

PROMISES TOWN

A TEXAS MYSTERY

BY THE

AUTHOR OF *Splendor Bay*

L.B. COBB

“A wonderful mix of characters highlights this memorable mystery” — *Mystery Scene Magazine*

“Chiseled out of the Texas landscape, politics, and Virginia Rodriguez's sometimes bitchy, but mostly likable, character” — *Midwest Book Review*

“From the opening page, you are hooked and delighted to hang onto the hook” — *Review of Texas Books*

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The eBook edition of *Promises Town* has a larger text font than the trade softcover and library hardcover print editions, hence it also has a greater page count.

ABOUT THE BOOK

A federal prosecutor, the nemesis of Washington elite, is murdered at a posh Bayou City hotel. His wife is found with the gun at the scene and her motive is obvious—he did her wrong and she caught him in the act. The wife is arrested quickly.

Perhaps too quickly, ASSISTANT DISTRICT ATTORNEY VIRGINIA RODRIGUEZ soon realizes, but a dismissal isn't that simple. Powerful people want a conviction and more than Virginia's career is on the line—calculating killers have added her name to their list. Virginia is smart and sassy, and she can hold her own against LEO ZACHMANN, the high-profile attorney who has taken up the wife's defense, but can she deliver Texas justice in a case where the truth is as elusive as the evidence?

PROMISES TOWN delivers a rich blend of memorable characters, a fascinating view of the two-sided search for truth in criminal cases, an intriguing mystery, wry humor, and Virginia Rodriguez, a woman who has it all—a killer of a job, a child and a dog to feed, a house to keep, promises to remember, and no Prince Charming in view.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

L. B. Cobb grew up in Tennessee and practiced geology before practicing law. She now lives in Houston, Texas.

ONE

Friday, May 22, 4:15 p.m., Bayou City, Texas

Virginia Rodriguez struggled with the key outside while the telephone rang inside and her dog yelped in the backyard. Finally, the lock clicked. She kicked the door open, dropped everything on the kitchen table, and grabbed the phone.

“What?” she demanded, watching helplessly as the grocery sack and her shoulder bag spilled their contents across the table. Cans and vegetables tumbled to the floor. Her cell phone landed in a chair. Her gun clanged into the empty dog food bowl.

“Sorry to bother you at home,” said her boss, District Attorney Wendell Boettcher, “but this is important.”

“I’m off duty, Wen. Remember? You approved my vacation.”

“I know, and you deserve one. You did a great job on the Bell trial. Your closing should make the evening news, but I need—”

“Absolutely not!” She swatted a mosquito and glanced at the still open kitchen door, then at the patio door to the backyard where Denver, her black Labrador, had added glass scratching to his attention-getting routine.

“Just hear me out,” Wen persisted. “It’s that federal prosecutor, the one who went after those politicians on that sex scandal. It’s a tremendous growth opportunity, or I wouldn’t have called.”

Right. Another frigging growth opportunity. What management offered workers instead of decent wages. But not this time. She’d had all the personal growth she could stand.

“No. Give it to someone else. I’m tired. I haven’t had a full night’s sleep in a month.”

“I need you, Virginia. It’s Stuart Fullerton, at the Concord.”

“Under no circumstances will I work with the headmaster of the sleaze-talk-show school of criminal prosecution.”

“You wouldn’t exactly be working with him,” said Wen.

“What, then?”

“He’s dead.”

“Dead?”

“Murdered,” said Wen. “Just check out the scene before the cops screw it up, then you can hand it off.”

No! No more! She had to let Denver in before his glass scratching drove her berserk. She had to get out of her hot lawyer suit and sagging pantyhose. She wanted to get into a tub and soak the trial photos of *las víctimas jóvenes* from her mind, then spend the evening making an authentic Tex-Mex dinner for her authentic Tex-Mex child.

Wen interrupted her internal harangue. “Honest, Virginia. If you don’t want the case, you can reassign it. I promise.”

No. She desperately needed a couple of weeks of pretending she had a normal life like other single working women with children. Single Working Woman With Child? Yes, that’s what she was. A SWWWC. Move the letters around a bit and she could be a website for the liberated woman who has it all—job she hates, child and dog to feed, laundry to do, house to clean, promises to remember, and no Prince Charming in view.

“Unless the Feds take it away from us,” Wen added.

She stopped in mid-tirade. Maybe. Probably. With a name brand federal prosecutor victim, the US Attorney’s office might actually take it over. Besides, she would be in town until after son Nick’s graduation on Thursday, and she could shop for whatever he needed for the summer after they got to the ranch. A discount store was within easy driving distance now.

“I really want you to take this one, Virginia.”

Maybe she could make it work. Get the case started, get her name on national television a few nights so that when she sent her resume to the big firms, they’d know who she was. So maybe one of them would hire her and pay her enough that she could make both the mortgage payment and Nick’s college tuition in the fall.

“Please, just get it started. That’s all I’m asking.”

Yes, she could do it and not disappoint Nick, and this case really could be the door marked “Exit.” Scratching out a living in the DA’s office was getting old. Her body felt old. Her soul felt old. Was this the way out?

Virginia sighed, disappointed with herself for doing what Wen knew she would do when he called. “I’ll check it out, but I don’t want any lip from you if I reassign it.”

“You have my word.”

“Sure, Wen, I had your word I could take a vacation, too,” Virginia grumbled as she hung up the phone.

Springing into action, she stepped over cans, stashed the lettuce, meat and cheese in the refrigerator, and scrawled a note. “*Nick, I’m on a case, but I’ll be home early. I’ll pick up a pizza. Sorry, Mom.*”

Virginia anchored the note to the refrigerator door with a magnet, breathed deeply, and let the guilt go. Then she turned her cell phone back on and stuffed it and her gun into her bag. Quickly she filled dog bowls, let Denver in, and extracted the requisite promise. “You going to behave if I leave you inside?”

Denver gave her his version of a grin, wagged his tail to emphasize his good-dog status, and whined affirmatively in the “Rocky Mountain High” pitch that had earned him his name.

“You better,” she threatened. “You piddle on the floor or chew up anything, it’s off to the pound with you. *Hasta la vista, pal.*”

Denver lost the grin and answered with a whimper.

“Okay, I’ll trust you this time.” Virginia tugged her pantyhose back into place and straightened her skirt. In a final glance around the kitchen, she saw the avocados under the table. Denver would think they were balls, and eventually she’d find their moldy corpses under a piece of furniture. But no time to worry about that now.

Virginia locked the door and hurried to her twelve-year-old pickup truck, which was still parked in the driveway because the garage was still littered with Nick’s motorbike parts. She’d forgotten to pick up the latest essential gizmo at the bike shop on her way home. And something else was on Nick’s list, she mused as she got in the truck, something she’d promised him on her way out the door this morning that she wouldn’t forget, something he *absolutely* had to have today.

What was it?

Virginia thought for a moment, but couldn’t remember. Whatever it was, they’d have to get it tomorrow.

Leaving her neighborhood, deceptively named Country Club Estates by its 1950s developer, her mind turned to her next challenge—getting to the Concord Hotel quickly and without mishap. One wrong turn and she’d be stuck in the Friday afternoon dance-of-death for hours.

Weaving through neighborhood streets as long as she could, Virginia made it to the freeway without incident, merged into the nerve-racking traffic, then turned on the radio for the high-in-the-sky road report on the politically incorrect *Bill & Bob Country Retro Show*.

“We interrupt Charley Pride’s *Honky Tonk Blues* album for late-breaking news,” Bill declared. “Federal prosecutor Stuart Fullerton is reported to be a shooting victim at the swank Concord Hotel. No word yet on his condition or who did it. What do you think, Bob?”

“The Lord works in mysterious ways,” quipped Bob. “All you commuters out there supporting the cell phone industry, give us a ring-a-ding and tell us what you think. Thirteenth caller wins a weekend in a luxury suite at the Concord. You can check in just as soon as they mop up the blood and gore.”

Virginia fished her cell phone out of her bag and punched a quick-dial number. “Turn on your radio,” she said when Wen answered. “*Bill & Bob*. Or your television. It’s probably everywhere by now. The jackals are on the prowl.”

Virginia braked to a stop in front of the Concord. Cop cars and a crime lab van were on the scene, but no sign of the medical examiner’s ghoulish wagon and, thankfully, no news vans, either. She checked her watch—4:45 p.m. *Bill & Bob* had scooped everyone again, but it wouldn’t take long for the rest of the pack of dogs to find out.

