left it on the scene. Such arrogance didn't fit their profile of J. J. Fielding, leaving behind a calling card. Anyway, the guy was a banker, a high-powered number-cruncher. Not a killer.

Oh, sure, they were still seeking him on the money-laundering charge, but he wasn't the FBI's prime suspect for the murders, not even close. There were dozens of others on the list ahead of him, bad people, serious felons, all of whom had been Ed Keller's target at one time or another. All considered far more likely than Fielding to order a hit or do the deed themselves.

With Randall back in school and Hannah on leave, she spent her days scouring old newspaper files, questioning Fielding's associates at Nation's Trust, searching for any scrap of evidence that might point to the man's whereabouts. At one point she showed up on the porch of Maude Fielding, the banker's abandoned wife. After a moment's hesitation, Mrs. Fielding invited her in, made her tea, listened to her story. Said nothing till Hannah asked the one question she'd come for, "Was your

husband capable of murder?”

Maude Fielding smiled quietly.

“My dear,” she said, “who among us isn’t capable of it?”

For weeks Hannah took notes, developed theories, relentlessly badgered Frank Sheffield. A nice guy, mellow, looked more like an aging tennis bum than an FBI agent. Lived in a dinky motel on the beach at Key Biscayne, ran around shirtless when he wasn’t at work. Hannah knocked on his motel room door at six in the morning, ten at night, bombarded him with seven, eight phone calls a day. “Do you consider this?” “Have you looked into that?” “The shooter was taller than six feet. Fielding was six foot one.”

“A lot of people are over six feet, Hannah. And who were the other two guys with him, his chauffeur and butler?”

Frank Sheffield was always patient and respectful, looking her straight in the eye, though he must have considered her a flaming crackpot.

Because of course she was. During her years with homicide she’d often been on the receiving end of the same kind of lunacy. A victim’s family member calling every day, convinced that unless they did so the investigation would be shelved. Pestering, pestering.

But she couldn’t help herself. So inflamed with rage, she couldn’t stop. Picking up the phone, dialing it again, “Frank Sheffield, please.” The secretaries started recognizing her voice. Frank was in a conference. Frank was in the field.

Weeks like that. Every waking moment on the phone or at the library. Until one evening as she was setting the phone back on the hook after sharing another brilliant idea with Frank Sheffield, she turned to find Randall staring at her from the doorway of her study. His mouth twisted, eyes red.

“What is it?” she asked him. “What’s wrong, Randall?”

He took a breath, a tear gleaming on his cheek.

“Please stop,” he said. “I can’t take it anymore. I want it to be over.”

So she stopped. No more calls. No faxes. Nothing.

J. J. Fielding was never seen or heard from again. No one at the FBI ever informed her directly, but she knew how it worked. Without a prime suspect or fresh leads, the probe of her parents’ murder gradually faded from their high-priority roster. Until finally the case slipped quietly to the Bureau’s back shelves.

There were no windows in room 2307 of the FBI office building at 26 Federal Plaza in Lower Manhattan. An interior room, plain white walls, naked except for an FBI seal and a TV screen flush-mounted beside it. Gray carpet, and a long cherry table with fifteen green leather chairs. Five of them occupied today. A couple of minutes earlier the small talk had died away, now everyone was quiet, eyes down, sipping their coffee, waiting for Special Agent Helen Shane to arrive.

One look around the conference table and Frank Sheffield knew a serious mistake had been made. He didn't belong here. Not with these people. Unless maybe he'd been ordered to New York on a Saturday morning to face a reprimand for his total and unwavering lack of distinction. Twenty-one years with the Bureau without a single commendation. A record so undistinguished it had given Frank Sheffield a kind of reverse fame.

He worked out of the Miami field office, one of the busiest in the country, over seven thousand cases last year, six hundred-fifty agents and support personnel responsible for FBI activity from Vero Beach all the way to Antarctica. Frank hadn't heard of any major crime outbreaks in Antarctica, then again, you could never be sure when the penguin population might start acting up.

