

The Hunting

A Chance Colter Mystery

By
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For Thora

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ONE

Kill Colter. The words formed under her finger on the steamed glass of the bathroom mirror. Below she scrawled, Kill Partanza. The words slowly faded from the mirror as the ceiling exhaust fan sucked in drier air from the bedroom but the words remained etched in her brain. She wrapped a towel around her muscular body and another around long blonde hair. It had been a good workout. The pleasant feeling of an endorphin high lingered.

These last two hits of her long career had been a year in the planning. It was a year that had forced her to expose herself in ways she never had during her career as a contract assassin. One paying job remained before executing her plan to eliminate first Anna Partanza followed by Chance Colter. Then, she would slip quietly into retirement in Europe.

After many years devoted to killing people for money, the concept of nothing-to-do produced an unsettling feeling she could not put into words. She was successful at her chosen profession for several reasons. It had been satisfying. Finding satisfaction in retirement would probably take time, she guessed.

Successful assassins don't kill from revenge. Emotions of any sort were distractions, dangerous and unaffordable reveries of the mind. But with Colter, revenge *was* her motive. There could be none other.

With the Partanza woman, her motive was the completion of the one contract she failed to fulfill. Her scheduler had returned the fee to the client and the assassin, with a damaged shoulder wound from a bullet from the gun the Partanza woman had fired at her with closed eyes fled the U.S. A lucky shot was an understatement. The assassin had staggered from the apartment believing her career was ended. But a brilliant Italian surgeon had reconstructed the shoulder to a usable condition.

Discovery of Anna Partanza in Switzerland, hiding in a convent for nearly a year after her escape from Key West Florida, meant the assassin would have to kill the woman outside the U.S. That was something she had never done. Working on foreign soil had always been avoided. She needed Europe to be a clean retirement destination.

Anna Partanza had been cautious and the selection of a convent was an effective hideout. Nearly twelve months and much money had been required to learn of her location outside of Zurich. Colter was easier to find. He and his new wife had emerged from Canada to relocate in Savannah, Georgia using their true names and were days away from opening a restaurant and bar.

The assassin padded in bare feet to the living room of the house she rented in San Diego. She would not be there much longer. Once she left for her last paying job, she would travel directly to Switzerland to kill Partanza. That was her original plan. Then return to kill Colter. The sequence was determined in her mind by the belief that Colter was planted in Savannah whereas the unpredictable Partanza woman might suddenly leave the convent. It had taken too much time and money to find her to begin again. The assassin wanted these last two hits done. Then, retire in peace.

The assassin's name was Irina Petrova. A least that was the name she had used for the past year. She changed names and addresses often. Her birth name was known only to her.

The next afternoon the drive from her current base in San Diego to Los Angeles took a couple of hours at five over the speed limit. The assassin had sold the Cessna business jet she loved to fly; and the Maserati convertible she owned in Miami for a Jaguar XKR-S convertible. With a supercharged V8 engine delivering 550 H.P., the car would deliver 0 to 60 mph in 4.2 seconds. That's what the dealer promised but Irina had no desire to test the car to its limit, exhilarating as that would be. Anything that alerted the police was definitely not in her plan. Still, the car was fun to drive. With the top down her long blonde hair blew wildly in the wind. It was a shame she would probably abandon it.

Irina Petrova was motoring to her last job. She yawned and stretched in the comfortable seat. After nearly thirteen years as a contract killer, she was hanging up her cleats, cashing in her chips and folding her tent. She smiled, working for one more metaphor for retirement that didn't come to mind. One more assignment, well, not quite one more, but one more that earned a fee, was on her schedule for tonight. The two additional hits she had spent the year planning earned no fee. They were personal.

Anna Partanza, to Irina's unbelievable good luck, had suddenly returned to the United States from Switzerland. This, Irina had learned only hours before from her scheduler who was in direct contact with the resources hired to track down Partanza. Now she was back and in Las Vegas only a five-hour drive away. Irina smiled. That was an immensely good omen. Two days from now Irina had planned to be in Switzerland. Notification of her target's sudden return arrived just in time.

The price to discover the whereabouts of her two targets had been significant both in money and risk. Research was not Irina's forte. It was dangerous and for almost thirteen years, unnecessary. Clients provided dossiers on targets.

Virtually no one knew the name Irina that she used or what she looked like. She doubted anyone could put her face with that name. Her scheduler was the sole go-between for the research project. Never did anyone save her scheduler speak directly with her or with a client.

In their terse, often stylized conversation, the scheduler said the source had discovered that Anna Partanza had abruptly returned. The informant in Zurich discovered the Partanza woman had traveled to the U.S. under the name of Lizabetta Campania with a residence in Las Vegas Nevada. She had booked a room for several nights at the Cromwell Hotel, room 1712. The source also learned that the Partanza woman arranged for a rental car to be at the hotel the day after tomorrow. The research money had been well spent. Hopefully the risk of exposure was needless worry since Irina was retiring and would disappear even more deeply than she lived as an assassin after killing Anna Partanza and Chance Colter.

Irina guessed somehow the source or the source's source hacked into the Partanza woman's computer along with watching her in Zurich. Irina shook her head with amazement, thinking, *Enough money will buy anything*. What Irina didn't know was why Partanza abruptly decided to return from her imagined safety in Switzerland. Perhaps that didn't matter. She would die regardless.

The second hit was on a retired police officer named Chance Colter. His retired status made him fair game according to her self-determined rules for acceptable targets for assassination. They were opening a restaurant and bar and were no doubt consumed

with getting the business up and running. That would be a major distraction for him. Killing him would be easy. Irina had decided he could wait until she eliminated Anna Partanza.