Virginia flipped her visor down to display her park-anywhere District Attorney pass and dashed up the steps of the chrome and glass hotel.

Several badge waves later, she stepped off the elevator at the eighteenth floor. Who’s left to serve and protect the other citizens? she wondered as she scanned a hallway swarming with cops. Then she spied Detective Jackson Smith standing outside room 1807 talking to another officer and relaxed. With Smitty in charge, chances were the crime scene had not been compromised entirely.

Smitty raised his head and breathed deeply through his Michelangelo *David* nose. He turned his sable eyes in her direction as if he’d caught her scent and smiled, a tad too knowingly, then strolled toward her. “Good to see you again.”

Virginia met his eyes, hungry eyes, *ojos hambrientos*, and instantly felt the panic of prey. Quickly she glanced away.

Smitty had been a mistake. It should never have happened. It would never happen again.

“You in charge?” Virginia asked the tall, precisely dressed black man in her most assertive prosecutor’s voice. The sharp tone added an extra foot to her five-foot-one height in king of the mountain games with cops, lawyers, and judges.

Smitty gestured toward room 1807. “Victims are in there.”

“Victims? More than one?”

“Two. Fullerton’s wife was found with the gun, so I guess we’ve got our shooter. She’s in 1809. It has a connecting door to the murder room.”

“Anyone question her?” Virginia asked.

“Tried to beat a confession out of her,” Smitty quipped.

Virginia frowned. Jokes about violating a defendant’s rights didn’t play well with her. She’d had one too many cases compromised by overly aggressive police tactics.

“Don’t worry,” Smitty said. “Everything’s kosher. She’s had her warning and is exercising her right to remain silent.”

Virginia sighed. “Anybody call the medical examiner?”

“Twice.”

“Call again. We can’t do much until they get here. I saw the CSU van outside. I assume they’re observing protocol?”

“Yes, ma’am.” Smitty clicked his heels soldier fashion. “A criminalist tended to the widow, but I asked them to hold off on a sweep of the rooms until the ME finishes. Anything else, ma’am?”

Virginia ignored the question and the attitude as she moved past him into 1807. She first noticed lights flashing like blinking lightning bugs in a mirror behind an officer. Farther into the room, she saw the police photographer with plastic bags over his shoes, edging his way around the drapes-drawn darkened room. Taking another step, she saw the bodies.

Joined like Siamese twins, back to belly, spoons on the king-sized bed, both nude, both male, the older male with a head wound embraced the younger male who had been shot in the chest. Blood decorated the headboard and ivory walls behind the bed. Blood-soaked bedding draped to the plush teal carpet.

“Think she reloaded?” Virginia asked, alluding to the oft-repeated advice a prominent defense attorney gave women in his country club luncheon speeches: “Ladies, if you just have to shoot your husbands, remember one thing. Don’t reload. You might get off by claiming you thought he was a burglar when he came sneaking in late from tomcatting, and you might get off if you catch him in the act and claim it made you go insane. If you reload, that’s premeditated. Premeditated will get you life in the pen, for sure. Might get you death.”

“Under these circumstances,” Smitty said, “you’ll never get a murder conviction, not even if she reloaded twice.”

“Be lucky to get her on manslaughter,” Virginia muttered.

TWO

Friday, May 22, 4:30 p.m.

Leo Zachmann's secretary stuck her blond head into his office. "Pick up line three," Martha Dee ordered. "You'll want to talk to this guy."

"Want to give me a clue?" Leo glanced at the wall clock above the door, cognizant of his five o'clock deadline for faxing answers to interrogatories in a civil case. He'd rather be doing just about anything else at the moment, but such tedious work kept the firm prosperous between the sporadic but much more lively high-society murder cases. Actually, his wife's corporate deal-making kept them prosperous, but no need to quibble over details.

"The police are holding Mrs. Stuart Fullerton for the murder of her husband at the Concord Hotel."

"Fullerton? Washington-scandal Stuart Fullerton?"

"That's the one."

"Is she on the line?"

"No. It's a man. He says he's 'a friend' of Mrs. Fullerton. Won't give me a name, but he really wants to hire you."

Leo looked at the papers in front of him, then at the clock again. "Can you finish these up and fax them off?"

"No problem." Martha Dee grinned at him.

"What's so funny?"

"You. You look like a kid getting let out of school early."

Leo grunted. "Tell my wife I may be late for dinner?" He pressed a button to start the tape recorder hooked to his phone

and lifted the receiver. “Leo Zachmann here. What can I do for you?”

“I’m calling on behalf of Janette Fullerton, Mrs. Stuart Fullerton. The police are detaining her at the Concord Hotel. Will you help her?”

“Who are you?” Leo replied. “And what makes you think she wants my help?”

“Who I am isn’t important,” the voice said. “She needs you.”

“Not so fast,” said Leo. “Tell me what happened.”

“You’ll have to get the details from her. Please, just name your price, and I’ll send you a check.”

“Whoa,” said Leo. “You tell me the nature of her problem, then we’ll worry about my fee.”

Leo heard a sigh. “The police think she murdered her husband. I don’t know any more than that, but I’ll see that you’re well paid, whatever you want. Just help her.”

“How do I get in touch with you if I decide to sign on?”

“Write this down.” The voice recited a phone number with a Washington DC area code.

Leo was now intrigued by just who the mystery man might be. “I’ll talk to her, but I’m not promising representation.”

“Please, just check it out, then call me back.”

“That much, I’ll do.”

Leo buzzed Martha Dee and put his jacket on while she gathered up papers from his desk. When she left, he rang Jerry Thibideau, the firm’s private investigator. “Meet me at the elevator. Right now. Happy hour at the Concord.”

When Leo came through his office door, he found his wife and law partner, Miranda, blocking his escape. “I hear you’re standing me up for a new client,” she accused.

Leo swept Miranda into his arms and gave her a peck on the lips. “I would never give up an evening with you for a client,

my dear. You and the kids start dinner without me if I run a little late.”

Miranda’s emerald eyes locked on his blues. “I’m coming with you to make sure you don’t ‘run a little late.’”

Martha Dee cleared her throat. “Would you two take it elsewhere? Someone gave me a five o’clock deadline, and you’re in my way.”

“Certainly.” Leo directed Miranda toward the elevators. “Oh, Martha Dee? Would you check caller ID and see if you can figure out who our mystery man is?”

“Yeah, yeah,” Martha Dee said as she fed the fax machine.

Jerry Thibideau came out of his office just as Leo and Miranda reached the elevator. “What’s up?”

“Don’t know yet,” Leo said. “Some man, who didn’t want to tell me his name, thinks Mrs. Stuart Fullerton needs a lawyer.”

“Fullerton? The guy who went after those politicians?”

“That one. Apparently he’s no longer among the living, and the police think his wife did him in. While I talk with the widow, see if you can get your cop buddies to tell you what they have on her.”

“I’ll wait in the bar,” Miranda said.

“No, my dear. You wanted to come. You can assist me in interviewing our potential client, act as my truth-seeking missile. Then you can tell me whether you’ll let me get on this horse and ride.”

Miranda gave Leo her skeptical look.

“Don’t I always listen to your opinions?” he asked.

“You listen, then you do as you damn well please.”

Police cars with strobe lights flashing and television station vans with antennae turning were parked helter-skelter in front

of the hotel. Reporters babbled into microphones on the front steps. It looked like Christmas at the Concord and Leo felt the anticipation of a present waiting to be opened inside.

Leo and Jerry formed the offensive line with Miranda on their heels as they crossed the granite-floored lobby.

A young officer stepped out of the open elevator car as they approached. "Sorry, sir. We have a police problem upstairs. Hotel management is offering guests free refreshments in the Rustler's Lounge. Wait there. We'll let you know when we're done."

"About that little problem you have," said Leo, "that's where we're headed. I'm Leo Zachmann. You guys are holding my client, Mrs. Stuart Fullerton, on the eighteenth floor."

"I'm sorry, sir," the cop said, "but no one goes up."

Leo moved closer to read his badge, towering over the cop. "Tell you what, Officer Cuellar, we're getting on this elevator. You call whomever you need to call and tell them they'll have to shoot Mrs. Fullerton's lawyer to keep him from getting off. And someone else might get hurt in the shoot-out. You want to tell them that?"

The officer, his right hand resting on his gun, glared up at Leo, then shrugged and stepped aside. "I'll let them know some *loco abogado* is coming up."

