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SLEIGHT **OF** HAND

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE

PHILLIP
MARGOLIN

SLEIGHT
OF HAND

A NOVEL OF SUSPENSE



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to Frank Eiseman, who believed that teaching chess to elementary school children would help those students succeed in the classroom and in life; to Dick Roy, who made Frank's dream real; to Julie Young, the executive director and heart of Chess for Success; and to all the board members, program directors, coaches, and volunteers who have made Chess for Success one of the most successful and innovative educational programs in the Pacific Northwest.

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Part I

The Ottoman Scepter

Chapter One

The American Bar Association decided to hold its annual convention at the Theodore Roosevelt Hotel in downtown Washington, D.C. On Wednesday evening, a who's who of the most powerful men and women in the country circulated at a cocktail party hosted by Rankin, Lusk, Carstairs and White. Charles Benedict was a minor leaguer in the power and influence department but even in this elite company he stood out because he was strikingly handsome and charismatic, the person toward whom the eyes of not only women but men were drawn when he entered a room.

Benedict was six feet two inches tall, with a cultivated tan. His salt-and-pepper hair was cut short and his trim, athletic build, ramrod posture, and chiseled features brought to mind the Special Forces heroes in action movies. When Benedict moved, it was easy to imagine a field of force emanating from him, and there was no question that his physical presence contributed to his success as a trial attorney, although more sinister factors sometimes came into play.

Benedict was charming a partner from a Chicago firm when he was distracted by Carrie and Horace Blair, who were carrying on a whispered argument in a corner of the ballroom. It was rare to see the Blairs together, but Rankin, Lusk handled Horace's legal work, and that was an obvious explanation for the presence of the businessman, who was not a member of the bar.

Carrie Blair was wearing a charcoal-black Gucci suit, and her natural honey-blond hair flowed over its shoulders. She had translucent gray-green eyes that could paralyze the most misogynist man. Her nose was the type all the dissatisfied society women begged their plastic surgeons to copy, and her skin was tan and smooth. If someone were to ask what Carrie Blair did for a living, many people would guess that she was a television news anchor and none would peg her as the prosecutor in charge of the Narcotics Unit in one of Virginia's most populous counties.

Carrie's millionaire husband looked every bit the southern gentleman, but he was many years older than his wife, and a stranger would not be faulted for assuming that he was Carrie's father. Horace was gripping Carrie's arm. His face, red from anger, contrasted sharply with his snowy white hair. Carrie wrenched her arm from her husband's grasp and walked out of the ballroom just as Charles Benedict's cell phone vibrated.

"I've got to take this," Benedict said, abruptly ending the conversation with the Chicago attorney. Her expectant smile changed to a frown. She was attractive, rich, and powerful, and was not used to being dismissed like some hired hand. Had she known more about Benedict, she would have understood why he'd ditched her without so much as an apology. The woman was just another potential notch on Benedict's gun, whereas the caller was going to pay an excessive fee for a highly specialized service that Benedict provided.

"Yes," Benedict said when he was alone in a side hall.

"He's at the tavern," the caller said.

Benedict left the hotel and jogged to a parking garage a few blocks away. He'd boosted a dull green Chevrolet earlier in the evening. After switching the plates, Benedict had stashed the car on the third floor of the garage. The attorney got into the backseat and took off his yellow-and-blue-striped

Hermès tie, his gray Armani suit, and his silk shirt. Then he pulled sneakers, a hooded sweatshirt, and a pair of faded jeans out of a duffel bag. As soon as he'd changed clothes, Benedict drove out of the lot toward Virginia.

Norman Krueger's life, which had been on a downward spiral since birth, had recently gotten worse than something that hardly seemed possible. Norman had been born to a drug-addicted prostitute who had no clue as to the identity of Norman's father. His childhood had ricocheted between physical abuse, sexual abuse, and neglect. The lessons in school, when he attended, were incomprehensible to someone with Norman's limited IQ and attention span. Gangs were not the answer, because he was too puny and frightened to be of use where violence was involved, and too stupid to be trusted with any task that might require guile.

Norman got by on a combination of public assistance and low-paying jobs, from which he was frequently fired for incompetence or absenteeism. Recently, much of his pay had gone toward supporting a drug habit. The origins of his addiction were confusing to Norman. They had sneaked up on him like some sort of controlled-substance ninja, but drugs were now the focus of his miserable life.

Norman's girlfriend, Vera Petrov, was as ugly and hapless as Norman, but she was capable of maintaining steady employment. She was also a second cousin of Nikolai Orlansky, a major player in the Russian Mafia, whom she'd prevailed upon to give Norman a job sweeping up in one of his many taverns.

Norman was the type of person no one noticed, the human equivalent of a sagging armchair that has been stored in a dusty corner of a side room. Evil things happened around Norman all the time and no one seemed to care that Norman had witnessed them. But Norman had eyes and ears and a memory which, weak as it was, still retained the sights and sounds of startling events involving murder and torture, especially when he was the person assigned to clean up the gore.

Never in a million years would Norman have considered informing on his employer. He had seen what happened to those who crossed the Russian. Then he came to the attention of an undercover federal agent who befriended Norman and listened intently to everything Norman said when he was under the influence of drugs and/or alcohol. Many of his tales concerned horrifying exploits in which Nikolai Orlansky was directly involved, the type of activities that could send the Russian to prison for life or even to death row. So Norman's "friend" set him up, and the next thing he knew he was faced with having to choose between years in prison for possession of a controlled substance with intent to distribute or testifying against a man capable of telling off-color jokes while skinning a living screaming human being.

