

Conflagration

A Chance Colter Mystery

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For Scott, whose love for and knowledge of guns is encyclopedic.

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When all seems lost, success may be nearest.

Life's door opens and closes. What matters is in the room.

Hope for the best but plan for the worst.

The bombing was among the largest in U.S. history. Not since the World Trade Center attack on September 11, 2001 had so many died. The resulting conflagration incinerated a city block and claimed the lives of ninety-three people. No one in the building survived – except two.

A week had been devoted to studying the targets' patterns of movements. Seven days of meticulous surveillance had established where they went and when. Thomas Murray had learned much. On the eighth day, he knew how he would kill them. Another seven days passed before he returned to fulfill the contract.

Like most people, the Colters' lives were predictable. Life was fashioned of a sequence of recurrent tasks and events. Apart from vacations or entertainment that happened spontaneously little changed day to day. Seemingly, spontaneous acts such as going to a movie, entertaining friends or having a romantic dinner for two at a favorite spot, followed a broader pattern. These events occurred on a clock of boredom or expectation that built over time. The conversation would be: It's time to get out of the house. It's time we saw the Joneses. I'd like to see a movie. I'm sick of these four walls. Let's do something this weekend.

Owning a relatively new restaurant and bar limited their freedom for spontaneity. They were compelled or perhaps condemned to work its many hours of operation and the many more that were needed. The business was less than six months old and doing well judging from the numbers of customers that streamed in. Vacations with a trusted manager left in charge were far in the future. Finding the Colters' was simple. They were either working or sleeping.

Murray had carefully considered both the method and location of the kills. In truth, his contract was for one assassination but separating husband from the wife was unlikely. Since they were perpetually together, collateral damage – a term he found amusing – was expected. All that mattered was eliminating the primary target. It was irrelevant if others died in that pursuit.

The home of the targets lay in a quiet Savannah neighborhood. Its spacious lot was bounded by a white picket fence. Live oaks dripped with Spanish moss. The lane that led to the house saw little vehicular traffic comprised primarily of neighbors. The Colters' home bordered a bay of the Atlantic Ocean where a listless, meandering stream reluctantly emptied brackish waters forced back with the tides as if the sea rejected them daily. The tidal basin was home to myriad wildlife and was one of numerous area estuaries that supported teeming coastal fauna. It was by appearance an indolent, bucolic setting with neighbors – long-time and aged residents - hidden by a riot of twined azaleas bordering the property.

Appearances can be deceiving and upon scrutiny, the assassin determined the Colter property was a fortress of hidden and layered security. Cars were parked in a secured garage. Invisible cameras, motion detectors, and sensors that read in the infrared and the visible spectrum protected the house. The assassin suspected invisible laser beams crisscrossed access points. Motion sensors triggered floodlights on the property.

Without confederates, the dwelling was impregnable and the assassin always worked alone. Colter, the ex-police officer was unexpectedly cautious.

The business, The Silver Magnolia, presented a much easier opportunity. Security was standard. Motion detectors fed to a monitoring security company. Police and fire response would require several minutes. From his surveillance, he knew when the targets would be within. The assassin had no need to penetrate the security perimeter of the business. Proximity was all he required.

Murray's client had stated that the deaths should look like the work of foreign terrorists. They were an easy mark after 9/11 and created mass hysteria among the population. Confusion was an ally. To further assign the murder to a terrorist act, Murray would plant two additional explosive devices - simple dynamite stolen from a construction site planted on different rail tracks in the city. Neither would explode. The explosives were real but the detonators were faulty giving the appearance that the devices were inexpertly constructed. Murray knew authorities would falsely claim they had thwarted additional acts of terrorism. Homeland Security, local law enforcement and the FBI would take credit.

To assure the killing of the targets was deemed a terrorist act that lacked sophistication, the explosive device at their business would be a simple fuel oil and ammonium nitrate bomb in a van placed outside The Silver Magnolia. But it would be massive and would destroy the building and everyone in it. Murray was uncertain of the anticipated magnitude of the blast. Setting off small test bombs was impractical and determining how scalable the power of the explosion would be for a given volume of material was unknowable. Too much Internet research could be a threat. Err on the side of too little exposure rather than too much was his mantra when it came to Internet searches.

Collateral damage beyond the targets was certain. Murray didn't care. In fact, collateral damage further masked the true nature of the assassinations of the owner.

Murray had created a martyr video that he would send to the media claiming responsibility for the bombing. No mention of the targets was necessary. It was an act of Islam carried out against a business making a fortune from the sale and consumption of alcohol. The Infidels would pay. The Silver Magnolia was an example to show that Al Qaeda could still hit America. New York city or Washington DC, always preferred targets, were so heavily policed that the attack in Savannah, Georgia would seem credible as a place that could be accessed.

A little makeup darkened his exposed skin. The ski mask hid his face. He wore a keffiyeh in the Charraweyya style on his head. Brown contact lenses masked his blue eyes. The AK 47 rifle was a late decision but a nice touch he thought as he switched on the camera.

To prevent FBI analysts determining an Arab accent was false he held his martyr manifesto before his chest printed on a large card in English. Three times, he had rewritten it to be satisfied the printed letters did not telegraph his handwriting. Behind him was a Saudi Arabian flag. The American public had not forgotten that fifteen of the nineteen terrorists of 9/11 were Saudis. His review of the video judged it effective. The city of Savannah would be in turmoil. His escape would be simple. CNN would run the story twenty-four seven for days. FOX news would blame it on the Democrats. The Democrats would assail Republicans for outrageous accusations without a shred of

evidence that security had been lax. But the head of Homeland Security would face a withering congressional hearing that she would not survive.

On the eighth day, he was ready. It was a biblical extension of one day from the description found in the book of Exodus for God's creation of the world. It seemed a fitting irony that instead of God resting on the seventh day, Islam acted on the eighth. Perhaps his manifesto needed to explain the correlation. On second thought, who cared? Then, he realized any reference to biblical scripture would be discordant with a supposed Islamic martyr. Inwardly, Murray was religiously ambivalent but friends and neighbors in his private life thought him a devout Presbyterian. It was all so much nonsense anyway. What mattered was successfully executing another contract and getting paid. His growing fortune was his god.