"Thank you, kind sir," Leo said, "but make that some big-and-mean crazy lawyer, so they'll know which one."

Miranda kicked Leo in the calf as the elevator doors closed.

"Ouch!" Leo yelped. "Why'd you do that?"

She glared at him. "One of these days some hot-headed cop will call your bluff."

Leo shrugged. "You've always looked good in black."

"Not to worry," interjected Jerry, "not with our new improved police department. Now, back in my day, it was

bang, bang, you're under arrest, bang, bang, you have a right to remain silent. These days, they're too scared of Internal Affairs."

"You two clean up your act or I'll take you home," Miranda warned.

Jerry grinned at Leo over Miranda's auburn head. "Course back then, internal affairs took place behind closed doors between the chief and his secretary. Now, it's cops screwing cops."

Leo had hired the six-foot-six chocolate colored Gericault Thibideau away from the Bayou City Police Department over twenty years ago after Jerry came up with evidence that helped the then hot-shot Assistant DA and now distinguished DA Wendell Boettcher whip Leo soundly in his first big love-and-murder trial. Fortunately, Wen had never done it again, and Jerry still held the respect of the older cops, at least enough they sometimes let him in on what was really in their evidence locker.

As the elevator door opened at the eighteenth floor, Jerry turned right toward a group of officers. A tall black cop in a well-tailored suit stepped forward. "Whatcha doin' here, Thibideau?"

Jerry extended his hand. "What's up, Smitty?"

Leo watched as Smitty-the-cop warmed to Jerry-the-ex-cop, then he scanned the crowded hallway looking for one of Boettcher's people. Wen would definitely have a prosecutor guarding against a screw-up on a case this big.

He saw her talking with a police photographer at the door of 1807 and smiled. That's Virginia, Leo thought, already at work on her trial exhibits.

Leo placed his hand on the small of Miranda's back. "Would you accompany me to the boudoir, my dear?"

THREE

Friday, May 22, 5:15 p.m.

Virginia felt genuine delight when she saw Leo Zachmann coming toward her. Of all the defense attorneys in town, Leo was her most challenging adversary and her favorite. Tough and relentless when he believed he had an innocent client, he would plead them out when he knew they were guilty. Leo was at least six-five, with mature silver in his fair hair and a sparkle in his dark blue eyes. His dashing good looks drew media attention, she reminded herself, and winning this one hands down against Zachmann wouldn't hurt her professional reputation one bit.

"What are you doing here, Leo?" she asked the blond giant.

"Why, Virginia, I see blinking cop cars and rowdy reporters, and I just have to see if there's paying work I can hustle up," Leo deadpanned. "You know how testy the state bar gets when you send runners in to sign up clients, so I like to do the signing up myself."

"Right. I was told Mrs. Fullerton hasn't said a word, but it looks like she managed to sneak in a call to a lawyer."

"Oh, she didn't call me," Leo said, pulling his wife into the huddle. "Miranda had one of her psychic visions, saw one of God's children needed her rights protected, so we rushed straight over before some other lawyer could beat my time."

Virginia offered her hand to Miranda Zachmann. "Good to see you again. Anyone ever tell you that your husband is full of crap?"

Miranda smiled. "It's been mentioned by a few besides me."

Virginia turned to Leo. "I suppose you'd like to see Mrs. Fullerton. We've parked her in 1809."

Leo pointed to the now closed and guarded door of 1807. "I'd sure appreciate it if you'd let me look in there first, before they cart off the exculpatory evidence, that is. It'll save us both a bunch of time later on."

Virginia eyed Leo suspiciously, then shrugged. He'd have access to the crime scene anyway. It might as well be now when they could watch him. "You can look, but don't touch."

"Could someone take Miranda in to see Mrs. Fullerton while I check it out?" Leo asked. "I'll be along in a minute."

Virginia nudged the arm of the uniformed officer at the door. "Make sure Mr. Zachmann signs the log sheet. Then he can take a brief look at the crime scene. After he's done, he can visit with his client in 1809. Watch him every second he's in 1807, and don't let him touch anything."

A uniformed officer stood up from the small sofa as Miranda and Virginia entered 1809. Miranda focused on the woman who remained seated in a chair by the window. Janette Fullerton was not what she had expected. Instead of being a stylishly-chic lawyer wife, Mrs. Fullerton looked like a country music star in town for the rodeo—Texas-big bouffant blond hair, heavy-handed makeup, skintight jeans, fancy high-heel boots, a purple satin western shirt trimmed in turquoise fringe and silver beads, the top unbuttoned to reveal ample cleavage. If it were February and rodeo time, Miranda might understand the costume, but May? Was this her idea of a Go-Texan tourist outfit?

The woman took a drag from her cigarette and dropped it into the ocher-colored liquid in a hotel-logo glass on the table

next to her chair. Then she picked up the television remote and pushed the mute button. Silent images of the late-breaking events at the Concord played on.

“I’m Miranda Zachmann. My husband and law partner, Leo Zachmann, will be with us shortly. He’s here to assist you if you need an attorney.”

Mrs. Fullerton stared at Miranda as if trying to bring her into focus, shifted her gaze to Virginia, then looked back at the muted television. “It appears I do,” she said absently.

“May I sit?” Miranda asked.

Janette Fullerton pointed to the bed.

Miranda glanced at Virginia. “Could we be alone?”

Virginia shrugged and motioned for the officer to follow her out. “I’ll go try to keep Leo from stealing my evidence.”

Miranda waited for Janette Fullerton to look at her again, then realized the woman’s detached air concealed fright—fright bordering on terror. “Mrs. Fullerton?”

Her eyes darted to Miranda. “Yes?”

“Do you understand that we’re here to help you?”

She nodded. “How did you know?”

“Whoever you called must have called Leo,” said Miranda.

“I didn’t call anyone. I’ve been busy with people swabbing my hands and... They said I could call a lawyer after they booked me.”

Miranda stared at Mrs. Fullerton. If she hadn’t called the man who phoned Leo, then how had he known? Miranda scanned the room. Her eyes landed on a lamp on a night table. She examined the shade. A tiny disc fell out of a pleat.

A bug? Were there others?

Miranda put it back, then unscrewed the speaking end of the phone receiver and saw another. She screwed the phone parts together and turned to Janette with a finger in front of her lips in the “hush” sign. Leaving the room, Miranda pulled a cell phone from her purse.

* * *

“Wow!” Leo blurted to the officer beside him. “Talk about getting caught with your pants down.”

“Does give you a different perspective,” the officer replied.

“Sort of yang-yang instead of yin-yang, ain’t it?” Leo continued. “So, what do you guys think? Who did it?”

Virginia slipped in next to Leo and dismissed the officer with a wave of her hand. “Seems obvious—a wife with a gun and a dead husband engaged in an extramarital sex act at the moment of death.”

“Sounds circumstantial to me,” Leo mused.

“An eyewitness to the shooting and a solid confession would sound circumstantial to you, Leo Zachmann. Let’s see. Motive? We don’t need it, but I’d say we have it anyway. Means? A recently-fired weapon in the widow’s possession. Opportunity? The widow and gun were found in the room adjacent to the bodies. The door between the rooms was open. And, let’s not forget, she hasn’t said she didn’t do it. She hasn’t offered any explanation at all. About all she’s done is send a telepathic message to a defense lawyer, which sort of indicates she thinks she needs one. So can we take her statement now and wrap this up? I don’t know about you, Leo, but I’ve had a hell of a week, and I could use some sleep.”

“Why don’t you let me take Mrs. Fullerton home with Miranda and me?” Leo suggested. “I’ll bring her downtown in the morning.”

“How about I let the police take her downtown now?” Virginia countered. “You can visit her whenever you’re ready.”

“Why don’t you wait until after you get the lab results to book her, so you don’t embarrass the DA’s office by arresting the wrong person?”

“Leo, I’m tired. I don’t feel like debating you tonight. We have a rich woman in the next room. Rich women can buy

airplane tickets and disappear where the long arm of Texas law can't reach them. Our one, only, and obvious suspect goes downtown tonight."

"I wish you'd reconsider, Virginia," Leo cajoled. "I know you're exhausted from the Bell trial. From all reports, you did a bang-up job on it. I'm not much of one for the death penalty, but your Mr. Bell is one I'd give the needle to myself. You're really making a name for yourself, you know. If you ever decide to change sides—"

"Don't try your blarney on me, Leo Zachmann, or I might consider it attempted bribery. If you want to talk with your client, I'd suggest you get on with it."