Norman had been ordered to show up in the morning at an office in a strip mall identified as the corporate headquarters of International Products Limited. There he would be debriefed in preparation for his testimony in front of a federal grand jury. If he did not show up, he was doomed. If he did show up, he was doomed. Confronted with this lose-lose proposition, Norman drove to the nearest tavern.

By the time his wallet was empty, Norman could barely walk. As he staggered to his car, he was so inebriated that he barely noticed the blustery, chill wind that had driven the temperature down into the twenties. Norman planned to drive home from the tavern. The possibility of being arrested for drunk driving or committing vehicular homicide never entered his alcohol-addled brain. However, he did notice that it was awfully dark in the back corner of the lot where he had parked. Wasn't a light shining down on his space earlier in the evening? Since it took too much effort to answer the question, Norman abandoned the task, even though the broken glass crunching underfoot provided

clue to the fate of the streetlight suspended over his vehicle.

Norman fished his car key out of his pocket and bent over, squinting at the keyhole. It was very dark and his hand wouldn't stay still, so the task of putting the key into the lock presented a problem. He was concentrating so hard on opening his door that he was unaware that someone was standing beside him until he saw a blue-jeans pant leg out of the corner of his eye.

"What the fuck!" Norman exclaimed, adrenaline juicing his muscles enough to permit him to jump back into the side of his car.

"Good evening, Mr. Krueger."

"Who are you?" Norman gasped.

The new arrival showed Norman his hands. They were empty. Then they weren't. A business card appeared where none had been before. The man held it out to Krueger.

"How did you do that?" Norman asked, amazed.

"Magic," Charles Benedict answered with a friendly smile.

Norman squinted at the card. Then he looked at the dirty jeans, ratty sweatshirt, and old sneakers.

"You're a lawyer?"

"I am," Benedict said, as he made the card vanish. "I represent Mr. Nikolai Orlansky."

It took all of Norman's willpower to keep from soiling himself.

"A little bird told Mr. Orlansky that you are planning on singing to the feds," Benedict said.

"No, no. That ain't true. You tell Mr. Orlansky he ain't got nothing to worry about here."

Benedict smiled. "Nick will be very happy to hear that. Hey, want to see another magic trick?"

Even though Norman was anxious to leave, he didn't want to be rude, and the first trick had been mystifying.

"Uh, sure," he said.

"Great." Benedict pushed up the sleeves of his sweatshirt and rotated his hands again.

"Nothing in my hands or up my sleeves, right?"

"No," Norman said.

Benedict waved his hands mysteriously and a large hunting knife appeared. Norman's mouth gaped open. Then he grinned.

"You gotta tell me how you do this stuff."

"A magician never reveals his secrets."

Norman looked disappointed.

"My final trick is a doozy," Benedict said. "For my grand finale, I'm going to make you disappear."

Then he buried the knife in Norman's heart.

In the morning, Norman's car was still parked in the far corner of the lot, but true to Charles Benedict's word, there was no trace of Mr. Krueger whatsoever.

Chapter Two

Death can take many forms. There is the bullet between the eyes, poison secretly administered, or a free fall from a forty-story building, but Dana Cutler was convinced that the most horrible way to die was from boredom. At least a bullet in the brain was quick.

The lives of fictional private eyes are filled with danger and excitement, but Dana's life was a succession of stakeouts during which she sipped coffee from a thermos and prayed her subject wouldn't do something important while she was peeing in a gas-station restroom. The bulk of Dana's cases came from (a) criminal defense attorneys who hoped she would find a miracle witness who could clear an obviously guilty client, (b) husbands or wives who thought their spouse was cheating, or (c), as in her present assignment, an insurance company that wanted to find out if a claimant was faking an injury. These were not scenarios that inspired the plots of high-octane action movies.

Lars Jorgenson was an athletic, broad-shouldered accountant with a serious addiction to gambling who had just gone through a brutal divorce. Jorgenson's personal and financial lives had been sliding down a slippery slope until his car was totaled at an intersection. Jorgenson said he'd suffered permanent damage to his back that made it impossible to work, and he had a doctor who swore that was so. If the claim held up, Lars would receive a hefty sum, but the doctor was a well-known quack and the insurance company was certain that Jorgenson was faking. Dana had been following Jorgenson around for the past three days and had nothing to show for her efforts. Tonight, Lars had parked in the lot of a sports bar before hobbling inside in apparent discomfort.

Dana was an athletic five ten with short auburn hair and electric green eyes. Men always noticed her. To keep from being spotted by Jorgenson, Dana had donned several disguises. Tonight she was wearing a brown wig and makeup and clothes that made her look dowdy. Even so, several men at the bar watched her as she walked in.

One of the men watched longer than the others. He had a thick black beard, and his long, greasy hair was pulled back into a ponytail that fell down the back of a leather jacket that advertised Harley Davidson. When the man made a quarter turn on his bar stool so he could eye Dana, his T-shirt rode up, revealing a gut that lapped over the top of stained jeans.

Dana's stomach tightened, she grew light-headed, and her breathing increased. She slipped her hand into her jacket pocket and her fingers curled around the handle of a .38 Special, one of several weapons she was carrying. The man turned his attention back to his drink, but Dana couldn't relax and it took her several minutes before she let go of her gun.

Dana knew why she'd had the panic attack. Before she became a private detective, she had worked undercover for the D.C. police. On her last assignment, she was tasked to discover the location of a meth lab run by a biker gang. Dana infiltrated the gang but her cover was blown. The bikers had kept her prisoner in the basement of their lab, where they raped and beat her for days before making a fatal mistake.

One of the rapists had gotten drunk and staggered into the basement for some fun. He had tossed his beer bottle away before pulling down his pants. It had not registered in his drink-addled mind that

the bottle had shattered until Dana shoved a jagged piece of glass into his eye.