The morning pattern of the targets was a predictable routine. Chance Colter arrived at the business about 8:30 AM. The wife and co-owner arrived sometime around eleven in the morning. They often took different routes to work and left at different times. Colter was a former policeman and apparently was forever vigilant. Murray smiled. *Or paranoid*. He found the tactics amusing. Nothing would save them.

The Silver Magnolia opened for lunch at 11:30 AM and was packed by noon. The number of dead could exceed one hundred in the restaurant and adjacent businesses. Ascribing the act to anyone but Al Qaeda terrorists seemed beyond the pale.

Assassination of the two owners would not be determined the cause of the act. They were simply two bodies among many. It was a perfect plan worthy of the assassin, he mused.

The delivery van with the massive bomb was stolen early that morning. It came from the lot of a food supplier used by the target. While Colter might find it curious that it would sit unattended at the loading door behind the restaurant, it was a familiar van and would likely not cause excessive concern for the short time it would exist.

At 11:40 AM, hungry patrons were filing in. The target and his wife were in the building. They had arrived on schedule. They would be busy attending to customers. Murray watched from across the street a block away. The detonator was linked to a cell phone in the classic terrorist style. Since Murray was not an Arab terrorist, he had not been penetrated by the FBI or exposed in a sting operation. The makings for the bomb had been acquired weeks before in rural farming communities in Nebraska and Kansas. They were untraceable. Ammonium nitrate was a common chemical in farming communities.

No one would remember him when he casually left Savannah. His all-American face looked nothing like an Arab.

The assassin pushed the button ten minutes later at 11:50 AM. A millisecond later, the bomb exploded behind the building. The stolen delivery van was backed against the loading entrance door and the doors to the van were open, somewhat shaping the charge.

The Silver Magnolia was destroyed as well as the adjacent businesses to either side housed in the same large building. Great gouts of flame roiled high into the blue sky darkening it to twilight. Searing hot hunks of metal and debris dropped in a hellish rain in a wide perimeter. Nearby buildings were rocked and shifted from their foundations. Windows were blown out for blocks. A boy on a bicycle was thrown against a building, smashing a shoulder and mangling the bicycle. Burning embers ignited the roof of a convertible and burned the paint from others. In seconds the convertible was engulfed in

flame and seconds later, its fuel tank exploded. Pedestrians were thrown free of their shoes that lay where they had stood.

Nearly concurrent with the blast, natural gas lines were ripped apart and a second fireball engulfed the structure. Everything remaining was incinerated. Then, the remains of the roof collapsed trapping and sealing the fate of everyone inside. No one escaped.

Murray felt the pressure wave from the explosion. It rocked him back and tore the sunglasses from his face. As he steadied himself, he was surprised at the force of the blast.

Everyone in the Silver Magnolia was doomed along with those in neighboring businesses. Ninety-three people lost their lives in a conflagration that reduced the building to a flaming mass of rubble. After an hour, firefighters had subdued the blaze. Nothing remained but a smoldering mass with nothing higher than four feet. It would be days before the bits of human bone that remained could be collected. Complete identification of the dead depended largely on friends, family and employers of people who were thought to have been in the building. Many individuals could not be accurately determined from scant physical remains.

The owners, Chance and Tika Colter, parked their cars in the service lot behind the building but away from it to allow trucks easy access to the loading docks. They regularly parked behind a five-foot high poured concrete bunker that held maintenance equipment for the building. A concrete block wall that held two dumpsters surrounded it. Colter had often remarked that it was built like a fortification of war more than a place to lock up dumpsters and equipment.

Seconds before the bomb exploded, Tika had rushed through the back door to Colter in his car. He had missed part of the bank deposit that had been separated from the pouch in the safe. Usually, Colter made the deposit later in the day but he had not gotten to it the previous afternoon.

As she jogged behind the concrete housing, Colter's car was flipped on its roof but partially protected by the concrete bunker surrounded by a concrete block wall. The front and side airbags of Colter's car were activated, offering additional protection. Tika was thrown against his car by the force of the blast but shielded by the sturdy bunker.

Murray walked casually to a rented van parked six blocks away. Several hours had been required to transfer the half-ton of explosive to the stolen delivery van, shuttle the two vehicles to the back of the Silver Magnolia and place his rented van within walking distance. The rented van could be traced to him but he had rented it a thousand miles to the West. No one could know of his involvement. Now, his work was done.

It was a pleasant day although the sky was filled with billowing clouds of oily black smoke. Flames engulfed the wreckage of the three businesses. As he sauntered to the vehicle, the sound of distant sirens met his ears. Murray hid a smile and whispered, "Executed as planned."

It was an hour later when he heard a radio report that estimated dozens, perhaps as many as one hundred people had been instantly killed in the three businesses. Most had been lunch patrons of The Silver Magnolia and its employees. People on foot or in cars near the building were injured. None had been directly in front of the building and that, the report intimated, accounted for their survival. The report then rebroadcast the cryptic audio portion of a TV interview conducted at a Savannah hospital with the owner of The Silver Magnolia, one of three businesses destroyed in the blast.

The assassin worked to manage his incredulity as he listened to the radio news report. The target and his wife had inexplicably survived. They were miraculously the two sole survivors. The target received minor injuries but his wife had been gravely hurt. The assassin would not be paid. The job was not finished. Hands slammed against the steering wheel. He slammed on the brakes, narrowly avoiding being struck from behind. A horn sounded from the angry driver. Pulling to the shoulder, he U-turned and sped back to Savannah.

The dashboard clock of the rental van glowed 1:35 PM when Murray cruised around the hospital complex to find street parking several blocks away. License plates of vehicles were routinely filmed in many places. His simple disguise aged him beyond his fifty-five years. With a practiced hobbling gait, he entered the hospital, located the gift shop and purchased a small flower bouquet. A pistol hung heavy in a pocket of his light jacket. With the temperature in the high nineties, it was a necessary but uncomfortable and discordant item of clothing. An elderly woman sat behind a counter on the ground floor. Her smock identified her as a volunteer.

With an adopted husky voice and soft drawl, he asked for the room number of Mrs. Chance Colter.

She stared intently into a computer screen. Seconds ticked by as Murray suppressed his impatience. "Room 412, West Wing. Take the elevators to your right."