"Promise me that you'll get her decent accommodations."

"I'll do what I can," said Virginia.

Leo walked out of 1807 and saw Miranda on her cell phone at the end of the hall. She was reciting a credit card number when he reached her.

"What are you buying?"

"A room. Tell Virginia you want to talk with Mrs. Fullerton in 1822." She pointed down the hall. "Away from all the activity. The desk manager is on the way up with a key."

"I doubt Virginia will agree to that."

"Just ask her." Miranda proceeded to tell Leo about the bugs in 1809.

Leo saw Virginia talking to the cop in the suit who Jerry had called Smitty and headed toward her. She waved Smitty away before he reached them.

"I need a favor," he announced.

Virginia rolled her eyes. "What now?"

"I'd like to talk with my client in a room Miranda just rented."

"What? Now, why on earth would I agree to that, Leo?"

"Why not? One room is much the same as another."

“Why not 1809 then?” Virginia demanded.

“I’d prefer a room of my own choosing.”

“Leo, I’m tired. I’ve already accommodated you more than I should have. Go talk with your client in 1809. Now. Or not. Your choice. You’ll have plenty of time to talk after she’s booked.”

“It’s this way,” Leo argued. “Miranda found a couple of bugging devices in 1809, and I don’t want to discuss anything with my client in that room. Let me talk to her in another room, which you can personally inspect, or I’ll go down and give a press conference, tell that coven of devil worshipers on the front steps that the police and the District Attorney are bugging attorney-client conversations.”

“Bugged? You’ve got to be kidding.”

“I’m not kidding. About the bugs or a press conference, if it becomes necessary. You want me to go tell the press you’re violating Mrs. Fullerton’s constitutional rights up here?”

Virginia glared at Leo. “Fine,” she snapped. “Have it your way, but make it quick.”

Leo sighed. He hadn’t wanted to rile Virginia, but he’d worry about having burned that drawbridge when he needed to cross it again. Right now he regretted giving up the information about the bugs because there was a better than even chance the police would trash both rooms looking for more of them before he could get his experts in to find whatever else might be of use in Mrs. Fullerton’s defense.

FOUR

Friday, May 22, 6:15 p.m.

Mrs. Fullerton glanced at the door as if considering an escape, then at Miranda as if seeking an ally. Finally, her eyes rested on Leo's face. "Will you represent me?"

"I don't know yet," he said. "Regardless, this conversation is privileged. Whatever you say to Miranda and me, we'll take to our graves, unless it's something I can use for your defense. Does that work for you?"

"I understand the concept of attorney-client privilege," she said, "but first tell me why you're here."

"I received a phone call from a gentleman. He didn't give me his name, but he said you needed my help." Leo pulled a note from his jacket pocket and showed it to her. "You recognize this number?"

She stared at the note a moment and handed it back. "No."

"You're sure?" Leo asked.

She shrugged. "It doesn't matter. Obviously, I need a lawyer."

Leo nodded, then studied Janette Fullerton. Time to see if she would tell the important lie. "Did you do it?"

"No! Absolutely not!" She glared at Leo.

Most attorneys didn't ask—because they really didn't want to know, because clients usually lied, and because it didn't matter. Regardless of the answer, the bottom line was simple—did the prosecution have sufficient credible evidence to prove guilt beyond a reasonable doubt? *Not guilty* and *innocent*

were two different animals. But Leo asked, because it was a tad easier on his soul if they said they were innocent, and he needed to know if they were liars.

“I returned to our room,” Janette Fullerton explained. “When I didn’t find Stuart there, I assumed he was still working.”

“Working?” repeated Leo.

She nodded. “They used Ray’s room as their office.”

“Ray?” Leo quizzed.

“Ray Atkins. The one with my... with Stuart in... his... his associate.”

“Oh,” said Leo.

She took a deep breath and continued. “I knocked, then tried the door. It was unlocked, as usual. I went in. It took a moment for my eyes to adjust to the dark room. Then I saw them. On the bed. God, it was horrible!” She shuddered, closed her eyes, and hugged herself.

Leo briefly wondered whether it was the memory of finding her husband in bed with a man, or the memory of finding them dead, or the memory of killing them that upset her. He gave her a moment to compose herself, noting she hadn’t said where she had returned from. But that could wait. “They said you were found with a gun.”

“Gun?” She looked at him with a bewildered expression.

“They found a gun on the night table in your room next to the telephone. Do you know how it got there?”

She looked at her hands plucking invisible lint from her jeans, then she glanced out the window. “No, I don’t know. All I remember is thinking I should call 9-1-1.”

“Did you?” Leo asked.

“Yes. No. Not 9-1-1. Zero, for the front desk. I told them my husband had been shot and asked them to send help.”

“And then?”

“Then I waited until the security guard arrived. He picked up a gun and did something with it. I don’t remember what. Then the emergency people and police arrived.”

“They ask you any questions?”

She stared at Leo long enough for him to notice that below the turquoise eye shadow her eyes were cornflower blue, with little gold flecks like freckles scattered around the irises. Unusual blue eyes.

“Yes, but I didn’t say anything. I wanted to tell them I hadn’t done it, but I couldn’t make the words come out.”

“What happened next?” Leo prodded.

“The black officer, the tall one in the nice suit, reminded me I had a right to remain silent. He offered me a soft drink and a cigarette. Funny. I hadn’t smoked in years. Now it seems like I never stopped. You don’t happen to have one on you, do you?”

“Afraid not,” Leo said, wishing he did. Miranda nagged him into quitting years ago, but he’d never completely lost the desire to light up when he saw someone else enjoying a smoke.

He glanced at Miranda. She frowned at him as if she’d read his mind. Probably had. Usually did. Leo turned back to Janette Fullerton. “What happened next?”

“People from the crime lab showed up. They took swabs from my hands and clothes, then they got busy in Ray’s room and left me with an officer. He turned on the television and we watched the news until you showed up.” She glanced at Miranda.

There was a knock on the door. “Five minutes,” Virginia called from outside.

“Okay,” Leo said. “We’ve got to wrap this up. Let me tell you what’s going to happen. The police will take you downtown to central booking. Reporters are swarming like piranhas downstairs; don’t say a word to any of them. Just keep moving.

Don't look at them and don't hide your face, duck your head, smile, look smug, or anything else. Any emotion you show might make the public think you're guilty, might make a potential juror think you're guilty."

Janette nodded.

"They'll book you," Leo continued, "take your picture and prints, put you in a cell. I hope it will be a private cell, but don't count on it. You may share quarters with some unpleasant people tonight. Don't talk to any of them. People in jail will turn on you."

She nodded again, clearly alarmed.

"By the way, they have video cameras and microphones hidden everywhere these days, including jail cells. Don't say or do anything you don't want on camera. You got that?"

Janette Fullerton closed her eyes and sighed.

"I'd like to tell you that I'll have you out in a few hours," Leo continued, "but that won't happen. We can't do anything about bail until after the arraignment. I'll try to schedule that for Monday. This weekend, I'll need to talk with you some more and do a little investigation of my own. The more evidence we have on our side when we go into court, the more likely we'll be to get you released."

"I have to get home! My children—"

"I'm sorry, that's not going to happen tonight."

Janette Fullerton turned pleading eyes on Miranda. Miranda shook her head and Janette looked back at Leo. "You'll come with me, won't you?"

"I'm sorry. My accompanying you to jail won't help you get any better treatment tonight, and I'd rather not give the press fuel for a flash fire this early. They see you walk out with a lawyer on your arm, and they'll start speculating you did some pre-need planning. We don't want that idea polluting potential

jurors' minds. Besides, there are things I need to take care of first."

"Your fee?" she said curtly.

"That's one thing. Not the major issue, but while we're on that subject, you want to hire me directly, or you want me to make my arrangements with the fellow who called me?"

Janette stared at Leo a moment, considering.

"It doesn't matter to me whether you pay me directly or someone else pays me. If I hire on, it's your interest I'll protect. Nobody but you and me have any say in the matter, and I call the shots in the courtroom. You understand?"

Janette stood and paced between the bed and the window, then stopped to stare out at the view of the downtown skyline. Finally, she turned back to Leo. "Call him," she said with no obvious chagrin at her earlier lie.

"You want me to talk with him about bail?" Leo asked.

She looked down at her hands and examined a chipped nail on her right index finger.

Trigger finger? Leo wondered.