~~When the police arrived at the farm they found Dana naked, covered with gore and staring glass-eyed into space. A blood-soaked ax lay next to two .357 Magnums, and the ax and the handguns lay near the dismembered bodies of the other three bikers. The man at the bar bore a faint resemblance to one of her kidnappers.~~

Dana had spent a year in a mental hospital, recovering from physical and psychic wounds. When she left, she moved into a small apartment near the National Cathedral. For months she had stayed there her sanctuary unless necessity drove her out. When her savings reached rock bottom she was forced to face reality. There was no way she could return to the D.C. police, but police work was the only thing she knew. Working as a private investigator was an adequate solution, and she made certain that her cases were routine and did not involve danger. Then, by chance, Dana had been involved in a case that helped bring down Christopher Farrington, the president of the United States. The danger she encountered had made her feel alive and the notoriety she had achieved from this high-profile case had brought her plenty of work, but now it was the rare assignment that induced an adrenaline high.

When Dana entered the bar, she'd seen Lars Jorgenson limping to a table, leaning his cane against its side, and grimacing as he slumped into a chair. Dana found an empty booth that gave her a good view of her quarry. The second half of a basketball game was just starting on one of the large-screen TVs. A long hour later, the Wizards succumbed to the Knicks. Jorgenson, in apparent pain, levered himself out of his chair and limped to his car. Dana followed him home. When the lights at Jorgenson's apartment went out at midnight Dana slumped down in the front seat of her car, took a sip of coffee from her thermos, and prayed that a direct hit by a flaming meteor would end her misery.

Chapter Three

Charles Benedict disposed of Krueger's body, the knife, and the old clothes before abandoning the Chevrolet with the key still in the ignition in the area of the capital with the highest crime rate. A smaller crowd was still schmoozing in the ballroom when he returned to the Theodore Roosevelt to mingle at the cocktail party.

After a reasonable amount of time, Benedict took the stairs to the lobby. As he walked by the Bull Moose Bar he spotted Carrie Blair in a booth in a distant corner, nursing a drink. Benedict took a step back. Carrie was alone. She was staring into her glass, and she looked sad. Benedict had always wondered what "The Society Prosecutor" would be like in bed, and he couldn't pass up a chance to find out. Before he entered the bar, the lawyer took a pillbox out of his pocket and palmed a mild sedative that would make Carrie compliant. Slipping the pill into Carrie's drink would pose no problem for someone with the lawyer's skill at sleight of hand.

Carrie was leaning forward and staring into a double shot of bourbon. Benedict was certain that most of the men in the bar had eyed her more than once. He bet that they were wondering what could possibly make someone so perfect look so depressed. Benedict was fairly certain he knew the reason for the prosecutor's funk.

Almost ten years ago, when Carrie was a young assistant commonwealth attorney, she had tried to prosecute Horace Blair for driving under the influence. Horace had become smitten with the woman who was prosecuting him and he had pursued her relentlessly. Their marriage was the scandal of the decade in the circles in which Horace traveled. Everyone believed that Carrie had married Blair for his money and the people in Horace's set made no secret of their disdain. From what Benedict had heard, living the life of a millionaire's wife had gotten old quickly. Society snubbed Carrie, and her old friends felt uncomfortable around her. Carrie was rumored to live in her office more than in the plush rooms of Horace's mansion.

Benedict slid into the booth across from Blair. Carrie was not happy to see him. The prosecutor knew Benedict well enough to see past his *GQ* model looks. In her office, Benedict was thought of as a high-priced hired gun who had flunked his ethics course in law school. No one doubted his ability. He won more than his share of tough cases. But it was the way he won some of them that raised eyebrows. When the client was in the top tax bracket, or a member of Nikolai Orlansky's crew, evidence disappeared from property rooms and witnesses went missing or developed faulty memories. No one ever proved hanky-panky was involved, but a rank smell wafted over many of Benedict's cases.

"Hey, Carrie," Benedict said. "I thought I saw you at the Rankin, Lusk bash. You must know a lot of that crowd. Don't they represent Horace?"

"What do you want, Charlie?" asked Carrie, who was too deep in her cups to worry about being polite.

"You look down in the dumps, so I thought I'd try to cheer you up."

"Thanks, but I'd rather be alone."

"Okay, I get that, but I did have a business proposition for you."

Carrie tilted her head to the side and studied Benedict. "What might that be?"

"One of your puppies, Mary Maguire, is prosecuting Kyle Ross, Devon Ross's son."

"No deals, Charlie. That little fucker tried to seduce a thirteen-year-old girl by giving her cocaine. Then he offered a bribe to a cop. And his father made a veiled threat to Mary. That will all come out at sentencing, and I'm going to ask for the maximum."

"Whoa, slow down. This is just another case. There's no reason to take it personally."

"Well, you can tell your client I do."

"You're forgetting how green Maguire is. I may eat her lunch. Then there won't be a sentencing."

"Mary's young but she's sharp. And you have no defense."

Benedict pulled a pack of playing cards out of his pocket and fanned them out. While Carrie's attention was on the cards, he passed a hand over her glass and slipped a pill into her drink.

"Tell you what," Benedict said. "Let's settle this like civilized people. You pick a card but don't tell me what it is. If I can't guess it, I'll plead my guy guilty. But you dismiss if I do."

Carrie threw her head back and laughed. "You're too much."

Benedict smiled. "I did that to snap you out of your funk. You looked so sad when I spotted you. I knew I had to do something to cheer you up. And I wouldn't have made you drop the case, because I always guess your card."

"Oh, yeah? Let me see the deck."