Murray hobbled away; confident she had noticed his appearance. As the elevator opened, Murray stepped into the corridor and glanced about. The room was to the right. Being there was a risk but Murray needed to know if Colter was with his wife or had returned home. Colter would likely be at her side probably all night but it was possible he had headed home for a change of clothes or to pick up personal items before returning if she had been stabilized and was asleep. Perhaps an opportunity might present itself to yet kill the dazed man. Then, Murray realized that if Colter had been slightly injured as the report implied, he would have been taken by separate ambulance to the hospital. He would have no car. One or both of their vehicles might have been destroyed in the blast. Colter could take a taxi home and back but Murray needed to know if he was at the hospital.

As Murray approached the room, a haggard Chance Colter abruptly appeared in the doorway staring at a cell phone. The two collided.

"Sorry. Wasn't paying attention. You all right?" Colter asked.

Murray nodded and said, "Guess I wasn't either. I'm fine." Murray continued shuffling along the hall. Apart from his small stature, made smaller by his bent body, he doubted Colter could have recognized he was disguised but cops were trained observers. A moment of fear gripped him.

With the knowledge that Colter was in the hospital, Murray needed to decide his next move. Murray was agile and in good physical condition but he had never had physical encounters with targets. He always killed from a distance. The pistol in his pocket was a precaution. Colter was known to be a martial arts expert.

Colter could be camped in his wife's hospital room for days. Although the subterfuge of a terrorist attack might lower Colter's guard, determining a plan for a second attempt would take time. Seeing Colter face to face, Murray saw that Colter was a big man and powerfully build. No second try today.

A second opportunity would arise. Opportunities always did. Now it was time to take to ground and disappear more deeply than usual. A nationwide manhunt by every law enforcement agency in the country would be waged. Canada and Mexico would be alerted. He was confident he had deflected suspicion to foreign terrorists but ever cautious, he would be especially vigilant in the days ahead.

Murray had been scrupulously careful to leave no evidence but something could always be discovered. Modern forensic science was astonishing in what it could recover. But that would take time and he would be far away, back home.

Al Qaeda, always a prime suspect in terrorist attacks against American interests abroad, had deep roots in Saudi Arabia. His printed manifesto had carefully avoided ascribing responsibility to a specific organization but the use of the Saudi flag was damning evidence of at least sympathy, if not direct affiliation with that nation by the terrorist. He wanted law enforcement to cast their net as wide as possible among the Muslim communities in America and waste confronting the Saudis.

The massive bomb was another obvious case of foreign terrorism that would loudly cry out for justice. The American public would demand revenge. The shadow of 9/11 lived forever in the American psyche. Missiles might be fired. Bombs might be dropped. Israel might attribute the act to the Iranians demanding a military strike in reply. The Israelis might produce erroneous intelligence supporting the claim. On and on it would go. Despite his failure, the misdirection produced a grin as he drove north from Savannah.

Ten seconds after the blast, Colter had pried himself from the car, dazed and battered but miraculously only bruised and scraped. He could not recall the instant of the explosion. It was as if it blew his memory away. Unsteadily, he walked around the car, searching for Tika. He remembered she approached with something in her hand. Her twisted and sprawled body lay on the parking lot pavement partially against his car. “No. God, no!” Colter rushed to her seeing her eyes were closed. A good sign. Her breathing was shallow but she was breathing, unconscious but breathing. Feeling a limp wrist, he found a steady but faint heartbeat. Tika was alive.

The wail of sirens came from several directions but Colter dug for his phone and entered 911 for an ambulance. He carefully laid Tika prone away from his car, but still protectively behind the bunker. It had been shifted a couple of feet. The block wall was deflected and partially collapsed, but it had survived the blast. Moving Tika was a risk but fuel was leaking from his car’s tank. With her laid out, he glimpsed the burning rubble that had been The Silver Magnolia before easing his body gently over hers as a protective shield. The heat from the inferno was intense even behind the bunker.

Colter had earlier noticed the van at the service door when he exited The Silver Magnolia. No driver was in it. He guessed Bob from Southern Wholesale Foods had found a way to make their delivery after one of his delivery trucks had been stolen the previous night but he’d seen no one from Bob’s company in the building. Colter had needed to make the bank deposit. He initially hadn’t seen Tika jogging to him. She was hidden behind the head height concrete housing. Only a second before the blast did he notice her approach. Colter realized the timing of his leaving and Tika’s exit from the building to his car had saved them both. He doubted anyone could have survived inside. The building no longer existed. Their world was forever changed.

In minutes, he was riding in a companion ambulance over strenuous but futile objection as Tika was rushed to a Savannah hospital with a trauma unit.

“I’m sorry, sir. We must take you separately. You will meet up with your wife in a few minutes. You need treatment for your injuries,” the lead paramedic had commanded. “They might be serious. We can’t know.”

Minutes later, Tika was pushed into surgery with three hospital workers hovering over the gurney. The hospital had immediately braced for an influx of injured. Few came.

After being patched up, Colter paced the small surgical waiting room. A television reporter arrived from one of the local network affiliates. She had tracked him to the hospital.

Off camera she asked, “Are you Chance Colter?”

“Yes.”

The camera rolled.

“Mr. Colter, can you tell us anything about what happened?”

“No.”

Do you have any idea why terrorists would target your business?”

“No.”

“What will you do now?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you seen the terrorist’s martyr video?”

Colter glanced at the television in the room. “You mean that one?”

“Ahh, yes.”

“It’s been running almost continuously.”

“Ahh, of course. Did you get any warning that someone was planning this?”

“No.”

The sound of footsteps in the hall turned his head away from the reporter for a heartbeat before Colter glanced at her again. “Do you know how many people were killed?”

She blinked at him. “Why, everyone. No one survived...except you and your wife.”

“How many?”

“I don’t believe that has been confirmed. A number has not been released.”

The reporter’s producer was talking into her earpiece. Her eyes shifted and she stopped talking. “Ask the questions, Molly. He’s taking over the interview,” the producer barked.

The surgeon stepped to the open door. Colter joined him in the hall. The reporter attempted to follow with the cameraman at her side. Colter ignored her. Her outstretched arm thrust the microphone into Colter’s face as he met the surgeon. The cameraman was filming. Colter took the arm of the reporter and led her into the waiting room. He motioned the cameraman to follow. The man did, seeing the expression on Colter’s face. Colter closed the door. The reporter and cameraman resumed the report in the room without Colter. Her mouth was moving and her face registered deep concern.