It was a recurring memory for Irina and she remembered it vividly again. The man named Colter burst through a door and shot her repeatedly in the back just as she fired at the Partanza woman, throwing off her aim. Irina was wearing a Kevlar vest but the bullets struck behind her heart. The little Irina remembered included seeing the inexperienced Partanza woman fire a revolver with her eyes closed and feeling the bullet smash into her shoulder just beyond the margin of the protective vest. Miraculously, Irina had survived after her heart stopped, leaving Colter to believe her dead. He chose to help the Partanza woman leave Key West and left Irina to suddenly revive and stagger, bleeding from the shoulder wound to the street and escape.

The big engine purred as Irina exited the 405 North onto Manhattan Beach Blvd., then west to Manhattan Beach. Her target was there. The dossier provided by the client through her scheduler provided pictures of the target and the sailboat he was expected to be on that night. Irina didn't care who he was or why the client wanted him dead. So long as the target was not a government official, a law enforcement officer or anyone in the judicial system, he was a legitimate target.

Irina liked mixing up the ways she assassinated targets. That made the work more interesting. For a man on a sailboat, she could kill from a great distance with a sniper rifle or sneak onto the boat and garrote him and cut his throat or simply shoot him. Or she could blow the boat from the water with explosives with him handcuffed to it. In Irina's line of work, there was no decision as to method that couldn't be changed with how things played out. She was always prepared for the unexpected. A good assassin took advantage of opportunities as they presented themselves. A great assassin made opportunities happen. Irina was a great assassin.

In the Jaguar's trunk were a variety of weapons and explosives along with a wet suit, swim fins, SCUBA gear and dry bags to hold everything she needed if she decided to slip into the water. She mentally reviewed what she had brought. Her handgun was an FNP .45 Cal. ACP Tactical semi auto pistol with a laser sight. She had night vision goggles, an underwater facemask and a MK11 Mod O SWS sniper rifle used by Navy SEALs. The rifle delivered a 7.62 mm round accurately to 1,500 yds. It was mounted with a Leupold Vari X Mil DOT scope and a tripod. She had several pounds of SEMTEX, a commando style knife and other toys of her trade.

Irina had established a network of illegal arms providers through the years. She had never purchased a weapon legally. The suppliers were paid well and Irina was scrupulously careful with whom she did business. Moreover, all transactions occurred through her scheduler. None of her arms suppliers knew her or had personal contact with her.

The sun, like a disk of polished bronze made viewable through the thickness of the atmosphere, edged down to the blue line of the Pacific. High patchy cirrus clouds contributed to what was to be a spectacular sunset.

Irina drove by the beach parking area packed with cars. It was a warm summer night with little wind, perfect for lounging on the beach. Three sailboats plied the waters far from shore. Her target was aboard one of them.

She had no intention of parking in a public parking area and continued driving north on the road for a half-mile, turned right and found street parking in a compact neighborhood several blocks from the water. The sign at the side of the road read: Parking Permit Required, Up To \$200 Fine. Her car was registered in a fictitious name to a San Diego address. The sign did not indicate immediate towing. Irina dug in her purse for a residential street-parking permit from San Diego. The patrolling parking police would have to read it carefully to determine it was for another area. She would be away for a maximum of three hours.

The sun had sunk halfway below the horizon. Twilight was minutes away and full dark about an hour. Seeing the layout of the beach, the separation of the three sailboats in the distance on the water and the distance her target's boat was from shore, she decided to leave the sniper rifle in the Jaguar. Into a large black duffle Irina stuffed a small inflatable raft, two collapsible oars, the pistol, SEMTEX, a detonator and a timer. She stripped to her bra and panties, standing at the open car door. No one was around but no one would pay attention in a beach community. She changed into the wet suit, strapped the knife to her thigh, placed her clothes in a dry-bag with a rope tether, and shoved the swim fins and facemask into the duffle. It weighed nearly forty-five pounds but Irina shouldered it effortlessly. Despite the damaged shoulder, she was in the best shape of her life.

The walk to the beach consumed thirty minutes. Before full dark descended, she removed binoculars from the duffle and scanned the water. She had seen pictures of the sailboat of her target. It was distinctively different from the other two moving farther out to sea. The information she received from her scheduler from the client said the target would anchor the boat close to shore for the night in the bay to avoid the greater swells and possible chop of open water. Apparently he was prone to seasickness. A check of a laser range finder found the boat to be 1,983 yards from her position on the beach.

Irina had entered the beach at a grassy and rocky spit of land that met the water. The sandy beach and the beach revelers were to her left. They were a raucous group of youths. A few older couples strolled by at the water's edge.

By the time Irina unpacked and inflated the raft and secured the dry bags, it was full dark. There was no moon tonight. The small red and green lights of the target's sailboat would guide her. Irina blackened her hands, feet and face and slipped into the cold water, happy for the wet suit, rolled into the raft with her dry-bags, locked the oars into their plastic oarlocks and began rowing to the sailboat. Without the aid of a spotlight trained on her, she was invisible.

A quarter mile from shore the water rose to three-foot swells. Commanding the tiny raft was work. Irina pulled hard at the oars. The raft was so small and the oars so short, the craft was a challenge to keep on course.

Forty minutes later she silently approached the side of the big sailboat. The dossier described it as a Beneteau Oceanis Clipper approximately forty feet in length. She paddled silently to the stern. The name written on it was *Russian Revenge* written in the Cyrillic alphabet. It was a beautiful boat with the correct name. Irina tied the raft to the fantail and sat. The faint, muffled voice of a man met her ears. His voice was raised, his words slurred. The slap resounded in the still night air. A woman cried out. Hurried movements clattered furniture and dishes. The woman screamed. That would have to wait.