Benedict performed a few exotic shuffles, then extended the cards. Carrie selected one and looked at it. Benedict instructed her to put it back in the deck. Carrie slid the card back into the pack, then drank from her glass. Benedict shuffled the cards before making a few passes over the top of the deck. Then he stared into Carrie's eyes. The prosecutor took another drink before setting down her glass.

"Is your card the three of clubs?" Benedict asked.

Carrie smiled maliciously. "No."

Benedict's brow furrowed. He closed his eyes and placed his fingertips on his temples. When he opened his eyes, he looked uncertain.

"Was it the jack of diamonds?"

"You'd better practice a little harder, Charlie," Carrie said.

"Damn. I thought I had this trick down. What was your card?"

"The seven of hearts."

Benedict sighed. Then he looked confused. "Hey," he said. "There's a card under your glass."

Carrie looked down. Sure enough, a playing card was facedown on the table underneath the glass that held the remnants of her bourbon. She turned it over. Benedict grinned from ear to ear while Carrie stared dumbfounded at the seven of hearts.

"How did you do that?" she asked. Her speech was suddenly slurred.

"A magician never tells how he did a trick. But I'll show you another one."

Carrie closed her eyes and leaned back. She looked pale.

"Are you okay?" Benedict asked.

"I . . ." Carrie started. Then she stopped in midsentence.

Benedict walked around the booth and helped Carrie to stand.

"Whoa, you've had the proverbial one too many."

"I'm okay," she said, but she swayed unsteadily on her feet.

"You're in no condition to drive."

Carrie protested feebly. Benedict found her stub for valet parking. He laid a twenty on the table and helped Carrie out of the bar.

Benedict parked Carrie's silver Porsche in front of his condominium and helped her walk up the steps to his front door. The three-story condo was faux Federalist in style. An attached two-car garage accessible through an alley in the back of a row of similar condos, housed Benedict's Mercedes.

In contrast to the nineteenth-century exterior, the interior of Benedict's home was starkly modern with hardwood floors, glass-topped tables, and ivory-colored walls decorated with abstract art. Carrie was unsteady on her feet, and Benedict steered her into his spacious living room before easing her onto a sofa.

There were no interior walls on the main floor. The dining area abutted the living room, and a kitchen island topped with black slate separated the kitchen from the dining room.

"Why wasn't Horace with you?" Benedict asked as he put up a pot of coffee in the kitchen.

"Horace and I don't see all that much of each other," Carrie said, her speech still slurred.

"So the bloom is off the rose?"

"The fucking rose died years ago," Carrie answered bitterly, her tongue loosened by the drink Benedict had slipped into her drink.

"That's too bad. I remember reading about your romance and thinking how fairy-tale it was."

"Yeah, a Grimm's fairy tale. Very grim. Never marry for money, Charlie."

"You don't have to worry about me marrying. I learned my lesson a long time ago. One bad experience with wedlock and several stiff alimony payments taught me a lesson."

Suddenly Benedict was sitting beside her on the sofa and Carrie couldn't remember seeing him leave the kitchen. She shook her head to try to jump-start her brain, but it was definitely on the fritz.

Benedict slipped his arm around Carrie's shoulders. "What do you do for companionship?" he asked.

"Nothing with Horace, if I can help it. We haven't fucked in ages."

Benedict's fingers stroked Carrie's neck and brushed her earlobe. It felt nice. Then they were kissing and alarm bells went off. Carrie pushed him away with muscles that barely worked.

"I can't," she said.

"Horace will never know," Benedict whispered as he nuzzled her neck.

"You don't understand. I really can't."

Benedict was genuinely puzzled. "Do you mean that you can't make love?"

Carrie laughed but there was no humor in it. "I ain't menopausal yet, Charlie. I just can't fuck you."

"Why not? Horace may not be able to satisfy you, but that won't be a problem once we're in bed."

Carrie laughed again. "I have no doubt you're a stud, Charlie. I've heard the rumors around the courthouse. But getting laid would cost me millions, and I'm sure you're not that good."

"I don't get it."

"It's the prenup. And don't ask me anything about it because it's a secret."

"Don't worry. A gentleman knows what 'no' means," Benedict said gallantly. "And I think the coffee you so desperately need is ready."

Benedict walked over to the coffeepot and poured a cup for Carrie. Then, with his back shielding his hands from her, he laced the coffee with Rohypnol, familiarly known as "roofie," or the date-rap drug. The pharmaceutical was colorless, odorless, and tasteless and it induced drowsiness and impaired motor skills. Best of all, from Benedict's standpoint, amnesia was a side effect, so his victims never remembered what he'd done to them.

Benedict brought Carrie her cup. Then he smiled when she took her first long taste of the strong

brew.

Charles Benedict estimated that Carrie Blair would wake from her drugged sleep around 6:30, so he set his alarm for 5:45. He had brewed a fresh pot of coffee for breakfast and was pouring himself a cup when the door to his bedroom slammed open. Benedict looked up in time to see Carrie stumble on the stairs. Her stocking feet had slipped on the smooth hardwood and she grabbed the banister to keep from falling. As soon as she regained her balance, the prosecutor saw her host looking up at her with a bemused smile.

“What did you do to me?” Carrie demanded, her panic barely under control.

“Relax. Your honor is intact. I was a perfect gentleman.”

Benedict extended the cup he was holding. “Here, have some coffee. I just made it, and I think you can use it.”

Carrie ignored the cup. “What time is it?”

“Six thirty.”

“Oh, God. You mean I’ve been here all night?”

“Yes. You passed out and I put you in my bed. All I removed were your shoes and jacket. Then I slept in my guest room. You know, you’re not the first person to lose an evening to booze, but you might want to see someone if it happens again.”

Carrie ignored Benedict and looked around the condo.