“Mr. Colter, we have stabilized your wife,” the surgeon said. “There was some internal bleeding that required intervention. The spleen and liver were bruised. They should heal in time. We were initially worried about the spleen but it should recover from the trauma. Miraculously, she suffered no broken bones but multiple contusions. The big concern is brain trauma. She suffered a concussion. Not life threatening. She may have some cognitive issues for a time, perhaps months but without further problems, she should recover completely. I must caution you that brain injuries are unpredictable. We’ll keep her until we’re confident of no complications.”

Colter’s shoulders slumped. “Thank you doctor. Can I see her?”

“She’s in recovery. We’ll have her in a room in about an hour.” The surgeon turned to leave but stopped. “You were both very fortunate to have survived.” The surgeon took a breath. “Considering the magnitude of the blast, we expected to be deluged with severe injuries but no one survived except you and your wife. The injuries to people on the street were not life threatening to the twenty or so individuals we know about that have been treated here and at various local facilities. I’ve never encountered a one hundred percent fatality rate. Not even in Iraq.” The surgeon drifted down the hall, peeling off his surgical cap.

The reporter emerged from the waiting room with the cameraman and tried to get the doctor to say something before he walked away. He didn’t. She turned to Colter. “Mr. Colter...”

“I have nothing more to say. Please leave.”

She opened her mouth but seeing Colter's face said nothing. The reporter then motioned the cameraman to resume filming after her producer spoke again into her earpiece. "Get the man to talk, Molly. Press him. Keep on him."

The reporter let out a breath and ignored his harangue. She backed-stepped down the hall. With the receding forms of Colter and the surgeon as backdrop, she began to extemporize, speaking earnestly and with confidence. Later, the station received an award for her coverage and shortly after that, she was contacted by the much larger affiliate in Atlanta and left Savannah.

Her voice diminished to Colter as he made his way to the cafeteria for coffee and to wait. The machine delivered a paper cup filled with what resembled coffee but the aroma left doubt.

Hushed conversations and sad expressions painted the faces of those around him for loved ones in crisis as he selected an empty table. A few hospital workers on break chatted and laughed. For them, death, dying or recovery was routine. Colter settled into a molded plastic seat, tasted the coffee and decided it was. He turned the paper cup on the table, watching the coffee swirl and waited. Minutes passed slowly in a paroxysm of anxiety. During a second cup, a voice brought him from his worry for Tika.

"Colter?"

He looked up to see Special Agent Charles Dumont of the FBI standing at the table.

"Mind if I join you?"

"As long as you don't have a reporter with you."

Dumont smiled. "Find you already?" He sat.

Colter nodded. "One of the blondes from the local CBS affiliate." Colter let out a breath. "Ever notice how southern accents can sound, I don't know, disingenuous sometimes?"

"Don't spend that much time in the South. Wouldn't be politically correct for me to comment anyway."

"Yeah. What do you want? Where's your partner? Pickler? How in the world did you get here so fast?"

Dumont smirked. "Agent Pickler was reassigned. I was in the Atlanta office working on a case and since you and I have a history, I was directed to make contact. I requisitioned a car and made the drive rather quickly. I got updates from the local police. They thought you were here."

Colter's eyebrows rose. "Didn't know FBI had cars that would go that fast. You alone, then?"

Dumont's chuckled. Then his face became somber. "I'm alone for this meeting. Many of the agents in the Bureau will be assigned to this case in the next twelve hours."

Colter nodded his understanding. "What's the worst posting in the Bureau?"

"Debatable."

"Wherever that is, I hope Pickler got sent there."

"He had a way of irritating people. You weren't the only one." Dumont smirked recalling the last meeting Pickler and he had with Colter at The Silver Magnolia two days before it opened.

A comfortable silence settled between them. They had a history as Dumont had said. Dumont waited, glancing around the cafeteria.

“I don’t know anything, Dumont,” Colter said after a half minute.

“How’s the coffee?”

Colter peered into his cup. “The right color.”

Dumont rose and returned seconds later with a cup that matched Colter’s. He took a sip. “I’ve had worse.” Dumont let out a breath. “I’ve got to ask, first. Could this be the work of the assassin you hunted in Nevada and Europe? You didn’t produce photos of her corpse.”

Colter shook his head. “No. I told you she was dead. This was not her style, anyway. No way. Besides, the video was of an Arab guy by the looks of him on TV.”

“But is she dead, Colter? Did you kill her as you said?”

Colter looked deep into Dumont’s eyes, searching for something he hoped would be there. “I tell you this because of the circumstances we are in and for no other reason to keep you from wasting your time. She is not coming back. It was...challenging in France. Assassins from Marseilles hunted Anna Partanza and me twice. Two different teams. We were searching for a child related to Anna. A half-sister she didn’t know she had. Anna was determined to find her. A couple of nut jobs in the French Catholic Church in Paris didn’t want that to happen. They had some screwy notion the kid had a pipeline to God. Turned out the kid had a brain tumor that produced infrequent but vivid hallucinations.

We were abducted at gunpoint and taken to a remote farmhouse to be killed. The assassin arrived and saved us. She had been hunting us and followed the car we were in. Shot our two abductors in the next room.” Colter shrugged. “Change of heart, wanted us for herself? I don’t know for sure. After that, the assassin couldn’t bring herself to shoot us. Two people tied to chairs, helpless. No sport in it. She said it would be like Teddy Roosevelt shooting the bear that had been tied to a tree for him. He couldn’t do it. The bear became known as the teddy bear. We agreed to mutual life. I was hunting her as much as she was hunting us, as you know. She left in one car; we took our abductors’ car back to Paris to resume the search for the child. The assassin would disappear and I would say she was dead. She promised never to return. I believed her. Too many years. Too much exposure. She knew the clock had run out. The assassin is retired somewhere in Europe and despite her long, murderous career, Anna Partanza and I owe her our lives.” Colter looked down into his cup. “You had nothing on her. She’d have had to walk into your office and confess.” Colter swirled the dregs in the bottom of the paper cup. “I stayed with Anna to finish what she went for. She was still in danger and couldn’t do it alone. The bad guys in the Church really didn’t want us to find the child. Two more thugs were dispatched from Marseilles. The second team. I put them out of commission. We found the little girl. Her name is Bernadette. Happy ending. I came back to Tika. The assassin disappeared. Consider her dead, Special Agent Dumont. This is not her work.”