The dossier on the target said that a bodyguard would be on the boat. Irina reached for the knife at her thigh, slid the pistol from a dry-bag and silently moved forward along the port side from the fantail. The man was not at the stern of the boat. As she crept along the length of the boat she saw the point glow of a cigarette. A hulk of a man was leaning over the low bow rail staring toward the lights that twinkled on the shore. The boat had rotated on its anchor line with the stern to open water. His back was to her. Irina edged to the center of the boat onto the windowless elevated cabin structure below the mast and arm of the sail.

The gun was in her left hand. Although she had trained herself to be ambidextrous, she was a natural righty. With the knife in her right hand, she crept within five feet. He was finishing the cigarette. It was now or never. She could shoot him. A machine pistol hung lazily from one hand. But the target below would hear the muted pop, pop, pop and the heavy thud of the man.

Irina lunged forward driving the knife into the man's thick neck as he turned at her footfalls. Instinctively he thrust a hand to the wound. The blade had severed a carotid artery. He would bleed out in seconds. Blood pumped through his fingers but he was not dead yet. His eyes rolled and he raised the machine pistol. Firing the automatic weapon would put her in a gun battle with the target below. Irina withdrew the knife from the man's neck, slashing across her body into his right wrist, severing tendons above his hand. The knife plunge and wrist slash movement were made nearly simultaneously and occupied no more than two seconds. The man was losing strength as his life ran onto the deck in a crimson flood. Irina grabbed the machine pistol awkwardly with her gun hand and thrust the knife into the man's throat but he was already losing consciousness and dropped to his knees. The plunge of the knife into his throat stopped the death scream he would have made. Irina sheathed the blade and eased the man to the deck. She took the machine pistol and slid it into the water over the bow. Never leave a weapon lying about. A cardinal rule.

Irina crept back toward the cabin hatch. It was open. Light streamed from below.

Collateral damage was often unavoidable. Irina had no compunction about it. The bodyguard was a threat that had to be eliminated. The woman below was an innocent. Sometimes people died beyond the target. That's the way it worked. Unless expressly instructed to prevent the death of a particular person during a hit, Irina didn't care.

Right then, at that moment though, Irina did something completely out of character. She changed her plan. Perhaps it was because this was her last contract or the terror she heard in woman's screams that caused the change. Irina didn't know.

She stepped silently to the cabin hatch. The lights seemed blindingly bright below after the total darkness on the water. She blinked for a few heartbeats, letting her eyes adjust. A slender young woman, with long brown hair, probably still in her teens cringed from her reclined position on a padded bench behind a table. Her knees were up protectively toward her chest. Her arms wrapped about them. Blood ran down her chin from a split lower lip. Her tongue darted out, finding it. A wrist smeared it across her face. A fresh bruise on a cheek was beginning to color. The girl's eyes were riveted on the man and didn't notice Irina step down two steps into the cabin behind.

The man hovered over the frightened girl, ready to strike another blow across the small table. The girl's hands covered her face reflexively in anticipation. Irina shot him three times with hollow point bullets in the back of his head. Most of his face was blown

forward onto the back of the seat and onto the woman by the hollow point bullets. She stared voiceless at the nearly headless man who crumbled to the floor. A second before a scream left her throat, Irina jumped down into the cabin, motioning her to silence. Irina glanced about with the gun ahead of her.

“Anyone else on the boat,” she whispered, pointing the gun at the girl’s head.

“Anatoly on the deck. No. No. No one else,” the girl said in heavily accented English. The girl stared at Irina with eyes wide, mouth agape but she did not scream. She clutched her arms protectively about her body dressed in only in panties. Irina could see cigarette burns on her breasts. Her clothes lay on the seat. Irina didn’t approach the woman but still trained the gun at her. “Put on your clothes.”

The woman stared.

“Quickly if you want to live.”

The young woman slipped hurriedly into a bra, twice fumbling the clasp, tugged on Capri pants and a tank top. She grabbed leopard skin patterned high-heeled shoes, holding them. The heels were so high, Irina doubted she could walk in them on the deck. “There are diamonds,” the girl said.

“Where?”

“In the front on a bed.”

Irina motioned with her head. “Get them.”

The girl dashed into forward bedroom and returned with a small case. She held it to Irina.

“Take them. You’ve earned them.” Irina motioned her from the cabin with the gun. “Get in the dinghy and go to shore. Disappear.”

Irina noticed as she boarded the yacht that a dinghy with an outboard motor was tied to the stern. It pitched and yawed in the swells next to her tiny raft.

“Wha, what? You killed, Vladimir?” The young woman was flinging pieces of his brain from her hair. “Who are you?”

Fitting, Irina thought. Her last kill was a Russian Mafia kingpin.

“The little boat tied in back with the motor. Do you know how to operate it?”

The girl shrugged. “I, I think so.”

“Get in the boat and go to shore as I told you. Go slowly. If you go to fast, I will shoot you.”

“But you killed him.”

“Now. Or I will kill you, too. Go. Do not look at me again or I will *have* to kill you.”

The girl leapt to the floor and slid past Irina, her eyes cast to one side, holding her shoes and clutching the case of diamonds.”

She turned but did not look at Irina and spoke in a small voice. “Thank you for not killing me and killing him.” She had an eastern European accent. Possibly Polish, Irina guessed.

“Go.” Irina shouted.