“Where are my things? I’ve got to get home,” she said.

“Are you sure you don’t want breakfast or a shower?” Benedict asked as he walked over to a closet and took out Carrie’s shoes and jacket.

“I can’t believe this happened,” Carrie said, ignoring Benedict’s offer. She pulled on her jacket and slipped into her shoes.

Benedict held out her car key. “If you hurry, you can get home, change, and be in your office at your usual time.”

There was a mirror by the front door. Carrie stared at her image and ran her hand through her hair, trying for some semblance of order. Then she walked outside. Benedict followed her. On the street in front of Benedict’s condo a man in a tracksuit was jogging at a steady clip.

“Be careful driving,” Benedict cautioned. Carrie turned toward him and started to say something. Then she stopped and stared down the street. Before Benedict could ask what she was looking at, Carrie started screaming and ran toward a parked car. The driver gunned the engine and made a U-turn that left dust clouds and rubber. Carrie’s screams had attracted the jogger’s attention, and he turned and watched as the car sped off.

Carrie stopped running. Benedict saw her stare at the rear of the car, where the license plate was attached. Then she bent over, rested her hands on her knees, and took deep breaths to regain her composure.

“What was that all about?” Benedict asked when he reached her.

Carrie turned toward him. She looked furious. Then she walked to her car and drove away without answering Benedict’s question.

Chapter Four

On Thursday, Dana Cutler got out of bed at three in the afternoon, ran five miles, then went through a set of calisthenics. When she finished a third set of fifty push-ups, she collapsed on the floor of the room in the basement of the house she shared with Jake Teeny. Jake, a photojournalist, was away on an Arctic expedition sponsored by *National Geographic*. Dana had met Jake six months before she was kidnapped, and he'd stood by her when she was in the hospital, visiting often and fighting hard to keep her spirits up, even when that seemed impossible. When she was released, he took her to lunch and dinner, and an occasional movie, but he had never tried to touch her until she fell in love with him and let him into her life. Dana had always been a loner until she fell in love. When Jake was gone she felt like a part of her was missing. Tonight, after writing a report on the Jorgenson case, she would try to find something on TV to numb her mind. Then she would go to sleep and wake up to another boring and unfulfilling day.

Dana's last meal had been the beer and burger she'd downed at the sports bar during her surveillance of Lars Jorgenson, and she was starving. After a shower, she walked to the kitchen to scavenge the fixings for a sandwich. She had just opened the refrigerator door when her business phone rang.

"Cutler Investigations," Dana said.

"Dana Cutler, please," a woman said. Dana thought she heard a French accent.

"Speaking."

"I would like to retain you."

"To do what?" Dana asked.

"I would prefer that we not discuss the matter over the phone."

Definitely French, Dana concluded.

"Okay, but can you give me some idea of what you want me to do. If it's not the type of case I can handle I can refer you to someone who does."

"I really cannot say more. Your retainer will be very satisfactory if you accept the assignment. Meet me and I will pay you three thousand dollars for a consultation even if you do not take the case."

The sum, which was way more than her normal rate, surprised Dana. "Where do you want to meet?" she asked.

"I do not know Washington. Perhaps you can suggest a place to rendezvous?"

"Are you hungry?"

"Non."

"Well, I am. Why don't we meet at Michelangelo's? I know the owner and he'll guarantee your privacy. The food is pretty good, too, if you change your mind about dinner."

Michelangelo's was a family-owned Italian restaurant located in sight of the Capitol dome, in an area that was shifting from decay to gentrification. Abandoned buildings and vacant lots could be found only blocks away from chic boutiques, renovated row houses owned by young professionals, and

trendy restaurants. Michelangelo's, which was anything but trendy, had been a constant in the neighborhood for over sixty years. Sam and Donna Mazzara opened it with their life savings after emigrating from Sicily. Donna had passed away seven years ago, but Sam still came to work every day. Their son, Victor, helped run the restaurant now.

Michelangelo's was a few blocks from the offices of *Exposed*, a supermarket tabloid that had surprised establishment newspapers like the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* by winning prizes in journalism as a result of Dana's investigative work. Patrick Gorman, the newspaper's owner, ran a tab at Michelangelo's, and Sam and Victor knew Dana. When she called, they set aside a small private dining room in the back for her to meet with her potential client. The room was paneled in dark wood and the lighting was subdued. Black-and-white photographs of Sicily hung on the walls. Dana sat at a table covered in a white tablecloth and ordered a small antipasto and spaghetti aglio e olio. The antipasto had just arrived when Victor opened the door to admit a woman who looked as exotic as her accent. She was carrying an attaché case and wore a trench coat. Dark glasses obscured her eyes, her raven-black hair fell to her shoulders, she wore no rings on her fingers, and her lips were ruby red. Dana thought she'd fit in perfectly as the femme fatale in a 1940s film based on a Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett novel.

"Miss Cutler?" the woman asked.

Dana stood and offered her hand. The woman's fingers barely touched Dana's before she pulled her hand away.

"I am Margo Laurent."

"Have a seat, Ms. Laurent," Dana said as she motioned toward a chair on the other side of the table. Then she pointed her fork at her antipasto. "Sure you don't want something to eat? The food here is great."

"Thank you, but I am not hungry."

"Suit yourself. I hope you don't mind if I eat while we talk. I was up all night on a case and I'm starving."

"Please."

Dana waited for the woman to take off her coat. When she didn't, Dana said, "So, Ms. Laurent, why do you want to hire me?"

"How much do you know about the Ottoman Empire?"

Dana had speared a piece of mortadella and a slice of provolone, but she paused with her fork halfway to her mouth.

"Turks, right?"

Laurent nodded.