Dumont’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Quite a story. I’d love to hear all of it sometime but okay, Colter. Good enough. I didn’t believe it was she but I had to tie it off. By the way, does she have a name?”

“She called herself Irina.” Colter smirked. “But pick any name you like.”

Dumont nodded. “I like having a name. Did she look Russian or Slavic?”

Colter shrugged. “Or a half dozen other nationalities.” Then, Colter said, “What do you know and what do you think you know? I realize it’s early in your investigation. One guy or was a group behind it?”

“Al Qaeda, Hamas, the Iranians and North Koreans and who knows who else are thrilled of course but not taking credit. They know on this one that would be suicide. Thing is, it was out of the blue. I mean, really left field. We keep a very close eye on people and groups inclined to do something this big. But there is nothing and no one we can point to.”

“Somebody new?” Colter asked.

“Maybe. Or misdirection. Blame it on the Arabs. Great cover. The country goes ballistic as it is doing.”

Colter looked hard at Dumont. “Okay. I’ll buy that. If the motive was not Islamic hatred for our way of life, what?”

“Have you considered, why here, why now, why you, Colter?”

Colter blinked. “Me? You think this was about me? Kill what? Dozens of people to get me?”

“The video is a fake. Oh, the movie is real but the guy who is pictured in it is not an Arab. We have found inconsistencies. He tried very hard to make it appear that he was a Saudi but some things are wrong. I won’t go into the details. I’m not permitted to tell you how we know some things.” Dumont smiled. “Trade secrets. But we know.”

“You’re saying somebody wanted to kill me and my wife and wanted the act to look like a terrorist attack? Who?”

“You. Not your wife. She was collateral damage almost certainly. That’s why I’m here Colter. We need to find out who. I can tell you he’s probably in his early fifties, 5’ 5” to 5’ 7” tall. Weighs about 140 lbs. He carries his left shoulder slightly higher than the right. May have mild scoliosis. Despite the dark pigment showing on his exposed skin, he is Caucasian and with fair complexion. Hair color is unknown but light color, possibly reddish would be consistent with the skin type. We’d know a lot more if he said anything but he was too smart for that. Not saying anything was significant though. We reviewed every martyr video we could find. These guys love to make statements and brandish their AK 47’s. Admittedly, he had one but it was an American made version by Arsenel. We’re checking every gun they sold. Not definitive but the gun appeared new. It was not a Chinese or Russian model or secreted in from Pakistan. It was bought here in the U.S. probably for the video that we believe was produced in a particular place in this country.”

“Such as?”

Dumont hesitated. “Not urban. That’s all I can say. The handwriting on the card was done with too much care to mask a natural handwriting style for our handwriting people to glean much. No help there.”

“Rural? How do you know the video was produced in a rural place?”

Dumont shook his head. “That’s another area I can’t comment on. We’re searching for the place where it was produced.”

“You heard something. Something in the background. Something that ties it to a location. That’s what clued you in to the guy not being an Arab.”

Dumont smiled. “You’ve stretched a little too far, Colter. That’s all I can say.”

Colter stood. “My only concern right now is the safety and recovery of my wife.”

Dumont followed him to his feet. “If we are right, whoever wanted and wants you dead was and is prepared to do unspeakable things to make you among the non-living. Think about it. Put together a short list I can work with. I’m on your side. We need to

stop this not just to save you but to bring justice to all the people who were slaughtered by this..." Dumont searched for a word. "This madman."

Colter shook his head with dismay. "I made enemies as a cop. All cops do who work on the street for any length of time. I was an undercover narc for years. Before that, in homicide. Some were killers but most were garden-variety thugs who couldn't tie their own shoes. Wore loafers to avoid the task."

Dumont chuckled. "Funny. One of them falls into a different category, though. Think about it. In case you lost my last card, call me at this number if you come up with any candidates." Dumont produced a business card and handed it to Colter. "I believe, no I know we will find the perpetrator of this heinous act but your assistance could shorten the time. Consider this. There is the assassin, probably an individual. Then, there is the person or persons who hired him. We want them both." Dumont stared at Colter. "All stops are out on this one, Colter. Cases don't come any bigger than this."

"You looking for a promotion, Special Agent Dumont?"

"You have something against promotions, Sergeant Colter?"

Colter grinned. "I tried for lieutenant three times. Undercover cops don't get promoted. What we have to do are not actions that lead to captain's bars."

"You wanted to better yourself?"

"I wanted the pay increase. I liked working on the street and undercover. I was good at it. I would have been terrible at driving a desk. So, I guess, I got what I deserved and probably all I was capable of. I hope you move up, Dumont. You're a decent guy but I don't envy you this one. Could be a career maker or a career breaker."

"We need to keep in touch, Colter. If you go rogue on this..."

Colter turned to Dumont. "I won't live in fear, Dumont, waiting for the next attempt on our lives from whoever did this. Not my style."

"We're a nation of laws, Colter."

"Which you have taken an oath to uphold, Special Agent Dumont."

"You took an oath as a cop."

"I'm retired."

Colter thought, as he made his way to Tika's room, that this was the second time in a year he had been targeted by a professional assassin. With Irina, the first assassin, it was simply revenge for preventing her completion of a contract to kill Anna Partanza in Key West, Florida. This was different. Someone out there harbored a grudge deep enough and sick enough to hire a different professional assassin to kill him. Colter let out a breath wondering if others had similar hatred. He could not predict the future so it made little sense to worry about it. As he had said to Dumont, he wouldn't live in fear and if someone came for him, he would respond. Someone had. "Nobody attacks my wife," he muttered.

Attendants were sliding Tika from the ICU gurney onto the bed when he entered the room. It was in a private room. Colter had insisted. Tika was groggy, sedated but recovering from the anesthesia. She was battered black and blue almost everywhere skin showed. She moved slightly and winced. Her eyes opened and blinked. She saw Colter who leaned over her taking the one hand that was not bandaged. She smiled weakly, and then frowned.

"What happened?"

Colter wasn't sure what to say but Tika had always been tough. "Somebody blew up the business with a bomb."

Tika tried to make sense of what he had said but couldn't. "What about Davy and everybody. Are they okay?"

"We'll talk about that later. You need to rest. I'm here. I won't leave you."

Tika drifted to sleep.

As Colter fixed his eyes on the broken body of his wife, he made the decision. Phones were supposed to be turned off in rooms. In the hall, he entered a number for an apartment in Zurich Switzerland.