Irina heard the girl struggling with the dinghy’s motor.

“ I don’t know how to start it.” She yelled in frustration.

Irina climbed on deck, retrieved the SEMTEX from a dry-bag, inserted the detonator and set the timer for fifteen minutes. The timing was not favorable. She would

still be in the water when the boat exploded. Then, she jumped in the dinghy, turned the switch and pulled the cord. The motor came to life.

“This is the throttle.”

The girl stared dumbly at Irina.

“It makes the boat go.”

The girl nodded.

Irina jumped back on board the yacht untying the dinghy.

The woman would likely not follow her command to proceed slowly once away from the boat and would race to shore, Irina knew. Having the woman arrive on shore before Irina could escape was a minor risk. But the girl moved the dinghy slowly away from the big sailboat. Irina waited until the sound of the motor receded in the night. Myriad lights on shore acted as homing beacons for the girl. She could not get lost.

Irina climbed back into the small raft and began rowing. Thirteen minutes later, she put on swim fins, facemask and a small SCUBA tank and regulator. With the mouthpiece positioned, she slid into the water. She held the dry bags by their short ropes, retrieved her knife and slashed the raft. It quickly deflated and sank. Irina swam a few feet below the surface toward land.

After exactly two minutes, the big boat exploded in a fireball that seemed as bright as the sun but all that was visible of Irina were two black plastic bags apparently drifting toward shore.

When Irina stepped from the water to the rocky place from where she had begun, shouts and sirens from police cars could be heard a half-mile down the beach. The searching light of a police boat scanned the water around the burning hulk.

Irina shed the SCUBA gear and wet suit, found the hidden duffel, changed into her clothes, wiped off the black grease paint and walked in darkness to the Jaguar. The action was on the beach and offshore at the sinking yacht. Some of the residents from the houses in the small neighborhood where she had parked walked to the sandy shore to watch the burning boat. Everyone was facing toward the water as Irina started the big V8 engine and drove slowly toward the 405 to return to San Diego for the night. With an early start tomorrow she would be in Las Vegas before noon.

Irina smiled. A contract fulfilled. A satisfied customer. An innocent girl spared. The saving of the girl's life was oddly gratifying. That was an unfamiliar emotion and outcome. She never considered whether her targets deserved to die. That was irrelevant. Someone wanted a target dead and paid to have Irina kill that target. They were business deals. Contracts. Fee for service. The mutual consideration in legal contract terms was that she provided a service for which the other party paid. There was one difference and all her clients knew one thing. Failure to pay breached the contract or revealing anything to anyone about Irina would result in immediate assassination of the client. Irina would learn the name of the client from her scheduler if needed. It was there the corollary to contract law ended.

TWO

The ancient Swiss-Italian convent of Catherine of Verona sat perched on a rocky redoubt overlooking the sprawling city of Zurich. The cloistered nuns lived in a series of connected stone buildings some of which dated to the 14th century. The convent had been financially troubled for years. The substantial gift from their young American visitor helped immensely.

She had lived with them and taught American English to the nuns and a few children of wealthy families who made the trek from the valley to the convent. Most of the nuns spoke some English and the other languages of Switzerland but learning the diction and vocabulary of American English was of particular interest and entertaining. The work as a teacher enabled the woman to afford assistance to the convent in addition to her gift of money and provided something to do. She learned French from Sister Louisa and found the language similar to Italian in its grammatical construction.

Twelve months earlier she arrived harried, frightened and wary of everyone. She came on foot, dropped a distance away by a taxi and walked the steep hill to the heavy wooden doors of the convent's outer wall. The young woman hoped passage within meant safety and privacy, the two things she valued most.

Once each month she made the drive in an old Fiat she purchased soon after her arrival to a bank on Betterivestrasse in Zurich to withdraw small amounts of money for living expenses from the numbered accounts left by her father. There were two accounts. One had a large sum of money. The other was tied to a safe deposit box filled with cash.

After nearly a year, she felt only slightly more relaxed and comfortable in Zurich but ventured into the city occasionally to spend time alone in the cafés, at concerts and in museums but always alone. Her rudimentary Italian learned from her family had its dialectical origins in Sicily. The Italian spoken in Switzerland was different but she picked it up quickly along with some German and French discovering she had an aptitude for languages. She had no friends and no acquaintances save the sisters who offered sanctuary and asked no questions. After solitary days roaming the city, she drove the old Fiat to the convent for the night. The monthly visits were never on the same day of the week and only approximately at a monthly interval. She avoided stopping at the same café. Twice, young men had pursued her at different cafés forcing her to quickly leave and drive with abandon back to the convent. Her only contact with the outside world was a laptop computer and satellite-linking device. With it, she kept abreast of events in America that might bear on her safety.

Anna Bianca Partanza, daughter of a murdered Mafia crime boss knew during the first visit to the bank and at the first opening of the large box that was brought for her private viewing that she must return to the United States. The hand written message she discovered in the box was perplexing but undeniable. It declared no deadline and the note was not dated. There was no way to know when it was slipped into the box. Anna realized from the words that waiting too long was a risk. People die. Things change. There was urgency.

The bank box contained fifty thousand dollars and forty-five thousand euros. It was from these funds that she withdrew her modest living expenses avoiding withdrawals from the larger account. The last item in the box was a gun. She stared at it each time she visited the box wondering why her father had placed it there.

Anna was living in the convent as Maria Benedetto from New Jersey. The Lady Abbess of the convent, Sister Souvane had accepted her but noticing the fear in her eyes she asked three questions when Maria arrived before granting permission to stay at the convent.