"Yes," she said in answer to his spoken question.

"Okay, I guess that's it for now." Leo stood up. "I'll tell Ms. Rodriguez we're ready."

"Wait," Janette wailed, then she turned to Miranda to plead her case. "My clothes—would you ask if they'll let me change? I don't normally wear clothes like these. In fact, I've never worn anything like this before. I was in a photo shoot today, for a magazine article. On famous lawyer's wives or some such. I don't want people thinking I'm a hooker."

"I'll ask." Leo didn't want people thinking that either.

Janette turned to Miranda. "My mother has the children. Would you call her before they hear it on the news? Tell her—"

"I'll tell her you're okay," said Miranda.

Leo opened the door. A policewoman entered as he and Miranda left. He saw Virginia in the hallway a discreet distance from Room 1822 and headed toward her.

“Would you let Mrs. Fullerton change into street clothes before you take her downtown?” he asked. “That way, you can send her cowgirl outfit directly to the lab instead of waiting until you get her booked and changed at the jail—less chance any gunshot residue or blood on her clothes will rub off.”

Virginia stared at Leo.

“And can Miranda pick out her duds?” Leo continued.

Virginia sighed, then she nodded and led Miranda to 1809. A few minutes later they returned with clothing that Virginia passed to the policewoman inside 1822.

While they waited for Mrs. Fullerton to change, Miranda moved down the hallway to call her mother, and Leo began negotiations with Virginia. “Monday okay with you for the arraignment? Or later in the week would be fine. So we can both rest up this weekend.”

“I didn’t know there was any rest for defenders of the wicked.”

“I was more concerned about rest for those who prosecute the innocent,” countered Leo. “What do you say? How about we both take this weekend to figure out who is wicked and who is innocent?”

“I think we know already,” said Virginia.

“Well, we know about Mr. Fullerton and his companion. But the verdict isn’t in on his wife. There’s a long way to go before that happens, if it ever does. It wouldn’t hurt for you to take a little time to get your ducks in a row. Besides, you must be exhausted from that big trial.”

Virginia eyed Leo suspiciously, then bargained. “Monday’s fine, if you’ll agree that regardless of where we are on this case by Thursday, I’m taking a week off and you won’t play any defense attorney tricks while I’m gone.”

“I’ll behave,” said Leo. “Who’d we draw?”

Virginia pulled a paper from her shoulder bag. “Wagoner.” Virginia read the judge’s name.

“Susan’s fine with me. Better than most.”

“She’ll be happy to know that she’s had one satisfied customer,” Virginia said just as Janette Fullerton emerged from Room 1822. She rolled her eyes. “You owe me big time, Leo.”

“You’re right about that,” he agreed as he appraised Mrs. Fullerton. The cowgirl getup had been exchanged for a stylish suit. Hair and makeup were now in normal proportions. She looked like a lady going to a country club luncheon, not a hooker in town for the rodeo, and definitely not like a woman who would murder her husband without good cause. Potential jurors in front of their television sets tonight would form a favorable first impression of a well-groomed and bewildered Janette Fullerton.

“See you around,” Virginia told Leo and fell into line behind the policewoman leading Mrs. Fullerton to the elevator.

The doors opened and three men—big black guy, big brown-haired white guy, short redheaded white guy, all wearing dark suits—stepped off. The redheaded guy waved a badge and barked, “Who’s the man in charge?”

FBI, Leo decided, as Virginia guided Mrs. Fullerton around the men into the elevator.

The elevator doors closed on the women and Smitty-the-cop ambled over to the agents. “You just missed her,” he said, “but I’m Jackson Smith, Homicide. How may I help you?”

“Well,” Leo said to Miranda. “We’ve done all we can here. Let’s find Jerry and wrap this up.”

FIVE

Friday, May 22, 7:30 p.m.

Leo looked out on the miles of twinkling lights below the glass-walled restaurant at the top of the Concord. “What do the cops have?” he asked Jerry.

“The gun’s a thirty-eight. Course, they won’t know for sure it’s the murder weapon until they run ballistics. A hotel security guard found Mrs. Fullerton sitting on the bed, next to the phone with the gun beside the phone on the night table. He picked it up and stuck it in a pocket. Said he didn’t want to take a chance she’d pick it up again. If we’re lucky, he smeared her prints.”

Leo shrugged. “She says she didn’t kill them, so her prints shouldn’t be on it. At any rate, we have a sudden passion defense with the homosexual husband. What do you think, Miranda?”

“Do I think she murdered them?” She took a sip of wine. “No, I don’t. So, who was your friend, Jerry? The tall, black cop in the expensive suit?”

“Detective Andrew Jackson Smith. He joined the force a couple of years after I left, trained under my old partner when he graduated to Homicide. Smitty’s pretty good. Pays attention to details.”

“He missed the bugs,” said Leo.

Jerry smiled. “Yeah, but who besides Miranda would make that connection? First you’d have to know about the guy

calling you. Then you'd have to know the wife hadn't called anyone. Then you'd have to be half psychic."

"You've got a point there," said Leo.

Jerry checked his watch. "I'd better get home. Delphene will give me a talking-to if I'm out late again."

"Let's start back on this one in the morning," said Leo. "See if Stan Kendricks is available to take a look at blood spatter in 1807. Get a photographer to go with him. And call Prez. See if he can watch the autopsies tomorrow. Make the calls from home so that Delphene will know you're working late."

Jerry motioned to the waiter for the bill as he stood up.

"I'll get it," Leo said.

"That's why I'm leaving first," Jerry replied.

"Meet me downstairs for breakfast around eight in the morning. Maybe we can talk the cops into letting us back into those rooms."

Jerry gave the "okay" sign and made his exit.

Miranda glanced at her watch as Leo dropped several bills on the table. "We'll only be a half-hour late if we hurry."

Leo wrapped an arm around his wife's shoulders and guided her to the elevator. "Think our offspring will let us off the hook?"

She stopped in mid-stride and gave him her annoyed-wife look. "They're expecting us for dinner. Jennifer has cooked all day, and I told her we'd keep the children while she and Nathan take the boat out this weekend."

"I know, but we have that nice room all paid for. It'd be a shame to let it go to waste."

"It's too late for them to get a sitter," Miranda argued.

"If our daughter and her spouse really need one, Josh and his Susan, or at least Susan, will be happy to do it. That's why we had two kids—so they could help each other."

The grandkids sitting was probably Miranda's idea anyway, thought Leo, and usually he didn't mind. It was kind of nice to be waked up on a Saturday morning by wiggly, cuddly little kids jumping into bed with them as their own children had thirty some years ago. Gave him an excuse to watch cartoons with his best friend, two-year-old Benjamin, while Miranda and her shadow, four-year-old Leah, discussed whatever females talked about these days instead of recipes and embroidery—probably free trade and global warming. But he had other priorities this weekend.

Miranda moved out of Leo's embrace and glared at him. "You plan on sneaking back into those rooms, don't you?"

"Not me," Leo said innocently. "I just want a special night with the gal I love. Did you see that fancy tub? How about we have them send up their best champagne, then let's play bubble-bath?"

"Don't make promises you can't keep," she warned.

Miranda canceled the evening with their children and over dinner in their room told Leo about her earlier conversation with Janette Fullerton's mother. It had gone much the same as with other clients' mothers—shock, anguish, fear for her offspring. All Miranda had learned was that the Fullertons had two children, ages ten and thirteen.

While Miranda filled the tub, Leo called the mystery man's DC phone number. "I've talked with Mrs. Fullerton," he reported. "She says for me to discuss my fee with you, and there's the matter of bail, assuming we can get it."

"They've arrested her?"

"She'll be charged with two counts of murder," said Leo.

"You will defend her?" the man demanded.

"I will." Leo thought it interesting that the guy didn't seem surprised at the charges and didn't ask any questions.

“Tell me how much. I’ll have a cashier’s check delivered to your office first thing in the morning.”

Leo hemmed and hawed, then named an outrageous amount. “And I’ll need the bondsman’s percentage if they grant bail.”

“Done,” said the man.

“First, tell me where you fit into the picture. Mrs. Fullerton said she didn’t call you.”

“She didn’t. Mrs. Fullerton is the victim of unfortunate circumstances. I trust you will make sure justice is done.”

“Wait a minute,” Leo said just as the line went dead.

I know that voice, Leo thought as he replaced the receiver. I know that voice. But who? And how did mystery man know about Mrs. Fullerton’s predicament so soon?