It wasn't that Frank was a screw-off. He did his job as well as the next guy. But he wasn't at the head of the line volunteering for extra duty, and he sure as hell didn't have that spit-shined gung-ho bearing that bumped you steadily up the ladder. He served warrants, sat in surveillance vans, carried crates of subpoenaed documents from banks and boiler room operations. He sat in meetings half of every day, adding to his collection of doodles. Mostly he kept his head down, went home at five, took his kayak out on the bay, paddled ten miles around Key Biscayne, good weather or foul, and by the time he got back to his little stretch of beach, all the day's aggravations were magically erased.

Any way you looked at it, Sheffield didn't belong in this room with this bunch of fired-up overachievers who spent all their waking hours keeping America safe and their careers revving in high gear.

Across the table was Deputy Assistant Director Charlie Pettigrew who ten years ago was Special Agent in Charge of the Miami field office, Frank's boss. Somehow Charlie had parlayed one minor talent into major career advancement. Not exactly a yes-man, still Charlie was a guy who could sing harmony to any tune. Great at meetings, aligning himself with the right position. These days Pettigrew was fourth down the chain of command from Director Robert Kelly. Charlie was looking slim and spiffy, sharply creased white shirt, jeans. But Frank detected a little upper-echelon worry in his old buddy's eyes. Bigger concerns, more shades of gray than the old days in Miami, gunning for dopers, tearing holes in the cocaine pipeline.

On the other side of the table, slouching in his seat, was a kid named Andy Barth, twenty-something, with the long stringy blond hair and wolfish face of an undercover dope cop. Frank had seen the kid's picture a lot lately in internal press releases. The Bureau's computer guru, headed the cyber-crime division, fastest growing section in the FBI. Andy wore ratty blue jeans and a fresh white T-shirt. He was helping himself to the basket of Danish in the middle of the table. Taking one, offering them around, taking another. A boy with serious cravings.

At the head of the table was Abraham Ackerman, senior United States senator from New York, and Chair of the Armed Services Committee. For a man in his early fifties he obviously kept himself gym pumped. His dark wavy hair was swept back on the sides, and he was wearing a blue baseball hat with

the FBI logo embroidered in gold on the front. Probably a gift from Director Kelly. Ackerman wore a yellow golf shirt, faded jeans, and running shoes. Very casual on this Saturday morning, just one of the guys. Former college quarterback, Penn State, missed the national championship by a field goal. Two feet wide right. Frank remembered it because he'd won two hundred bucks on the game. With a mediocre team around him, Ackerman had thrown for over three hundred yards, run for a hundred more, almost won the championship single-handedly. A man who could carry ten guys on his back, haul them to the mountaintop. He'd done it then, been doing it ever since. Maybe not an astronaut, never walked on the moon, but the next best thing.

As Chair of the Armed Services Committee, the guy was used to five-star generals kowtowing to him, sitting there in a row, chests dripping with medals and ribbons while the senior senator from New York chewed them out or blasted holes in their latest budget requests.

That morning there was a hum rising from Ackerman's flesh like the tick of radioactivity. Not exactly the look of a grieving father. Frank had seen the story on the evening news a few weeks back, Ackerman, wiping tears from his eyes, had taken questions from reporters. Joanie, his only daughter, teenager, had been killed in a skiing accident in Aspen. Took a wrong trail in the tricky light of dusk, and smashed into a tree. Tragic mess.

But this morning the man looked like he was totally back to business. The way he lifted his eyes and measured each person in the room, his gaze swinging sharply to the doorway as Helen Shane made her entrance.

"Good news," she said, shutting the door behind her, moving breezily to a chair two down from Sheffield, giving him a quick once-over as she eased into the seat. She set a file folder on the table in front of her, brushed a strand of hair from her face. "I just got off the phone with Director Kelly. And I'm happy to report that we're fully green-lighted. It's a go."

"All right!" said Andy Barth. And took a celebratory bite from a cherry Danish.

Helen was wearing black linen slacks and a clingy white blouse. She had straight shoulder-length red hair and her tense green eyes looked out from under long bangs. The rest of her face was an odd mix of slightly oversized features that somehow looked good in photographs but seemed a little out of whack in real life. He'd heard she was a fashion model in high school, on the covers of *Seventeen*, and even *Glamour*. Graduated Columbia, then joined the G-men. God knew why. Maybe Frank would ask her about it later, take her out to lunch, maybe some of her ambition would rub off. This was, after all, the lady they said was destined to be the first female director of the FBI.