“Maria, have you committed a crime from which you are escaping?”

“No, Lady Abbess.” Maria breathed a nervous sigh.

“Do you believe in the God of the Catholic Bible?”

“Yes, Mother Abbess.” Maria nodded, her head down.

“Do you accept the saints of the church?”

Maria looked into the watery blue eyes of the elderly nun. “Yes, Lady Abbess.”

Anna had no documents with the name Maria Benedetto. Lady Abbess, Sister Souvane, did not ask to see them. Her passport in the name of Anna Bianca Partanza was hidden in the small chest of drawers among her clothing in her sparsely furnished cell. She needed false papers to re-enter her homeland as another person. Returning using her real name was a risk of unimaginable proportion and getting false papers with the name of Maria Benedetto was also a risk since all the sisters knew her by that name. That risk was to them, if anyone came for her. She felt fiercely protective of the women who lived apart from the outside world and had so easily and generously offered sanctuary.

And so, after months of furtively asking careful questions in cafés in the worst parts of the city, she found a man who said he knew a man who had a contact who would create the documents for €5,000. They would come from Russia, he confided but assured Maria they would pass American customs inspection.

Anna felt she was taking the second biggest gamble of her life. The biggest was traveling from Miami to Key West Florida to seek the aid of a retired policeman and restaurant owner by the name of Chance Colter to help her escape the Miami relatives who sought her death. The fact that she was alive was testament to that gamble paying off.

Anna waited a month for the completion of the false documents fearing her deposit had been lost or she would be arrested. Supplying the photo the passport seemed a risk in itself. For thirty days she hid in the convent without venturing to the city all but giving up hope they would come. Then one day a boy on a bicycle delivered a hand written message to the convent. He rapped on the big doors, shouting in French. “Sisters, I have a message for Maria Benedetto.” The note specified a time and place and on that day she drove the old Fiat into Zurich. With each step, at each corner, at every eye that noticed her she feared apprehension.

The man who met her in an expensive restaurant that she recognized by a blue necktie with gold stars stood as she approached the table. He was a tall, handsome man in his thirties and spoke with an accent she didn’t recognize. The several days’ growth of beard gave him a rough but popular look of men these days. The local Polizia Cantonale did not watch this restaurant like the cafés of her earlier forays seeking the false documents, he confided in accented Italian. After a few minutes of conversation and feigned laughter he slid the big envelope across the table as they dined on escargot,

mussels and drank expensive French Bordeaux. Maria picked at the food and sipped the wine without tasting it; so nervous was she of arrest.

By agreement she palmed him the second half of the money as they exchanged kisses to both cheeks upon leaving. The large envelope he gave her had the name of a tourist agency printed on one side and the documents were leafed into travel brochures. The man instructed her in the note before they met to remove a brochure or two and they would discuss sightseeing in the city.

Tucked in her purse as she climbed behind the wheel of the Fiat were a passport, birth certificate, Visa card, and driver's license in the name of Lizabetta Campania with an address in Las Vegas Nevada.

The next day Maria packed her few belongings, dressed in conservative business attire, her hair cut shorter by Sister Louisa and glanced around at the tiny cell that had been her home and sanctuary for twelve, lonely and fearful months. She was returning to the U.S. to face even greater fear and danger.

Sister Louisa knew how to drive. She sat silently in the passenger seat as Anna drove to the Zurich airport.

"Sister Louisa, drive the car back to the convent. If anything happens to it, do not worry. It's yours until I return. I'm not sure when that will be and although I have said goodbye to everyone, please thank Lady Abbess again for allowing me to stay with you."

Sister Louisa said. "Have a nice day. Don't do anything I wouldn't do. See ya later, bye-bye." She smiled sheepishly having used phrases Maria taught that Americans sometimes used when parting. Then, the small nun added. "Of course, Maria. I hope your return to America will ease the troubles on your soul. Please come back to us if only for a visit."

The flight from Zurich landed at Charles de Gaulle airport in Paris with a connecting flight to JFK in New York. For six hours Anna who lived for a year as Maria Benedetto, now Lizabetta Campania sat, or reclined, or stood, or paced the aisle without sleeping for one moment during the long flight across the Atlantic. The plane finally touched down in New York. Her first class seat was comfortable, the food edible and it got her off more quickly than coach passengers only to wait for her luggage for what seemed an eternity.

With hands shaking obviously, Lizabetta kept them moving or stuffed them into the pockets of her business suit jacket as she stood in line to the customs window. She felt she must look like one afflicted with Parkinson's disease so great was her anxiety as U.S. customs agents scrutinized her documents. But after a few seconds, she passed through and was safely back in her homeland. As a precaution, she had sewn her genuine passport and driver's license from Florida into the lining of the jacket in case the false passport was discovered and because she needed them to identify herself at her destination. At least she could prove her real identity if arrested. She imagined her pleading voice.

"People from my family are after me. They tried to kill me in Florida. I had no choice."

"And who is your family?"

"The Partanza's from here in New York."

Eyebrows would rise. "The Partanza crime family?"

Anna, arriving as Lizabetta, was back on American soil. It was in her mind, the most dangerous place in the world to be.

A separate flight carried her to Las Vegas in coach. The flight took on a party atmosphere as the flight attendants joked with passengers bound for the biggest and glitziest gambling city in the nation. "If you can't find whatever it is you're looking for in Las Vegas or the next county over, either it doesn't exist or you aren't trying," shouted a female flight attendant. Many laughed. She continued. "And if it doesn't exist, describe it and someone will invent it." More raucous laughter. "On the spot." Muted laughter. She overworked the joke but held her smile as she offered snacks for two dollars from a basket walking slowly down the aisle.