With his mind on entering the phone number, Colter didn't see the old man shuffling toward him in the hall. They collided. After a few words of apology, the small, bent over man continued down the corridor holding a bouquet of flowers. Nothing in the encounter registered with Colter except two things: the old man had something hard in a jacket pocket, maybe a medication bottle and who would wear a jacket in this heat and humidity? "Must be one of those old guys who is always cold," Colter mumbled as he completed entering the number.

Colter looked at his watch and calculated the time difference. It was evening in Zurich. He hoped they would be home. The phone rang.

“Allo. C’est Bernadette.”

“Bernadette, this is Chance Colter is your...is Anna there?” Colter spoke in English.

Bernadette switched to English. “Oh, Monsieur Colter. She is making an American dinner. We are having hamburgers with fries but with broccoli and milk, not Coca Cola that I very much prefer. Are you here?”

Colter couldn’t help but smile. Bernadette was always clear about her likes and dislikes. “No, I’m in America.”

“That is very far away. Oh, thank you for the birthday present. It was very nice. I am ten now, much better than being nine.”

“It fit all right?”

“Oh, yes.”

“Bernadette, I need to speak with Anna.”

Bernadette shouted. “Anna, the telephone is for you.” She had switched back to French. “It is your pretend uncle calling from America.”

Seconds later, Anna’s familiar voice sounded. “My gosh, this is a surprise. Bernadette loves the dress. It’s very grown up and it’s from America. She wears it until I convince her to wear something else for a day or two so I can get it cleaned. Thank you,” Anna said through a laugh.

“Tika and I were sorry we couldn’t get away for her birthday. Anna, I need a favor. A big one.”

“Anything.”

Colter let out a breath. “Tika has been injured. Someone tried to kill us. I would like to have her stay with you for a week or two. She can’t be moved for a few days. I need to get her someplace safe, out of the country so I can do what I have to do.”

“My God. What happened?”

“I can’t go into details on the phone. I’ll tell you everything when we get there.”

“Are you all right?”

“I’m fine. We were both fortunate to have survived. Tika doesn’t remember much. The doctor says her memory should improve but it could take time.”

Three days later Tika was discharged from the hospital. Colter hadn’t left the hospital but for brief stops at home to change clothes. They made an overnight stop at the house. The next morning Colter packed a suitcase for her and a smaller carryon for himself. He would not be staying long in Zurich.

Tika’s car had been parked beside Colter’s but on the side opposite his from the building. The dumpster bunker and Colter’s car had taken the force of the blast. Hers was remarkably unscathed. Tika had always wanted a sporty car. Colter didn’t care what he drove. He had collected her from the hospital in her new Audi S4 with glacier white metallic paint and black leather interior. He’d only driven it once at the dealership when they bought it and to and from the hospital, but Tika didn’t ask to drive. She couldn’t

anyway. Nobody drove her car but her - until then. Her mind operated in slow motion and she still had no recollection of the explosion that destroyed The Silver Magnolia.

“Chance? You said we’re going somewhere, I think.”

Colter nodded. “We’re spending the night at home and then we’re flying to Montreal for one night in the apartment.” They had kept Tika’s mother’s apartment there after she died. Tika had dual Canadian and U.S. citizenship. They liked having the apartment to visit and spend time in the French Canadian city although there had not been time since the business opened. “Then, I’m taking you to visit Anna and Bernadette in Zurich for a couple of weeks.”

“Why?”

“I have things to do that will take me away from Savannah. I don’t want you alone here or in Montreal.”

“What kind of things?”

“I’ll be back there as soon as I can. I promise.”

Tika sat back. She appeared in thought but Colter wasn’t sure what was going on in her head or if she would remember what he had just said.

The next morning his back ached. He had spent a restless night off and on in a chair working to remain alert but had fallen finally asleep with a Glock in his fist. The security system was activated and he doubted the assassin would try again until things settled down but he couldn’t relax.

When he awoke, Tika was standing at a bedroom window looking out at the trees and lawn. It was five-thirty. Tika was never up at five-thirty.

“I saw the sun rise, Chance. I don’t think I’ve ever seen that. It was beautiful through the trees. Do you see the sun rise every morning?”

“No babe. Not every morning.”

She turned to him. “I’m hungry, I think. Are you hungry, Chance?”

“Yeah. I’m hungry, babe. I’ll fix us something. You want to take a shower?”

“A shower? I guess...I suppose I should. You said we were going somewhere, didn’t you?”

“We’re taking a vacation, babe.”

“We are?”

“Where are we going again?”

“To visit Anna and Bernadette in Switzerland.”

Tika turned back to the window. “We sent a dress. I remember. I hope she liked it.”

“She loved it and can’t wait to meet you. She calls me Anna’s pretend uncle.”

Tika smiled. “It was blue.”

“Yes, babe, the dress was blue. You picked it out.”

“I don’t remember that.”

They were in the car and heading toward the Atlanta airport by noon that day. Their flight took them to Montreal. Colter thought he was probably being overly cautious flying to Canada before leaving for Zurich but he didn’t want to take any chances that the assassin was able to discover their movements in the U.S.

The apartment in Montreal, her mother’s home for many years, was familiar and seemed comforting to Tika as Colter watched her move through rooms, picking up

familiar objects. She walked into the bedroom. “Chance, I think I’ll lie down for a few minutes.”

Later, they went to a familiar restaurant that Tika recalled. The maître di remembered them.

“Madame and Monsieur Colter. It is good to see you again.” Pierre spoke in Quebecois-accented English.

Tika picked at her food but seemed to brighten as the evening commenced. She never ate much. Chance avoided ordering wine. Alcohol was not something she should consume yet, the doctors had advised.

He booked business class seats to Hamburg, avoiding France. The French might yet be looking for him. They were as comfortable as possible on the long flight followed by a shorter connecting flight to Zurich. They arrived at seven in the evening. Tika had slept for much of the flight and awoke more alert than when they left. Colter felt optimistic. She yawned as they deplaned toward customs. “I’ve never been to Switzerland. Have you?”

“Just the one time when I left Anna here with Bernadette.”

“You didn’t tell me everything, Chance. I know you. You left out all the dangerous parts.”

Colter smiled. “What makes you think it was dangerous?”

“Your leg. That scar. The big one.”