“The water’s getting cold,” Miranda called.

“Coming.” Leo pulled his shoes off and shucked his clothes. It was Friday night. How the hell would the guy get a cashier’s check to him tomorrow? He had to be somebody really important to get a banker off the golf course on a Saturday morning.

Leo’s train of thought came to a sudden stop when he saw Miranda smiling at him from the tub. She offered up her empty glass for him to pour another round of champagne.

He filled her glass, then one for himself and handed both to her. Now he had a real problem to solve. How would he ever be able to get into and out of that bubbly tub with his bad knee? But a promise was a promise.

Leo draped a leg across Miranda’s legs, trying to find a comfortable spot in the unfamiliar bed. “You want to tell me what’s bothering you?” he said, pulling her closer.

She sighed. “Your new case.”

“What about it?”

“I don’t think she committed those murders, and I’m certain she didn’t plant those bugs.”

“So?”

“So someone has gone to a lot of trouble to make it look like she killed them. Promise me that you and Jerry will be extra careful.”

“Aren’t we always?”

“No. You get your mind on a case and don’t see anything else that’s happening around you. You charge blindly at whatever cause you take up, like a bull after a red cape. And Jerry’s just as bad.”

“Hmm, maybe so.” He might not be as psychic as she was, but now was not the time to debate his powers of observation with Miranda. He moved a hand to a breast.

“Leo, please be careful. Someone set this up.”

“Are you going to worry all night, woman?”

“Are you trying to distract me?”

“I figured I might try. Again. But this time, I want you to pay attention to me.”

SIX

Friday, May 22, 10:00 p.m.

Virginia made sure that Janette Fullerton was booked and jailed according to procedure—this case would not come apart on a technicality. Then she realized how late it was and called home. Nick hadn't answered, so she drove home concerned about where he might be and the logistics of the new case.

She would do the arraignment on Monday, then, Leo willing and the crime lab working overtime this weekend, she'd be ready for the evidentiary hearing Leo would demand as early as Wednesday or Thursday. If she got that out of the way, she could take Nick to the family ranch in the Valley on Friday as planned without having to reassign the case. She'd spend a week or so visiting relatives, leave her son there for the summer, come back to tidy up the case file, and be ready for trial as early as July.

Unless Leo found ways to delay, which he would try to do if they didn't reach a plea agreement quickly. It would be hard for her to find a jury who would not be sympathetic to the wife, so she would definitely offer a fair and reasonable deal. The only issues: what was fair and reasonable under the circumstances, and would Leo go for broke rather than take the deal?

But that was something to think about tomorrow. Tonight, she would make sure Nick was safe and hadn't gone hungry. In the morning, she'd sleep late. Really late. Delicious catch-up sleep late.

The autopsies were scheduled for one o'clock. The assistant medical examiner who had finally showed up merely confirmed death and carted the bodies off to cold storage. By the time he'd arrived, body temperature was no more reliable for determining time of death than the other information gathered by the police.

A room service waiter delivered a pot of coffee to the two men around 2:00 p.m. They were fully clothed, discussing papers held by the younger man who let the waiter in. The wife called the hotel operator to report the murders at 3:48 p.m.

Virginia had one hour and forty-eight minutes of loose ends to knot. Maybe they could shorten the interval with the ME's lab work, and cops would interview hotel staff and guests over the weekend to see if anyone had heard a sound that might be interpreted as gunfire.

So far, they hadn't found anyone who had heard anything. But the posh rooms at the Concord were substantially more soundproofed than those in budget hotels, and it was the start of the weekend. Guests there for business reasons had checked out before the one o'clock deadline. Only one guest on the eighteenth floor had a confirmed stay-over for Friday night, and he hadn't returned when the police let people use the elevators again. He'd probably tired of waiting in the lounge and found another place to stay, but he was on the list for the cops to interview tomorrow.

Crime lab people would go over the rooms again in the morning to make sure nothing had been missed. An officer was posted outside 1807 tonight. No curious citizens or reporters would disturb the crime scene before the police finished. Smitty would oversee the lab people in the morning. All bases were covered.

Except the "bug problem." Who had planted them?
And why?

Fullerton had more enemies than any other lawyer on earth. As a special prosecutor, he had wrecked careers and lives when the conservative-controlled Congress, led by Texas' own Senator Harry Dunn went after the liberal's presidential front-runner. A young female aid accused him of seducing her into an affair. She said it went on for months; he denied anything happened. Conservatives felt it worthy of an investigation to see who was lying. Fullerton pursued the allegation with vigor for months with nothing to show for it. Then, instead of ending it, he expanded his inquiry into the sexual practices of other liberal politicians.

Finding no prosecutable offenses there, Fullerton went after the conservatives who the liberals had by then exposed as having at one time or other engaged in extramarital hanky-panky. Even Senator Dunn, a key instigator of the whole mess, was forced to admit to his own "youthful" indiscretions. Once one of the Senate's most powerful members, Dunn's hypocrisy in going after the liberals had left him in political ruin.

In the end, after great debate in the seats of power and in the press, millions of taxpayer dollars were spent and nobody was convicted of anything. Conservatives who had endorsed Fullerton's hard-core investigation were left with nothing but the wrath of voters who had endured one too many costly, sordid probes into politician's sex lives.

Bottom line, any number of powerful people had a motive to bug that room and a motive to murder Stuart Fullerton. But those were old motives. The widow had a new motive, or perhaps the oldest motives—she caught him in the act and with a man at that.

Chances were, the explanation for the bugs was as simple as the explanation for the murders. Maybe the wife suspected her husband had a lover and planted the bugs to get proof for a

better divorce settlement. Then she'd decided shooting him would be a quicker and more economical way out of the marriage. Except for the gay-husband twist, it was probably just another garden-variety spousal murder. Divorce, Texas style. And, if that were the case, Virginia just might convince a jury the murders were premeditated and get her conviction.

She pulled into her driveway and immediately all thoughts of the case vanished. The house was dark. Nick's stereo wasn't blaring out to the street. Obviously, he wasn't home.

"Dear God, please let him be okay," she prayed, then added. "If I find him at a friend's house this time of night, I'll kick his wiseacre rear end all the way home."

SEVEN

Friday, May 22, 11:00 p.m.

Officer Miguel Cuellar, guarding the crime scene from a chair outside room 1807, smiled as the man came off the elevator singing “Dixie” off key and meandered unsteadily down the corridor. *Borracho*, thought Cuellar. Good thing he’s walking instead of driving home.

Cuellar took a mental inventory of the guy—tall, six-two or three, about one-eighty, mid-thirties, dark brown hair, brown eyes, regular features, scar on right cheek, rumpled navy pinstripe suit. The guy shuffled to the doorway of 1805, fumbled with an electronic keycard, then leaned into the door as he poked it at the slot below the doorknob.

“Need a hand?” Cuellar offered.

So this was the guest they wanted to question. Not likely he would remember hearing gun fire or much of anything else if they questioned him tonight, and he’d definitely be sleeping late in the morning. The logical thing to do, Cuellar thought, was to tell his relief that the guy was back in his room. They could question him in the morning.

“Sus... Sure, Off... Ocifer,” the drunk said as Cuellar came toward him. The man offered the keycard.

Cuellar slid the card into the slot and the tiny light blinked from red to green. He pulled the card out, pushed the door open, and handed it back. “Have a good evening, sir.”

The drunk reached for the keycard and stumbled into Cuellar.

* * *

Special Agent Wayne Hargis held on as the cop collapsed in his arms, eyes wide at the surprise of death. Hargis dragged the body inside, unlocked the connecting door between 1805 and 1807, and dropped him on the bloodstained mattress where Atkins had lain. He checked the body—perfect aim, through the ribs, into the heart. Instant cardiac arrest, no mess, at least not until he removed the knife. Now, a stream of crimson stained the cop's blue shirt.

Hargis cleaned the switchblade with a handkerchief and slipped the knife into his pants pocket, then dropped the handkerchief into a plastic bag attached to the inside of his jacket. He pulled a small screwdriver and an electronic sensor from the bag, opened the connecting door to 1809, and went to work removing all traces of surveillance from the two rooms, taking his time, doing the job right.

He zipped the last of the bugs and tools into the bag and looked around 1807. Hargis pointed his finger in imitation of a gun to where Fullerton had lain. "Got you."