Lizabetta needed a rental car but had earlier decided to take a taxi to the Cromwell Hotel on the Strip. She arranged for a rental car to be brought to her at the hotel the day after tomorrow. The time zone changes and stress exhausted her. She needed a day to recover. Sleep on any of the flights was impossible. She couldn't stop imagining getting off the plane and having the same female assassin shoot her dead. The retired policeman, Chance Colter, had prevented her from being murdered. She owed him and although she thanked him for a last time in the small Key West airport, escaping was all she could think about that day when she fled her homeland for Europe.

The taxi line at McCarran airport in Las Vegas was longer than any she had ever experienced. It snaked around stanchions for a block. Eventually she sat in the backseat of a cab on the short ride to the hotel. A video promoting local hotels and advertising shows played on a viewer built into the back of the seat before her. As she glanced through the windows of the taxi, enormous billboards reprised the messages.

The hot desert sun was setting. The city was coming alive. Colored lights blinked, chased and shone everywhere by the millions it seemed. It was the most dazzling light show she had ever witnessed. As the taxi pulled up to the Cromwell under a canopy of more lights, she paid the driver, watched as a bellboy collected her luggage and entered the opulence of a posh Las Vegas hotel.

Anna had been left a lot of money by her father in the Swiss accounts. She could afford a nice hotel and the Cromwell was luxurious. Her Terrace Studio Suite was stunning. She had no interest in gambling or experiencing the nightlife of the hotel or the Strip. Although this was her first time in Las Vegas, she had one task to complete. The sooner she could slip back to Europe, the better. America was not a safe place.

One advantage to being in Las Vegas as opposed to many places was that so many people passed through the city, it was easy to be invisible. Anna recalled how different she had been as a twenty-one year old in Miami. She partied at South Beach clubs endlessly. She had a bodyguard. She was pampered. She wore, sexy, flashy and expensive clothes. As Anna Partanza she was visible and known. Then, everything changed. She was abruptly no longer the innocent, spoiled daughter of a wealthy Mafia boss, but a young American woman who had survived an assassination attempt by the other branch of the family and had lived in hiding for a year in the convent in Switzerland. Her new style was conservative, understated and inconspicuous. Anna as Lizabetta changed the color of her hair from black to auburn, sported the shorter cut from Sister Louisa that made her appear older than her twenty-two years, wore fake glasses and applied conservative makeup without the false eyelashes that she used to love to wear in Miami. Her business suit was navy blue and nondescript. Instead of her favored red or fuchsia four-inch heels, she wore simple black flats. Her naturally tawny complexion needed no stockings.

The message in the bank box that had brought her back to the U.S. was to her father. Someone she had never heard of named Madeleine placed the message in the big steel box for her father to find. She was someone to whom her father had given access and that suggested she was important to him. Who was Madeleine?

Anna's Uncle Niccolo had her father assassinated to assure his complete control over the Partanza family's legal and illegal businesses. He killed her father before he could travel again to Switzerland, discover the message and act on it. The secrecy of the account, the message and the woman named Madeleine caused Anna to wonder if she really had known her father. He often traveled to Europe when she was young on what he called business trips but that was all he said about his absences. Sometimes he was gone for several weeks. Now it was up to her to seek an explanation of the cryptic message.

Anna recalled the undated note's words written in a neat, feminine hand.

*Paolo,
Find Joseph Martini, Boulder City.
That's near Las Vegas in your state of Nevada.
I know he left you and the business of your family.
Do not harm him, Paolo.
He wrote to me of his fear of you and the others.
He will instruct you how to find me. I sent him a letter.
I dare not reveal it here.
You must find her. You must save her! She was taken.
You will know her, Paolo.
Her name is Bernadette.
Please, Paolo, I beg you. Do this for us.
I cannot, as you know. Then come for me.
We will finally be together.
All my love,*

Madeleine

Anna had no idea who the person to be found was or what the message meant. Many times she dismissed the message as irrelevant. Why risk going back to the U.S.? The Partanza family was alive and well in New York even though her evil Uncle Niccolo had died in a freak accident in the Miami mansion shortly after her escape from Florida. This she had discovered in a newspaper article on the Internet. They might yet want her eliminated. She knew too much about the family. But the message tormented and pulled her like a magnet to Las Vegas. In the end, she knew she had to learn its meaning. Perhaps unraveling that mystery would provide understanding into the secret life of her father.

Anna as Lizabetta waited patiently while the porter explained where everything was located in the suite. He went over room service and the amenities in the hotel. Eventually he stopped and smiled. She handed him money. Mercifully, he left. Anna dropped face up onto the bed after locking the door and drawing the drapes. Within minutes she was asleep.

She awoke several hours later less because she was rested than because she was famished. There had been food on the plane from Paris but that seemed like yesterday.

Myriad information about the hotel and the city was promoted in a stack of brochures artfully fanned on the coffee table. The bound book of the hotel's offerings was on top. Anna scanned the available restaurants. There was an unbelievable thirteen. She selected Poco Capello, featuring Italian cuisine. Poco capello she recalled meant 'little hat' in Italian. Reservations were recommended. Her call to the restaurant suggested that she could still be seated if she could arrive in ten minutes. The clock near the bed read 9:50 PM.

The restaurant was amazing. The food and wine were excellent and the atmosphere was warm and inviting. It was nearing 11:30 PM when Anna dropped into bed. She was happy to have tomorrow free to sleep in, get rested and prepare herself for the strange adventure to follow. For the first time since arriving on U.S. soil she felt safe. "I made it," she whispered. "Who are you Bernadette?" She mumbled as she drifted to sleep on satin sheets.