Thirty-two, worked out of the D.C. field office, and even Frank Sheffield, who didn't ordinarily pay attention to such matters, was fully aware of her recent successes. The latest one had gone down last August when Helen spearheaded the biohazard unit that thwarted a major smallpox virus attack. It was Helen's team that took down the high-tech plague lab operating inside a condo only a canister toss from the White House.

Ackerman was staring at Helen Shane. His eyes jacked up to full voltage.

Somewhere down the hall a phone rang, and that seemed to wake him from his fierce appraisal. He leaned to the side and scooped up a slim leather briefcase and slapped it down on the conference table. He unzipped it slowly and withdrew a handful of eight-by-ten glossies. Ackerman stared down at the top photograph for a moment, his face going slack, the color draining.

He pushed the stack to his right, directly in front of Charlie Pettigrew.

Charlie tried to nudge the stack on to Andy Barth, but the senator shot out his hand and took hold of Charlie's wrist.

"Look at them," he said.

“I’ve already seen them, sir.”

“Look at them again. I want you to keep these images in your mind. I want you to remember them every second of every day from now until you catch this fucking animal. Look at them, Mr. Pettigrew.”

Charlie stared at the photographs. He went through the stack slowly. There were five. He lingered on the last one, then slid them to Andy Barth.

Barth had a piece of Danish in his mouth when he peered at the top photograph. He flinched, didn’t swallow and didn’t chew as he suffered through the rest.

“I’m sure you’ve all witnessed autopsies as a part of your training,” the senator said. “And you have strong stomachs for this sort of thing. But you should remember as you look at these photographs that this girl, my daughter, was alive only seconds before this was done to her. This carnage. She was laughing. She was red-cheeked and brimming with life.”

Impassive, Helen Shane took her look and passed the photos on to Frank.

The girl was sixteen. Though if Frank hadn’t known her age already, he wouldn’t have been able to tell from the photos. She had dark curly hair and plump cheeks with a short upturned nose. But her face was spattered with gore and whatever her final expression might have been was now concealed by the mask of blood.

Her head was tilted back into a depression of snow. Around the rest of her body the snow was shadowed with blood. In the second and third photographs, the injuries were visible. The fourth and last were close-ups of the gaping wounds in her chest.

“This wasn’t any skiing accident,” said Sheffield.

“That’s right, Frank,” said Pettigrew. “That was only the cover story.”

“Tell him,” Ackerman said. “Tell him what this animal did.”

The light was buzzing in the senator’s eyes.

Helen Shane leaned forward in her chair, rested her forearms on the edge of the table.

“He was hiding in the trees on the edge of the ski slope. As Joanie passed by, he stepped out, clotheslined her, dragged her ten yards into the underbrush.”

“My forensics are a little weak,” Frank said. “What’re these wounds?”

“After he strangled her,” said Helen with the lilt of a schoolroom recitation, “Joanie was alive but unconscious. That’s when he tore open her parka and made a crude incision directly below the xiphoid, a triangular cartilaginous mass at the base of the sternum. Once he’d broken through the skin, he apparently widened the laceration with his fingers, and when the breach was large enough, he inserted his hand into Joanie’s chest cavity, took her heart in his fist, and crushed it.”

Sheffield felt a light-headed swirl begin to form behind his eyes. The silence thickened, a breathless interlude.

“This is why we’re here,” the senator said, staring at Sheffield. “Because some man in his jungle mansion was unhappy with Joanie’s father. Unhappy that I ordered a napalm strike on his coca fields. Unhappy that I approved a half-dozen separate guerrilla operations that caused him great financial losses. This unhappy man in his jungle mansion hired a monster that you people refer to as Hal to retaliate for his losses.

“Until my daughter was slaughtered, I was not aware that such a monster existed. Nor did I know that your Bureau has been pursuing this beast for the last ten years without success. But now that I do know, now that I’ve seen what complete incompetence has been operating here, an incompetence which has led to this, this atrocity, I have made it my mission to change that. And I will not rest until

this mission is complete.”

Out in the hallway, a man laughed, and a woman’s high cackle answered back. The intrusion seemed to push Ackerman deeper into his rage.

He raised his huge fist and hammered it against the table, then pushed his chair back a few inches from the table as if he meant to hurl himself at the whole incompetent group of them.