Then he locked the connecting door and went into the bathroom in 1805. He removed the wig and the contacts. Stashing them in the jacket bag, he checked his image in the mirror and combed his blond hair back into place. Noticing the scar, he removed it and extracted a blond mustache from his jacket pocket. Not much of a disguise, he thought as he pressed the mustache into place, but it might buy a little extra time if the local cops had to sort through conflicting witness descriptions.

Hargis checked the hallway. Assured that no one was about, he closed the door on 1805 and this segment of his life. He took the elevator car off "stop" and, as the car descended, pulled off the piece of tape covering the camera eye in the

button for the nonexistent thirteenth floor. When the doors opened, he checked the lobby. Seeing only a bellhop sleeping on a sofa, he stepped out and walked swiftly to a waiting taxi.

Not a bad night's work, Hargis mused as he settled into the back seat of the cab. Too bad about the local cop, but those were the breaks. Then he smiled as he remembered the earlier murders. Atkins hadn't even seen it coming. When he'd come through the connecting door, Atkins had been sitting on the bed, focused on the papers he was discussing with Fullerton. The silenced gun had made a little pop and Atkins fell back, instantly dead.

That's when Fullerton looked up from his own papers. He'd have done it for free just to have seen the look on Fullerton's self-righteous face when he realized he was next.

"Please, please," was all the bastard had said, over and over, as he'd complied with the order to strip. And the fun part—when Fullerton was naked, he'd made him strip Atkins' body and arrange the corpse. Then it got messy.

Fullerton grabbed for the gun in his briefcase. It had gone off in the struggle, an ugly head shot, not a pretty sight. Lucky nobody heard the blast, or at least no one came to check it out before he could finish. But it wasn't neat, not like he'd intended, and it threw him off his game, caused him to rush to get out of there.

Hargis sighed, clearing his mind of the murders. It was over, and he was off to the airport for a flight to the Grand Caymans. From there, who knew? With the money waiting for him, he had a world of options. No more worry about performance reviews or whether he'd be next on the Bureau's downsize list.

When they'd begun cleaning house after the terrorist attacks, he'd made his own early retirement plan. He had been

trained to kill. Why not do it for something more than grunt wages? Now, thirty-five-years old and with a couple of million in the bank, he was a free man.

It had taken a bit of courage, but what didn't? Besides, nobody who mattered would look for him too hard. The Bureau would run for cover to keep from getting blamed for screwing up again and the rest of Washington would breathe a sigh of relief that the bogeyman was dead, give lying eulogies, then move on to the next news sensation.

"How'd it go?" asked the driver, a large black man.

"Peachy. Just peachy," Hargis answered. Special Agent Sam Martin then turned his attention to a briefcase on the seat next to him. He stripped the bag from his jacket lining and dropped it into the case. He added the knife and gloves from his pocket, but decided to keep his gun.

Martin would take care of the details, plant just enough evidence to get the cops curious again, if finding a dead cop in Atkins' bed didn't do it.

They definitely had more than enough to get the wife out of the jam she was in, so he was off the hook there. Like that was totally his fault. So he'd left the gun on the night table in 1809. Atkins' bags were packed full for a weekend visit to his girlfriend, so he'd had to searched Fullerton's room for a bag big enough to hold their clothes, papers, and Atkins' frigging laptop. In the process, he'd put Fullerton's gun down.

Like he was supposed to remember everything. At least he'd remembered to cart out Atkins' bag and laptop, and Fullerton's briefcase, and the damn cell phones. Everything but the bugs. Now even that was done.

One last duty. Hargis pulled his cell phone from a jacket pocket and punched in the numbers. "Mission accomplished," he reported. "Make sure all my money is in the bank."

Hargis glanced out the taxi's dirty window as he clicked the phone closed and slipped it back into his pocket. Office buildings gave way to strip shopping centers, car dealerships, and mobile home sales lots. They'd be at the airport soon, but the charter wouldn't be there until four. Maybe he could take a nap while he waited so he'd be fresh in the morning. He wanted to be at the bank the minute the doors opened.

His thoughts turned to his future. Where would he go after he picked up his money? Maybe Tahiti. Like that artist, Gauguin. He was in the midst of a fantasy of himself on a Tahitian beach with a beautiful native woman when Martin veered off the freeway.

"Where're you going?" Hargis snapped.

"Figured I'd get some coffee. Plenty of time. Want something to eat?"

"Actually, I am hungry. Haven't eaten since lunch." Hargis checked the intersection as they came to a stop. No filling stations or hamburger places. "Looks like this is a bust."

Martin turned right onto a two-lane road surrounded by pine trees. "There's an all-night joint up the road, maybe five miles. They serve mean steaks, cold beer, hot coffee, and wicked women."

"Sounds good. Real good." He'd been running on adrenaline all day, too keyed up to eat before the kill, too busy afterwards.

Martin continued up the deserted county road, pulling to a stop minutes later in front of a "Road Out" barrier.

Hargis saw that they were at the edge of a steep embankment. "Where are we?"

"Been nice working with you," said Sam Martin as he turned around and squeezed the trigger.

* * *

Sam Martin got out of the taxi, removed the warning barrier, and sent the cab on its way into the bayou. The moon offered just enough light for him to see the car settle beneath the murky waters. As it disappeared, he put the barrier back into place and looked around. An isolated section of road, an isolated section of bayou, almost no traffic. It would be years before anyone built a subdivision, a few more years before the subdivision flooded and they dredged the bayou as after-the-fact flood control. Unless a driver plowed through the barrier in front of witnesses, nobody would ever find the cab. What were the chances of that?

He pulled out a phone and punched a number. "I need a ride."

Two minutes later a black sports utility vehicle pulled up. "How'd it go?" asked Special Agent Jim Penny.

"Peachy. I have it on good authority that it went 'just peachy.'"

Bayou City police officer Bill Thomas came on duty at 12:10 a.m. Not finding Miguel Cuellar sitting in the chair outside 1807, he assumed Cuellar had gone home at midnight. A relatively harmless dereliction of duty to leave before his replacement arrived, as was his own late arrival. Only the DA's lawyers would insist on guarding empty hotel rooms in the middle of the night. Not enough IQ in the DA's office to make a turnip. Ought to get real jobs, out on the front line, facing the crazed citizens and their bullets and knives, serving and protecting, see what law and order was all about.

So he was a little late getting to work. So what? Nobody's perfect. No harm, no foul. Wasn't that what the lawyers always said? No harm, no foul.

Wonder what they meant by that? Next time he was in court, he'd ask an ADA. Damn lawyers!

* * *

Hotel guard Dave Jenkins had fallen asleep in front of the security room monitors soon after coming on duty at ten o'clock and never noticed the elevator camera was out of service. When he awoke briefly at 12:20 a.m., all activity on the eighteenth floor was as it should have been. A cop sat in the chair outside 1807. Cameras operational, except the one that caught the traffic from the elevator to 1807. It had been out a couple of days. He ought to call maintenance, Jenkins told himself, stay on them until they checked it out. Not that anything interesting ever happened in the corridors. Except couples groping each other, and not enough of that to keep him entertained. The day shift was where all the action was.

Like today. That woman caught her big shot husband in the act and blew him away. Guy doing another guy probably deserved it.

Certainly made Willie Barnes' day. When he'd come on duty, Willie had been full of himself over taking the gun away from her. Like who couldn't take a gun away from a woman? But to hear Willie tell it, he'd saved the world. If Willie was so great, let him get the goddamn camera fixed.

Nothing ever happened at night.

For sure, nothing happening now.

EIGHT

Friday, May 22, 11:00 p.m.

Virginia's "Nick hunt" was short. He had scrawled a response at the bottom of her note on the refrigerator. *"Mom, you said you'd pick up my tux, but they said you hadn't been there. Mr. Nguyn loaned me the money to get it. Don't expect me home before dawn. Prom. Late Dinner. Midnight movie. Party at Ken's house. Don't worry. No drinking and driving and unprotected sex, at least not while drinking or driving."*

Wiseacre. She smiled at the note, then sighed. Picking up the tux was the to-do she couldn't remember when she'd left the house. She'd forgotten Nick's prom, hadn't been here to take a picture of him on the brink of manhood, hadn't told him how handsome he looked and how proud she was. She had blown another important moment in his life, broken another promise. Just call her the queen of broken promises land. They should take away her motherhood license.

Virginia kicked off her pumps and opened the refrigerator. Spotting the box of wine, she lifted a glass from the drying rack. Thank heaven for her neighbor.