THREE

“This it?”

“Number’s right. Thirty-eight Edgewater Road.”

“No sign.”

“Not open.”

The door was unlocked. They walked in.

A beautiful mixed race woman rose from behind a bar to one side. “Not open yet, guys. Come back in two days.”

The two men glanced at the piles of boxes on the floor. Pickler said. “Think you’ll make it?”

Tika wiped her brow with a wrist. “It’s in the paper and on local cable TV. No choice.”

Chance Colter appeared from a hall carrying a case of vodka, noticed the two men and set it on the bar.

“Should be another case of gin and one of whiskey back there, Chance,”

Tika said.

“I’ll look again,” Colter replied. Then he turned to the two men. “What does the FBI want?”

The men exchanged a look. The taller one blinked and said, “I’m Special Agent Dumont and this is Special Agent Pickler. Are you Chance Colter?” He gave Colter an inquiring stare.

Colter nodded with a smirk. “The wool suits and boring ties. You guys never dress for the climate. CIA spooks? Never spot ‘em. Always blend right in. It must be ninety-five degrees out there with humidity to match. You fly in from DC?”

Dumont said, “Minneapolis, your old stomping ground.”

“Cool summer in Minneapolis? I haven’t paid attention.”

“Than here,” Pickler said, wiping his brow.

“Field office in Atlanta provide the wheels?” Colter looked through the big window overlooking the street.

Dumont nodded. “Yes.”

“We’re busy. What’s up?” Colter asked.

“Is there someplace we can talk for a few minutes?” Dumont asked.

“Here,” Colter said.

Dumont and Picker exchanged another look. “Someplace more private?” Dumont asked. “What we need to discuss with you is...” Dumont worked to finish the thought.

Colter nodded at two barstools and sat in another. “This is my wife, Tika. There is nothing you have to say to me that she won’t hear.”

Dumont took a breath. “Okay.”

Picker said. “Chuck, maybe...”

Dumont raised a hand to his partner. “You heard the man. You read the file.”

Colter said, "Of course. A file."

Dumont slid over a stool. Pickler followed. Dumont said, "You were in law enforcement for twenty years, give or take in Minneapolis. An unblemished record until the end. Then, you were exonerated. It all worked out. Got your pension reinstated. Well, most of it."

Pickler smirked and said with a hint of sarcasm, "Back in good graces?"

Colter turned from Pickler to Dumont who appeared senior to Pickler. "See some ID and cards?"

"Sure," Dumont said, nodding to Pickler. They fished out their badges and laid business cards on the bar.

Colter scrutinized them. "Charles Dumont and Vincent Pickler. Okay, Special Agent Dumont, please continue."

Dumont cleared his throat. "We know that during your career you worked with our people a number of times on different cases. High marks for collaboration. That's why we were assigned instead of agents from headquarters in DC. So, I'm not going to go over the basics or past history." Dumont glanced at Tika. "Mrs. Colter, you need to understand that what I'm going to say is privileged information."

Tika said, "I've always felt special."

Colter grinned.

Dumont's face reddened. "Here it is. We believe a contract assassin has been working in this country for at least a decade. Recent snippets of cell phone interceptions have reinforced that view. The communications have not been identified as the assassin's directly. It has been from individuals who have hired him or were contacted for logistical support."

"What exactly does logistical support mean?" Colter asked.

Dumont shrugged. "Providing weapons generally but lately it's been different. I'd call it research."

"Tried to get one through an airport lately?" Pickler asked.

"A gun?" Colter asked wondering if Pickler was keeping up with Dumont's train of thought.

Dumont continued. "We know some of what happened in Key West. We were watching the Partanza crime family's activities in Miami and knew they were involved with something on the Key. We believe the assassin was hired to kill a Partanza family member there.

This assassin is extremely cautious, has never killed anyone that would raise a lasting flag with law enforcement at the local level. The assassin never has killed a government official, a law enforcement person or anyone that would get us involved or keep local cops looking for long." Dumont shrugged. "We think. Many of the hits have been well disguised as accidents or deaths from natural causes we also believe. Easy for local cops to accept those conclusions and avoid cold cases. Some have been of criminals that local law enforcement was happy to have gone."

"Which means the Bureau is guessing about the assassin." Colter said.

Dumont nodded. "Up to recently. Our profilers have discovered a pattern that has, well, gotten the attention of the higher ups in the Bureau. Not a ten-most-wanted, but someone we want to stop. This person may have killed hundreds of people. We don't know."

“A pattern that took ten years to spot? Why am I not impressed?” Colter said.

Dumont stiffened. “Look Colter...” Then he relaxed, adopting an easy smile. “We believe you have seen this man in Key West and can identify him.

Colter looked into Dumont’s eyes. “Woman. Not a man.”

Dumont and Pickler sat straighter. Dumont exclaimed. “A woman?”

“How can you be certain?” Asked Pickler.

“Because I shot her four times in the back and she was shot in the shoulder from the front by the young woman Tika and I had agreed to protect from the Partanza family and help escape.” Colter glanced from Dumont to Pickler and to Tika who offered no interpretable expression. “I thought she was dead. No pulse. Bleeding profusely from the shoulder wound. But she was wearing a vest. The only thing I can believe that makes sense is that her heart stopped temporarily when she hit the floor hard face down. She was technically dead when I checked her. Later, after I got the girl on a plane out of Key West, I returned but the assassin was gone.”