Dana smiled apologetically. "I'm afraid that's the extent of my knowledge. I was never much of a history buff."

"The Ottoman Empire lasted from 1299 to 1923," Laurent said. "In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, at the height of its power, it controlled territory in southeastern Europe, southwestern Asia, and North Africa. Constantinople was its capital city and the empire was at the center of interaction between the Eastern and Western worlds for six centuries. At times, the empire's tentacles reached into Persia, Egypt, Baghdad, Hungary, Transylvania, Moldavia, and the outskirts of Vienna. By the end of the reign of Suleiman the Magnificent in 1566 the empire's population totaled fifteen million people."

"Impressive," Dana said before taking another forkful of Italian delicacies. She had no interest in Laurent's history lesson, but three thousand bucks was three thousand bucks, so she pretended to find

it fascinating.

“If you do not know about the Ottoman Empire, can I assume you’ve never heard of Gennadius Mark of Ephesus?”

“You got me,” Dana said before eating a slice of prosciutto.

“In 1444, the court of Byzantium was desperate for Western assistance against the Turks and agreed to a union with Rome, yielding on almost all of the important theological issues that divided the East and the West. For example, the unionists agreed to accept the concept of purgatory, which they had previously rejected.”

“Where is this going, Ms. Laurent?” asked Dana, whose patience was starting to fade.

“Bear with me. You need to understand the backstory before you can understand why I need your help.”

Dana shrugged. “It’s your dime.”

“Mark of Ephesus was concerned about the preservation of the Eastern Orthodox Church. He was the only bishop who refused to sign the union, and he spoke for the average Orthodox churchgoer who gathered around him. George Scholarius was a judge who made several speeches in favor of the union. When he returned to Byzantium, he saw how the lesser clergy and the common people opposed what they saw as the betrayal of their beliefs. He changed his mind and became a strong opponent of the union. When Mark died, on June 23, 1444, George became the leader of the anti-union camp. This brought him into disfavor with the court and he retired to a monastery and took the name Gennadius.”

“In 1453, at the age of twenty-one, Sultan Mehmet II conquered Constantinople and cemented the status of the empire as the preeminent power in southeastern Europe. Mehmet wanted to assure the loyalty of the Greek population so they would not appeal to the West for liberation, which could have set off a new round of Crusades. He needed to find the cleric with the most hostility toward the West to help him cement the loyalty of the Greek populace. Gennadius was the natural choice.

“After Mehmet took Constantinople, Gennadius was captured by the Turks and sold as a slave. Mehmet’s men found Gennadius in Adrianople and brought him to the sultan on a beautiful horse from the imperial stable adorned with a silver saddle. The sultan received him in his suite while standing. The sultan rarely stood when receiving visitors, so this was a very rare display of respect.

“Mehmet persuaded Gennadius to be the first Patriarch of Constantinople under Islamic rule and personally gave him a gold, bejeweled scepter as the symbol of his authority. This scepter was immensely valuable, but it was only one of thousands of treasures belonging to the Ottoman sultan. No mention was made of it after Mehmet passed the Byzantine emperor’s symbol of power to the patriarch.”

Dana was suddenly drawn into Laurent’s tale and forgot about eating. Typically, her meetings with clients were laced with phrases like “cheating bastard” and “malingerer.” Dana couldn’t remember any insurance executive mentioning a silver saddle or a jewel-encrusted golden scepter.

“My grandfather, Antoine Girard, was a fascinating man,” Laurent said, changing the subject abruptly. “He studied archaeology and history at the Sorbonne and Oxford. He was a soldier of fortune and was involved in a number of famous archaeological digs. In 1922, Howard Carter and Lord Carnarvon found the tomb of Tutankhamen in the Valley of the Kings in Egypt.”

“King Tut’s tomb?” asked Dana.

“*Exactement*. Antoine had a very minor role in the expedition, but he was there when the tomb was opened. Then he and Carter argued. My grandfather never revealed the basis of the dispute, but my father thought they might have fought over a woman both men had been seeing in Cairo, because that is where Antoine went after quitting the dig, and that is where he made his startling discovery.”

The door opened and Victor came in with Dana's pasta. Laurent fell silent, and Dana, who had lost interest in her food, regretted the intrusion.

"What discovery?" Dana asked as soon as the door closed behind Victor.

"Antoine found the Ottoman scepter. An open-air market place in North Africa or the Middle East is called a souk, and the largest souk in Cairo is the Khan-el-Khalili. Have you been to Egypt, Miss Cutler?"

Dana shook her head. Her only trips outside the U.S. of A. had been chaperoning Jake when he was photographing swimsuit models in Tahiti and a disastrous week with a fellow cop in Acapulco.

"A pity. Cairo is fascinating, and the Khan-el-Khalili is one of its more exotic attractions. It is a winding maze packed tight with people, restaurants, coffeehouses, and shops selling all sorts of wares. On one of his trips to the souk, Antoine ventured into a shop that purported to sell Egyptian antiquities. Most of them were obvious fakes, but Antoine's eye fell on an interesting item on a shelf in the back of the store. It was a jet-black scepter with no jewels, but there were indentations where jewels might have been at one time. More important, it resembled a gold scepter adorned with jewels Antoine had seen in a museum in Constantinople. Antoine suspected that the scepter was a copy, but something about it fascinated him. He bought it, along with several other items so the owner would not suspect his interest. When he got back to his hotel, he made a startling discovery."

"It was the real deal?" Dana guessed.

Laurent nodded. "Underneath several layers of black paint was solid gold. But the scepter's real value had nothing to do with gold. If Antoine had found the scepter that Mehmet gave to Gennadius, it would be priceless. Antoine spent ten years researching the scepter's provenance and eventually came to the conclusion that it was, as you so charmingly put it, 'the real deal.' "

"How do you know all this?"