Colter grinned. “Hard to hide that. Maybe you can get Anna to tell you the whole story.”

“When do you have to go back?”

“Two days.”

“I thought this was supposed to be a vacation.”

“When I come back for you we’re traveling through Europe. France, well maybe not France yet but Italy, Germany, Spain and Portugal, wherever you want to go.”

“How long will you be gone?”

“I’m not sure, babe. A week, maybe two.”

Anna insisted on collecting them from the Zurich airport. She had moved between calling him Colter, his preference, to Mr. Colter to Chance. She decided as she and Bernadette waited for them to appear that Chance was probably best choice despite their age difference of twenty years. They had been through much together getting Bernadette away from the Catholic Church and the French government. They were close.

Anna spotted them and waved. Bernadette stood on tiptoes and peered with raised chin between the shoulders and arms of people in front. Anna held her firmly by a hand.

“I cannot see them, Anna.” Bernadette spoke in her native French.

Colter spotted Anna and approached, separating people between them.

Bernadette rushed forward. Colter hugged her, lifting her from her the floor. “Ten seems bigger than nine,” Colter said in broken French.

Bernadette grinned as Colter set her down. She looked at Tika. “Anna said I should call you Mr. and Mrs. Colter.” She was speaking in English with careful attention to her pronunciation.

Tika bent down slowly. “You have my permission to call me Tika.” She angled her head to Colter. “Him you can call Uncle Chance.”

“But Anna said he is a pretend uncle,” Bernadette protested.

“Pretend Uncle Chance is way too long, don’t you think?” Tika asked.

Bernadette’s brow pinched. “Yes, it is long. Okay,” Bernadette agreed, a smile reappearing.

Not much was said in the car on the drive to Anna and Bernadette’s apartment located in the heart of the bustling Swiss city except by Bernadette who fashioned a running commentary on everything she knew about America and her desire to go there. She spoke of with how much she loved Anna and Rufus her curly-haired white dog; how much she loved their apartment and her room; how much she loved school and her new friends; how much she loved Uncle Chance for helping them get to Zurich and how much she loved Tika for letting Uncle Chance come to France to help them get to Zurich. Not one mention was made of the years she lived with nuns, hidden within the French Catholic Church. She ended as they arrived at the apartment with a comment of her hope that they could all speak English so that when Anna and she traveled to America she would understand everything. She explained that when they saw films in English she had difficulty understanding all of the words because many Americans in films mumbled horribly, in her opinion. They also used words that didn’t make sense sometimes. Anna had explained that all languages use words for other words that she called slang and that some phrases were idioms which meant you had to memorize them because they didn’t make sense at all. Bernadette asked, “Did you know that to hit the road means to leave but to hit the sack means to go to bed?” Bernadette threw out her thin arms and exclaimed, “Go figure.”

They all climbed from the car, happy for a break from Bernadette’s soliloquy. Bernadette skipped ahead to the door, inserting a key from a pocket. She held it open.

Anna whispered to Tika as they walked. “She jabbars on when she’s nervous or in a new situation. She’ll settle down.”

Tika said. “She’s adorable. Thank you for letting me stay with you. I have trouble concentrating since...since what happened. Chance is...” She shook her head slowly. “Going to do what Chance does.”

“Mr...Chance made my life possible. He made Bernadette’s life possible. He made our lives together possible.” Anna said. “I can never repay what you both did in Key West and him in Nevada and France.” Anna squeezed Tika’s arm. “We have plenty of time to talk. Bernadette goes to bed early. She burns so much energy during the day, she’s exhausted by eight and has a full day at school.”

“How do you spend your days?” Tika asked.

Anna chuckled. “Resting until she gets home. She is the love of my life right now. Plenty of time to find my Chance later.” Anna’s face became serious. “I’m so sorry about what happened in Savannah. I don’t know much. Only what Chance said on the phone.”

“I don’t remember much, either. My memory is coming back but that morning is gone probably forever and probably just as well. Chance is living with it. We lost so many friends. All of our employees working that day were killed. We were the only two who survived, he said. But I know he knows more he isn’t telling me. That’s Chance.” Tika looked away. “I lived a crazy life until I met him. I never felt safe or normal until he came into it. I worry, of course, when he goes away like he does but something inside me knows he’s all right and will come for me. I love him in a way I can’t put into words. He’s Chance. I guess that says it. He’ll never change.”

Three days later Colter's plane landed in Atlanta. Tika's car was as he left it in long-term parking. He checked it for bugs, bombs, scratches and dents. The Audi was a nice, comfortable ride and very different from the junkers he owned. For cops, the thing about junkers was they were inconspicuous and the sheet metal didn't matter. Cop junkers were junkers on the outside only. Mechanically they were meticulously cared for. Colter maintained his junkers well. But the aging Chev he owned was destroyed in the bomb blast. He was forced to drive a nice car and worried to return it to Tika in one piece. She would not be happy if he destroyed her new Audi in a car chase. "Maybe I should rent something," he mumbled.

Colter drove home to their Savannah house. He had a few things to take care of before leaving. He might not be back for days. There was no way to tell where this mission would lead. He avoided calling it a case in his mind. He was retired from law enforcement but Special Agent Dumont's appearance at the hospital made him feel like he was going undercover to solve a case. One thing was clear, if he found the assassin, the assassin would not survive the meeting. An exception had to be made to his mantra that he didn't kill people anymore since retiring. First, he had to find the guy and the guy had gone into hiding, Colter was sure.

Many funerals in many places for the staff from The Silver Magnolia that had died in the conflagration had been held. He couldn't attend them all so he had expressed Tika's and his condolences, accompanied by flowers. From his desk at home, he called his lawyer, accountant, banker, insurance agent and the owner of the former building. They all had tasks to perform. The Colter's had heavily insured their business after the Mafia threats to the Yellow Parrot Restaurant and Bar in Key West Florida. They took no chances with loss from any cause. They were protected financially.

Colter collected a snub-nose S&W thirty-eight and slipped it into a ballistic nylon ankle holster. He owned two Glocks but had added a SIG SP2022 in a .40 caliber with a 12 round magazine to his home arsenal. After experiencing the gun in France, he had purchased one. The two pistols sat on the desk alongside a box of ammo for each. He'd bring one Glock G23 Gen 4 in a .40 cal. as a backup. The matching round to the SIG was practical.