Mr. Nguyn's wife and children had been killed in their village while he led South Vietnam troops in that ugly war. Then, after trying to make a family out of distant relatives in France, he had decided, for reasons unstated, that Bayou City, Texas, USA, was the place to start life again. He had moved in

next-door twelve years ago when Nick was an adorable five-year-old and had quickly appointed himself Nick's surrogate grandfather, covering for her parental errors and omissions as best he could.

Virginia took a sip of wine. At least Nick wouldn't notice she had forgotten the pizza. Another broken promise, but no harm, no foul. Due to a technicality, it would not be noted in her motherhood permanent record. And she could finally get out of her suit and take a bath. Maybe she'd have a salad and watch TV until she dozed off. Virginia started for her bathroom but before she'd taken two steps, Denver scratched the patio door glass and wailed his "Rocky Mountain High."

She glanced under the kitchen table as she turned back to the patio door. The avocados were still there, showing no sign of a Denver ball game. Nick must have come home soon after she'd left and put him out.

She opened the door and the big dog bounded inside.

"How you doing, pal?" She scratched Denver's ears. "You been a good dog?"

Denver wagged his tail and yelped an answer.

"That's good," Virginia said, locking the patio door before heading to her bathroom. She paused in the entrance hall to make sure the front door was locked, then glanced into the living room.

Virginia smiled at the *senorita* in the painting above the sofa. The girl wore an embroidered ruffled peasant blouse and skirt and a whimsical, diamond-studded tiara in her long dark hair, hair that billowed in the breeze as she ran through a field of poorly executed Texas bluebonnets and Indian paint brush.

The incongruous tiara and joyous expression on the girl's face were the reasons Virginia had bought the otherwise tacky sidewalk artist's painting. Just once in her life, she wanted to

experience the joy the painter had put in that little Mexican girl's face. Joy. *Alegria*—her secret wish. But she'd settle for contentment.

Virginia continued on to her bathroom. She was too tired for a soaking bath, but her aging hot water heater was good for a ten-minute shower, almost enough time to scrub the summation exhibits from her mind—photos of dead little girls who might still be running through fields of bluebonnets had they not played in their front yards when a killer drove by.

The jury had given Bell the death penalty—not nearly enough. Death on a fire ant mound under a broiling Texas sun while being slowly skinned alive with a salted blade would not be enough. There was no penalty sever enough to match his crimes. But Bell had years of appeals, time he would be locked up with guys who would do to him some of the horrible things he had done to those little girls. Maybe, just maybe, a bit of justice would catch up with Mr. Bell while he waited to die.

Virginia stripped off her clothes and stepped into the shower. And tonight's crop of victims? What about them? Strangely, she felt no sense of life tragically cut short, even for the young lawyer in bed with Fullerton. Curiosity maybe. About what Stuart Fullerton was doing in Bayou City. Who was he hounding? And his friend in bed? The young Mr. Atkins? She hadn't even asked if anyone cared he was dead. The cops would figure it out and notify next of kin.

Fullerton's wife? Virginia felt a twinge of jealousy. Obviously Janette Fullerton was a pampered woman with a perfect life—the clothes she'd worn while leaving the Concord had probably cost more than Virginia's monthly salary before deductions.

Virginia almost felt sorry for the widow; her perfect life was no more. She massaged shampoo into her hair, imagining

Wen's face if she were to say, "I think we should dismiss charges. The widow just lost her Prince Charming." Except Stuart Fullerton was no Prince Charming. Amend that to, "She's just lost her meal ticket."

Speaking of Prince Charmings, just how had Zachmann known to show up when he did? Who had called him? Dashing Leo. Too bad he was taken, and taken he definitely was. No misinterpreting the way he'd looked at Miranda or the tender way he'd placed his hand on her back to guide her across the corridor. Definitely a Prince. Definitely married.

And Miranda? Another woman with a perfect life. Tomorrow she'd spend the day with Leo while Virginia watched the ME carve up dead bodies. But who said life was fair?

Bodies? Virginia's hand moved to her breast for the monthly cancer check. Ooh, sore. She tried to remember when she'd had her last period. Who could keep up? A few days and it's over. A few weeks and it's back. Life goes on. Sunrise, sunset. PMS.

Virginia dried off, towed her hair, and studied her reflection in the mirror. She sighed at the spreading streaks of silver in her dark hair. Not yet thirty-eight, she looked older. She should do something, maybe one of those wash-in colors from the drug store. But her skin wasn't bad, just a few laugh lines around her eyes. It was her expression that made her seem older. Her mouth turned down at the corners in that resigned "nothing good will ever happen again" way. Her mother's face. When had that happened?

Virginia raised her glass in a toast to her image. "You, girl, have the face of a person who has no joy in your life."

"What exactly do you plan on doing about that situation?" her image answered back.

It was up to her. It had always been up to her. She sighed. Enough of this pity party. Virginia dropped the towel and slid on the oversized T-shirt she used as a nightgown.

When she opened the bathroom door, Denver lay on the floor waiting for her. “How about a snack, boy?”

He bounded for the kitchen.

Virginia checked the refrigerator and briefly considered turning the lettuce and avocados into a salad. Instead, she opened the freezer compartment and pulled out the pint of chocolate ice cream she had hidden behind a bag of chopped spinach so Nick wouldn’t find it. A balanced meal—ice cream and wine.

Denver nudged her leg to remind her that he’d also been invited to dine and added his “I’m hungry” whimper.

“Okay, but I’m not sharing the ice cream.”

She found leftover beef stew in a plastic container and spooned it into his bowl. Then she headed for the bedroom.

Propping herself up on four pillows to watch television, she clicked the button and found a local news rebroadcast. The current Middle East crisis came first, then the local crime beat—the sketch artist’s interpretation of a serial rapist still on the loose and not yet her worry, a recap of the Bell trial with her summation and post-trial soundbite, and a clip of herself and the policewoman escorting Mrs. Fullerton out of the Concord.

Virginia turned up the sound. Not yet fifteen minutes of fame. More like sixty-seconds on the local news, but a start. Definitely a lucky break to have the starring role in a successful serial-murder prosecution and a high-profile double homicide on the same day.

Virginia savored a spoonful of ice cream while she channel-surfed, landing on the Loud Obnoxious Lawyers Arguing Show. They were showing the same tape of the policewoman,

Janette Fullerton, and herself. Some New York lawyer who she had never heard of told the show host that Virginia Rodriguez was a “take no prisoners” prosecutor. “She’s put her share of defendants on Texas’ infamous death row,” he declared.

“Damn! I had no idea that I was that good.”

Virginia’s comment brought Denver running.

“You either?” she asked as he skidded to a stop next to her bed. “That guy ought to start a Psychic Lawyer’s Hotline. Knows all, sees all, no questions asked. Maybe he can get Miranda Zachmann to be his spokesperson, let her do the commercial with her crystal ball.”

Denver wagged his tail encouragingly and plopped down.

“And the slogan. How about—if you slip and fall, give us a call, ’cause we do law. Or—if you get a ticket, tell ’em to stick it, ’cause we can fix it.”

Denver put his head between his paws and looked at her out of the tops of his eyes.

“Okay, I’ll stop. But I’d sure like to know how Leo knew to show up when he did and how Miranda found those bugs.”

Just then, the phone rang. Virginia looked at the clock. Almost midnight. She reached for the receiver, instantly worried that her son might need to be rescued from some prom-night misadventure.

NINE

Friday, May 22, 11:50 p.m.

Virginia answered the phone in her worried-mother voice.
“Where are you? Are you okay?”

“Virginia?”

“Put me on your do-not-call list!”

“Wait, Virginia,” Smitty said, “I have to talk to you.”

“It’s late. I’m tired. I’ll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Please, Virginia. Just tell me what I did wrong.”

She hung up the phone. Wrong? Wrong?

After working closely on the case for several months, they were reviewing evidence before the Bell trial began. She had broken down while examining autopsy photos of the little girls. He had comforted her. She had let him. She had gone willingly into that good night. She had even let herself believe the fairy tale, that he was a Prince Charming, different from the rest. She’d let her heart do that airborne Spring-dance of love, then she’d crashed against the wall of humiliation and hurt. Call her foolish. Call her silly. But don’t call her dumb. That lesson had been learned.

Up to now, Smitty had only called her office, and he’d stopped that after giving his testimony in the Bell case and had no excuse to call anymore. Just her luck to have him assigned to this case. He’d probably wormed her new unlisted number out of the dispatcher.