Helen lifted her eyes and gave the senator a serene half smile as if the two of them shared some secret.

“His name is Hal Bonner,” Helen announced. Then she was quiet for a moment, letting the silence dance around her.

Frank watched as she sat, eyes lowered, running a slender finger around the rim of her mug. Then touching the edge of a black TV channel changer.

Eyes still down, Helen said, “Bonner is twenty-nine years old, a white male. He’s approximately six feet tall. Born in Indiana, raised in foster care, no juvenile record. He was fifteen years old when he first came to the attention of the police in Indianapolis. Fourteen years ago, during a two-week period in the middle of July, Hal Bonner wiped out his former foster parents. Four women and three men ranging in age from thirty-six to sixty-seven. By the time the connection to Bonner was made, he’d vanished.”

Helen looked up, glanced around the table. Letting a few more seconds tick off her theatrical clock. Frank was watching her. Everyone else was too.

“He started out with simple strangulation,” she said. “The first four were killed that way. But by the time he got to number five, Hal was tearing them open, crushing their hearts. Like he did to Joanie. That’s been his MO ever since. Only for the last ten years he’s been getting paid.”

“Not your average hitman,” Andy said.

The senator cut his eyes to Andy, scowled, and looked back at Helen.

“And that’s all, Mr. Sheffield. Ten years, that’s all your people have.”

“Now he’s a hired gun for the Cali cartel,” Andy said. “They use Hal for special occasions, when they want to inspire the serious heebie-jeebies. Make an example of someone.”

Andy looked around at the silent group, took another bite from the remaining Danish.

“Senator Ackerman is correct,” Helen said. “Hal’s extremely slippery. Apparently he’s spotted every sting we’ve thrown at him. For ten years we’ve had him as a level-one priority and we’ve consistently bombed. Even using our best undercover people, Oscar winners, Hal saw through them every time. Got a whiff of something wrong, stepped back into the shadows, and was gone. But we think we have a winner this time. Something Hal won’t be able to resist.”

“All right,” Ackerman said, rapping his knuckles impatiently against the table. “Show him the photograph.”

Helen reached below the table and came up with a file folder. She laid it on the table next to her coffee.

“Fourteen years ago when Hal murdered his foster parents, he also was quite thorough about destroying any sign of his presence in those homes. Photo albums, schoolwork, drawings, everything. Very meticulous for a young man of only fifteen. As if he already had a life plan and knew exactly what he needed to do, obliterate any trace of his past life. But we did manage to locate one photo from a school in Evansville. A junior high school he attended for a few months.”

She took a thumbnail photograph from the folder and slid it across the table to Frank. He picked it up, studied it for several moments.

The boy was wearing a madras shirt buttoned to the top, and he stared grimly into the lens. A crudely handsome young man with heavy eyebrows and coarse, dark hair which was chopped and mangled as though he had been barbered by someone with failing eyesight and a palsied hand. His eyes were gray and widely spaced and protruded slightly. Already at thirteen or fourteen his cheeks were shadowed by a thick beard. As though he were cursed by a heavy flow of testosterone, launched into manhood years before he was ready.

“We’ve aged him,” Helen Shane said. “Brought him up to date. Agent Barth directed the work, using the TS-38 software system he designed.”

Andy showed them a gloating smile.

Helen picked up the TV remote and aimed it at the set and it crackled to life. Slowly she clicked through four different renderings, leaving each one on the screen for half a minute. Hal Bonner as a twenty-nine-year-old, side view and front. Hal with long hair. Hal with a trimmed beard. Hal with a shaggy beard and short hair. Hal Bonner clean-shaven and bald. She left the last one on the screen.

It was excellent work, but like every computer enhancement he’d seen, something was lost from the original photograph. Some spark in the eyes. While everyone stared at the television screen and murmured, Frank took another look at the small class photo.

He’d never believed in reading things into people’s eyes. All that windows-of-the-soul bullshit. But Hal Bonner’s eyes were tempting. In the class photo there was a brooding defiance in them that Sheffield had seen once or twice in the eyes of torture victims. Soldiers who’d suffered excruciating ordeals in POW camps, and because they’d managed to survive the worst their captors could inflict, they no longer knew real fear or cared quite as much as they once had about the suffering of others.