Then, he sat at the desk in thought. The house would be locked and the complex security system activated. Camera images in real time were fed to his phone and portable computer. Any breach of their home would be immediately communicated. If the assassin were audacious enough to attempt to finish what he hadn't at the Colter residence, he would have images of the man. But Colter doubted he would try again until calm settled over the nation and Colter relaxed his vigilance. Complacency was the assassin's friend. If Colter guessed right, the assassin was slipping back into a hidden life to await a second attempt.

Colter penned a list of possible suspects on a sheet of paper who could be or have hired the assassin and quickly realized he was completely out of touch with any of the hoodlums he had helped jail. The possibility existed that an incarcerated individual had contracted with an assassin from within a prison but somehow the magnitude of the attack suggested to Colter that someone outside contracted the hit. It was someone with a

serious grudge and the means to act on it. It's one thing to get word to a Vinnie or a Sal from inside to have a Paulie or a Guido clipped, quite another to locate a professional assassin and arrange a murder. Colter needed real-time information on who was in and who was out of prison.

Since his entire cop career had been in Minneapolis, Colter entered the number of Detective John Russo of the MPD.

"Lieutenant Russo."

"You made it. It's Colter."

"Three tries. Thanks. I earned it." Russo laughed. "You in town?"

"No. Might have to come. Depends on what you say or can find out."

"Where are you?"

"Savannah."

"Jesus, that's where the terrorist attack blew up a city block."

"Yeah. Our restaurant was in the middle of that block."

"No, shit! How'd you piss off that Arab?"

"That's why I'm calling. The video was a fake, a cover. Keep that to yourself, Russo."

"God damn! You sure?"

"Reliable source. Listen, I need to know who is in and out of jail that might be behind the attack. Somebody hired a pro to do the bombing and wanted it to look like a Saudi terrorist did it. That tells me the buyer fears discovery and gave instructions to the assassin to deflect blame to a foreign terrorist. It's possible the assassin decided on the phony terrorist approach on his own but my money says the client made the call, at least in general terms. That also suggests that the one who hired the assassin fears a connection could be made of him to me. I need the motive of the client."

"Who's in and who's out? I can do some research."

"One other thing. The assassin was a pro, as I said. It's someone who operates from anonymity, deeply hidden. I can find the buyer or the assassin. One gets me to the other but finding the buyer might be easier. The assassin has made a career out of not getting caught. Anybody come to mind?"

"No. But assassin's rap sheets at that level don't cross my desk from other parts of the country and if he worked here at some point, we probably didn't make a connection. If someone of that caliber made a hit in Minneapolis, we'd probably end up with a cold case like the murder of that banker woman, Elizabeth Plough that you and I worked on last winter. We both believed a pro took her out but we were never able to prove it. It's still a cold case as far as I'm concerned. Closed case of a double homicide as far as the department is concerned. Life goes on but as far as the buyer, I can see who might be possibilities. Somebody really doesn't like you, Colter...again."

"Yeah. My past just doesn't want to stay there...in the past."

Colter had wondered since meeting the assassin, Irina, from Key West in France whether she was behind the Elizabeth Plough hit. Somehow, it had felt like her work even though she had left nothing behind. Irina was gone and retired. He'd never know. But as he had told Special Agent Dumont, the bomb blast in Savannah was not her work. There was another assassin responsible for this attempt on him. "How many of these guys are there?" Colter sighed.

The call ended with Russo promising to look into incarcerations involving criminals Colter and he had been involved with. "I'll call you back, Colter."

Colter found the card for Special Agent Charles Dumont and entered his number.

"Dumont."

"Chance Colter."

"I guess you calling me is a good sign. You're not dropping off the radar."

"Dumont, I need to know if you have anything more on the assassin."

"Why?"

"So I can write him a letter to express my displeasure."

"Please don't go Lone Ranger on me, Colter. You'll end up dead."

"My wife and I missed that outcome by pure luck. We should both have been in the building."

"Then count yourselves fortunate."

"He'll try again. There will be no payment for failure. You expect me to sit and wait or hide someplace forever. Not my style, Dumont."

"You find this guy and kill him or the employer if there is one, that's murder one. Premeditated."

"No jury in the world would convict me. Remember the guy in the New York subway that shot those guys threatening him? He got off. Citizens wanted to give him a medal. This guy murdered more than... You have a number yet?"

"At this point ninety-three dead."

"Jesus, ninety-three people murdered in cold, calculated blood to mask a hit on me." Colter sighed softly into the phone. "My problems are two, Dumont. I need to find him and the one who hired him. Now do you have anything that will help me?"

"Do you really think the Bureau would endorse you hunting these guys? We're looking hard for the assassin. Many agents assigned. You're one person with no authorization to do anything. We're not even sure the assassin has a customer. He might have been acting out of personal desire. Take a vacation and let us do our work."

Colter immediately dismissed the idea that the assassin was operating without an employer. The hit on him was professional and expensive to set up. The single instance he could think of was Irina in France who hunted him and Anna Partanza out of revenge as her last hits before retirement and on her own nickel. Revenge is a powerful motivator but she exposed herself, as she had never done during her career to track Colter and Anna Partanza to France. In so doing, she had prescribed retirement as her only option. The thing about professional assassins that stood out for Colter was just that, they were professionals. Assassins, who let personal feelings dominate, didn't live very long. "Which means you have nothing more than what you told me at the hospital," Colter said.

"I can neither confirm or deny that."

"Have a nice day, Special Agent Dumont. If anything changes, you can reach me at this number. Leave a message. I won't be in Savannah."

"Where are you going?"

"I can neither confirm or deny my future whereabouts."

The call ended.

Colter leaned back. He got exactly what he expected from Dumont - nothing. He needed a source that had connections to the underworld of crime. He'd met a few through

the years. Since his work-history was in Minneapolis and the criminals he helped put away were predominately local, it was possible somebody might know something. Colter rose and packed a suitcase. The only way to have weapons was to drive. He knew whom he wanted first to contact if he could find him. With great trepidation, he drove Tika's car. He didn't want a paper trail with a car rental agency.

Two days later Colter arrived in Minneapolis, the City of Lakes. October in Savannah was hot and humid. Minneapolis weather was unpredictable but the day broke clear and dry with the daytime high forecast to be in the high seventies. Very comfortable but he'd gotten used to Savannah.