"During a sojourn in Paris, Antoine married my grandmother, Marie Levêque. Marie was wealthy and had homes in Paris and Bordeaux. They lived together long enough for Antoine to father Pauline Girard, my mother. My family had a collection of letters Antoine wrote to Marie while he was in Turkey. In one of them, he says that he has uncovered documents that convinced him that the scepter was real.

"Shortly after she received the letter, Marie got word from the French embassy in Constantinople that Antoine had been murdered. Shortly after that, burglars ransacked her villa in Bordeaux, and an attempt was made to break into her home in Paris. Fortunately, the scepter was hidden in a safe in the basement of the Paris mansion.

"When Hitler came to power, Marie moved to America, where she had relatives. Eventually Pauline married my father, Pierre Laurent, another wealthy émigré. Marie was highly intelligent and had many well-placed friends in the government. She anticipated Hitler's invasion and the weakness of the French army and shipped a great deal of art to America before hostilities broke out. One object she included in her cargo was the scepter.

"While she was living in New York her mansion was burglarized on more than one occasion despite her having alarm systems installed and security guards posted. She could never prove it, but she suspected that the scepter was the object of these home invasions. Then, during a vacation in Europe after the war, Marie was kidnapped and murdered. Another burglary occurred soon after, and an inside job was suspected. Marie had told my mother the history of the scepter and where it was hidden. When she went to the place where Marie had hidden it, the scepter was gone.

"When I was growing up, I heard many stories about Antoine's adventures, and the scepter was often mentioned. When I was a teenager, my mother showed me the letters that Antoine had written to

Marie. I became fascinated with the scepter and the Ottoman Empire. I majored in history in college and made several attempts to track down the scepter. All of them were unsuccessful.

“Then I read that a Turkish businessman who had been hard hit by the recession was auctioning off his art collection. Among the items in the catalog was a gold scepter. The picture reminded me of my mother’s description. I traveled to New York for the auction and confronted the head of the house. I showed him my proof that the scepter was stolen property but it wasn’t strong enough and he said the present owner was willing to risk a lawsuit.

“I hired an attorney but he told me that the scepter had been withdrawn from the auction. Soon after I heard rumors of a private sale. I also learned that Otto Pickering, a professor specializing in a history of the Ottoman Empire, had authenticated the scepter. And that is where my trail ran cold.”

“Did you talk to Pickering?”

“Despite repeated attempts to set up a meeting, he has refused to see me.”

“What is it that you want me to do?”

“I am terrified that the scepter will disappear for good if I do not act quickly. Otto Pickering is a recluse. He lives on an island off the coast of Washington State.”

Laurent placed the attaché case on the table and opened it. Inside were stacks of cash, a cell phone, and an airline ticket.

“I have purchased a first-class ticket on a flight to Seattle that leaves at midnight, and I have chartered a boat to take you to the island. Can you leave tonight?”

“That’s awfully short notice.”

“Miss Cutler, if we do not act immediately the scepter may disappear forever. The twenty-five thousand-dollar retainer in this attaché case should compensate you for any inconvenience you might suffer.”

Dana ran through the projects she had on her desk. Most of them would keep. More important, none of them involved Constantinople, French soldiers of fortune, the Khan-el-Khalili in Cairo, and the mysterious golden scepter. It was no contest.

“I’ll be on the plane,” Dana said.

Laurent’s shoulders had been hunched from tension and she’d been holding her breath. Now she exhaled and her shoulders sagged.

“I cannot thank you enough.”

“How do you want me to report to you?”

“My number is programmed into the cell phone in the attaché case.”

Dana stood up. “I’m going home to pack. I’ll give you an update as soon as I talk to Otto Pickering.”

Chapter Five

A torrential downpour pummeled the roof of the pilothouse of Emilio Leone's fishing boat. Violent waves smashed into its hull, and Dana Cutler's fingers gripped a handhold tightly as she fought to keep down the light meal she'd eaten for breakfast. Earlier on Friday morning, Dana had driven to a dockside café in a seaside town thirty miles north of Seattle. When she walked into the restaurant, Captain Leone was working on a cup of black coffee. He was bundled up in a pea jacket and knit cap. A thick black beard concealed a lot of his face, and a black patch covered his right eye. Dana thought he would have been perfectly at home on a pirate ship. Leone was not enthusiastic about sailing in a storm, but Margo Laurent's money had changed his mind, if not his surly attitude. The captain spoke only when necessary, and then he communicated in terse sentences or angry grunts.

Another wave crashed across the bow and the boat fell fast and hard into a trough before miraculously rising. Dana had seen the wave coming and had braced for the shock. It was freezing cold in the pilothouse but a heavy jacket and the wool cap that fit snugly over her ears helped somewhat. She bent forward and squinted through the sheets of rain that dashed against the window. Outside, massive waves crashed against black rocks that jutted like dinosaur teeth out of the unforgiving sea.

The captain saw where she was looking. "That's the island, Isla de Muerta."

"The Island of Death?"

"If a ship busts up on those rocks and a sailor is thrown into these waters, he's done."

Dana shivered as she imagined how it would feel to drown in the freezing, turbulent water.

Rain and heavy clouds obscured Dana's view, but the captain did not seem troubled by the lack of visibility. Seconds after Leone guided the boat through a break in the rocks the mist parted and Dana saw boats straining against their anchors as the wind and waves flung them about like toys. Leone steered the boat into a small harbor and secured it to a gray, weathered dock. Dana slung her duffel bag over her shoulder and got off quickly, grateful to be standing on solid ground.