In Hal Bonner’s eyes there was also a glint of bitter humor. This was one smug little alien bastard. On the television screen, however, his eyes were flat and empty. Drained of any hint of humanity by the digital rendering.

For several moments after Helen snapped the television off, Senator Ackerman continued to stare at the blank screen.

Sheffield took a breath, the photos of Joanie Ackerman and Hal Bonner still burning in his head. He didn’t have a weak stomach, but just now the floor felt soft beneath him, the room expanding and contracting with each breath.

Charlie Pettigrew pushed his chair back and stood up, trying in some measure to assume control of the proceedings. Though even a casual observer could tell poor Charlie was a distant third in this group’s pecking order.

“So, I suppose you’re curious to know, Frank, where you fit into all this.”

“It crossed my mind.”

“Well, actually there are several reasons,” the senator said.

Frank waited. This wasn’t the time for witty comebacks.

“You worked a murder case five years ago,” Charlie Pettigrew said. “Ed Keller, Assistant U.S. Attorney.”

“Yeah, Ed Keller and his wife, Martha. Sure I remember it. Never solved.”

“And a certain persistent relative.”

“You mean Hannah, their daughter.”

“That’s right.”

Helen Shane was studying Frank, her eyes scouring his features. It was the same way Frank’s ex-wife had looked at him most of the time. Collecting faults, adding them to the heap.

“You think Hal Bonner was involved in the Keller murders?”

“No, Frank,” said Helen. “We’re interested in the daughter. Hannah. Whatever you can tell us about her. We understand she made quite a fuss about the way you were handling the case. There are a dozen letters from her in our files, protesting the direction you took on the investigation.”

“She had her own theory, yeah. There were a lot of midnight phone calls. She showed up on my front porch a few times.”

“Is the woman unbalanced?” Ackerman asked.

“She’d just lost her parents, Senator. She was deeply distraught.”

Ackerman nodded. It seemed to be an emotion he vaguely understood.

The senator fixed Sheffield with an earnest, vote-getter look.

“I knew your father, Frank. Not well, but I knew him. I was greatly saddened by his passing. I had the utmost respect for the man.”

Frank nodded.

A lot of people had known Harry Sheffield. Liked him, respected him. He was that kind of man. Friends in high and low places and everywhere in between. The folks who showed up at his funeral could’ve been herded directly onto the next Noah’s Ark, diverse enough to be the complete breeding stock for a new world. Before Harry died there’d been talk of politics. Democratic nominee for Florida governor. Maybe something national. It all seemed possible for Harry Sheffield, retiring chief of police for Dade County, the most colorful, media-friendly, and well-loved cop the city had ever known. Sixty-one, still a young man. But even with all that charisma circulating in his veins he wasn’t immortal. The night of his retirement party, Harry Sheffield had returned home from the festivities at about 1 A.M. He took out the garbage, set it on the street, went back in and got a cold beer from the refrigerator, sat down in his favorite easy chair, turned on the television, and somewhere deep inside his chest, the tectonic plates shifted and Harry Sheffield had a seven-point-five heart attack. An old story. Nothing unique about it. Two hours after retiring from the job he loved, Harry lay dead in his recliner, a can of Schlitz malt liquor going flat on the table beside him.

That was over ten years ago, and still to this day people like Ackerman were bringing it up, passing on their condolences.

“So,” Sheffield said, “is anybody going to tell me why I’m here?”

“You’ll be our Miami tour guide,” Helen Shane said, “and our specialist on Hannah Keller.” Helen Shane showed him a smile. Lots of teeth, not much sincerity.

“Specialist? I barely know the lady.”

“For someone who barely knows her, you certainly filled your reports with detailed observations about her.” Helen’s smile became demure.

Frank had never come close to slapping a woman before, but he was picturing it now. A good rap on the cheek, just hard enough to wake Helen from her terminal smugness.

“And what does Hannah Keller have to do with this guy Bonner?”

“Let’s just say they share a common obsession,” Helen said.

“And what’s that?”

“J. J. Fielding.”

“Largest embezzlement in U.S. history, that J. J. Fielding?”

“That’s right, Frank. The man Hannah Keller believes murdered her parents. The same man Hal Bonner has been searching for without success for these last five years.”

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