"I'm staying at the Stanton B&B," she said. "Do you know where that is?"

"Walk a quarter mile down the road," the captain answered, pointing due north. "There's a sign on the front."

"How do I get in touch when I need to get back to the mainland?"

"The Stantons got my number," Leone said. Then he turned his back on Dana and trudged up the dock.

Dana followed and found herself on a short main street where the buildings all had a nautical theme. Peeling, sea-blue paint covered most of the stores. Anchors and wooden seagulls were common decoration. Dana passed a shop that sold bait and other fishing supplies, and a small grocery store. Ahead of her, the captain disappeared into the Safe Harbor Café, which advertised breakfast all day and a halibut special for dinner.

The rain was hard and cold and Dana walked fast, head down, shoulders hunched, speeding by a store that sold new and used books, an art gallery that displayed seascapes, a clothing store filled with foul-weather gear, and an antique store with brass sextants and an anchor chain in its front window.

There were a few people in the café and grocery store but Dana didn't see any customers in the other shops. She guessed that the townspeople made their nut during the summer and scraped by the rest of the year.

The B&B was a three-story yellow house with white trim that had been worked hard by the salt air. It was surrounded by a faded white picket fence grimed with moss. The inn had a front porch that wound around the side facing the sea. Dana imagined that the view would be great when the sun was shining. At the moment, she appreciated the shelter from the storm provided by the overhang.

Moments after she rang the doorbell, a short, plump woman with snowy white hair let her in.

"You must be Miss Cutler," she said, smiling broadly.

"How did you know?"

The woman laughed. "There was no trick to it. You're our only guest."

Dana smiled. "I guess the island doesn't get too many tourists this time of year."

"Or any other," the woman answered solemnly. "We're off the beaten track, so to speak. I'm Mabel Stanton. Let me show you to your room so you can get out of those wet clothes."

"I'm here on business," Dana said as they climbed the stairs to the second floor. "I'll need a car. Is there someplace I can rent one?"

"Miss Laurent asked about a car when she rented the room for you. You can use one of our cars. It's all paid for."

"Great. Can you tell me where Otto Pickering lives?"

"Other side of the island, but I don't know if he'll talk to you. The professor keeps to himself and I hear he doesn't like visitors."

"I won't know if he'll talk to me until I ask him. Can you show me how to get to Professor Pickering's house?"

"That's easy enough. It's off the main road but you won't have any trouble finding it. I already drew you a map. Will you be wanting something to eat before you go?"

Dana realized that she was starving. "That would be great."

"I've got beef stew, or I can fix you a sandwich."

"The stew sounds terrific. And a cup of hot coffee would be deeply appreciated."

"I'll have it waiting for you when you come down," Mabel said as she opened a door to a spacious room with a view of the sea.

"There's fresh towels in the bathroom. Here's your key. Anything else you need, tell me when you come downstairs."

Dana tossed her duffel bag on the bed and stripped off her clothes. She'd take a fast, scalding-hot shower, eat a hearty meal, then drive to the far side of Isla de Muerta to visit Otto Pickering. Her plan sounded simple enough.

Chapter Six

Dana could hear rain rattling against the B&B's windows while she devoured her lunch. She hoped that the downpour would let up by the time she drove to Pickering's house but she was out of luck. Nothing, the rain seemed more violent.

The main road was two lanes and it circled Isla de Muerta. The trees on the windward side were sparse, stunted, and bent away from the rocky shore. On the other side of the road, lightning strikes cast a flickering light over a dense evergreen forest. According to Mabel's map, Pickering's house was fifteen miles from the inn and two miles past the intersection of the main road and another road that bisected Isla de Muerta. Dana drove slowly and crossed the island's other artery twenty minutes after she started. Two miles farther on, Dana turned onto a narrow dirt track that led inland through thick woods. A heavy canopy shielded Dana's car from a good deal of the rain but it also made the way darker and created an impression that the trees were closing in on her. It took a lot to frighten Dana but the closeness of the primordial woods made her very uncomfortable.

Without warning, Pickering's house appeared. It was old, large, and ungainly and painted a dull brown to blend in with the forest that surrounded it. The central portion was two stories, and it looked as if additions had been slapped on without any rhyme or reason. Some were one story, others two. There was even a three-story tower on the side with the best view of the sea. None of the proper things looked kept up; the yard was wild and the house was badly in need of a paint job.

Dana parked and ran under an overhang. There was no bell but a heavy brass lion-head knocker was nailed to the middle of the front door. Dana pulled it back and slammed it forward, hoping that the clang of metal on metal would penetrate the thick oak door and the din created by the storm. She waited a minute, then used the knocker twice more. She was about to try again when she heard a voice yell, "I'm coming, I'm coming." A minute later, the door creaked open and Dana found herself facing an elderly, balding man with liver-spotted skin. He was stooped with age and clad in a white shirt, blue polka-dot bow tie, a brown tweed jacket with leather patches on the elbows, and loose-fitting green slacks that did not match his jacket. The pants were held up by suspenders.

"No solicitors," Otto Pickering said brusquely.

"I'm not selling anything, Professor."

"Then why are you here?"

Dana held out her card. "I've come on behalf of a client."

Pickering eyed the card suspiciously.

"I would have called," Dana said, "but your number is unlisted, and I couldn't find an e-mail address. This is a matter of some urgency, so I didn't have the luxury of writing."

"You still haven't told me what you want, young lady."

"I'm here because of the scepter that Sultan Mehmet II gave to Gennadius."

Surprise registered on Pickering's face for a moment. Then he regained his composure.

"Can we step inside, please?" Dana said. "I'm drowning out here."

The professor hesitated, and Dana hoped that he wouldn't slam the door in her face. The

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