“Anna Partanza. She was the young woman. After you aided her in her escape from Key West she left the country. Our interest stops at the border but Interpol tracked her in Switzerland where she lived and hid for about a year in a convent near Zurich. Had to be some family millions stashed away at one or more of those little boutique banks in Switzerland. She changed identities. Obtained false papers. That’s what got Interpol interested. We picked her up coming through customs at JFK on a passport with Las Vegas as her residence, living at 3875 Cactus Lane. We checked. It’s a parking lot. She’ll be in Las Vegas soon. Caught a flight from JFK to Glitter Gulch arriving later today. She’s in the air as we speak. Staying at the Cromwell but we don’t know for how long or why she’s there. Room 1712, assuming she didn’t change rooms or hotels. We don’t care about the money in Switzerland. The money was no doubt laundered but all the principals in the Partanza family who might have been arrested for tax evasion are dead or in jail,” Dumont said.

“RICO,” Pickler said. “Your remember, Colter. The Racketeer Influenced And Corrupt Organizations Act enabled us to get convictions of groups such as entire crime families and the Mafia in general, beyond individuals.”

“Great story, guys. We won’t tell a soul. Thanks for stopping by.” Colter stood.

Dumont and Pickler remained seated. Dumont said. “We want you to find and neutralize the assassin.”

Colter glanced at the two men. “Neutralize? No. In case you didn’t know, murder is illegal in this country. Do the higher ups know you guys are here or is this something you two cooked up on your own?”

Dumont glanced at Pickler then looked directly at Colter. “If you’re asking if anyone in the Bureau will own this, the answer is no.”

“If she has become a thorn in your side, why not just do what the FBI does and find her? Why ask me, a private citizen?”

“It may come to that,” Dumont said.

“The assassin has no identity. She disappears...” Pickler shrugged. “Come on Colter, you know how it works. Just don’t leave the body on the highway with a sign that reads: “Dead Assassin pinned to her chest. Burn anything that looks like identity documents.”

“I don’t kill people...anymore. I’ve changed jobs. The answer is still no,” Colter said.

Dumont looked at Colter, a smile crept over his face and he shot a telling glance at Pickler. “If that were all, I’d say no, too.” He reached into the jacket breast pocket, retrieved an envelope, removed a folded piece of paper and offered it to Colter but held it by a corner. He looked at Tika. “Forget he saw this. Forget you saw he saw this.” Dumont released the paper.

Colter glanced down the copy. Most of it was blacked out but what was there for him to read caused his eyebrows to shoot skyward.

Tika noticed. “What is it Chance? Don’t scare me like this. I can peel your eyebrows from the ceiling.”

Dumont said, “I’ll need that back,” as Colter handed it to Tika. A hand covered her mouth as she read and reread. Dumont reached out. She limply offered the paper back and stared at Colter.

“My God, Chance, she’s coming for you.”

Dumont held up a finger. “After the Partanza woman. We’re confident you’re number two. That’s why you have to get her before she comes for you. She won’t be expecting you to show up. Do you really want to wait and hope you can spot her, put your wife’s life in danger?” Dumont took a breath. “We can’t offer you protection, Colter. We can’t put you in a witness protection program. You’re not a witness. We can’t even go and find her because we don’t know what she looks like. Hell, Colter we thought she was a he.” Dumont cleared his throat. “We could put agents in the field with you. You spotted us the minute we walked in the door. She probably would, too. This assassin has been completely invisible for more than a decade. He’s...she’s not stupid or careless. We’re of no help unless she...” Dumont looked away.

“Unless she kills me and you move her to the ten most wanted list.” Colter dropped his head. “Unbelievable.”

“You know she can get to you sometime, somewhere,” Pickler said. “You don’t have a choice. Save the Partanza woman if you can but take the assassin out.”

Dumont said. “You’re not hard to find here, Colter. The two of you on local TV. Nice article in the Savannah Sun for the restaurant opening. I read the press release about The Silver Magnolia’s grand opening in two days.” He looked around. “It’s a classy place.”

Colter looked up at Dumont, visibly shaken. “Why did Anna come back and why Las Vegas? Why not stay invisible in Europe?”

Dumont shrugged. “Ask her. I’d like to know, too.”

“If you can get to her before the assassin,” Pickler said through a smirk.

Colter shifted his stare from Pickler to Dumont. He was an instant away from decking Pickler. He took a steadying breath. “Any idea when she is planning the hit in Las Vegas?”

Dumont shook his head. “Can’t be certain. The paper you both read was from transcripts compiled as recently as yesterday.”

“Guess.”

“Within the week. Not likely longer,” Dumont said.

Pickler said with a smirk that seemed permanent. “Call your wife. She can tell you how the grand opening went. From Vegas.”

Colter was off the bar stool but Dumont stepped between him and Pickler. Dumont handed Colter another piece of paper. "As my partner alluded, not easy to get a gun on a plane. Call this number when you get to Vegas. Weapons have been arranged for you. Bury them in the desert when you're through."

"Deep," Pickler added.

Dumont and Pickler stood. "Don't bother to call the Bureau. Don't cry for help. We never had this meeting," Dumont said. "We are who we say we are but there is no record of us being here. Officially, we were somewhere else today."

Pickler smiled. "Have a nice flight, Colter. Tonight. Nice meeting you, Mrs. Colter. I hope the opening goes well." He glanced around. "It's a great looking place." They turned to leave.

Colter asked Dumont. "You paying for the flight?"

He shook his head. "That would leave a paper trail."

Pickler said. "In your dreams." He glanced around at the restaurant décor. "If you didn't blow it all on this place, you can afford it. Besides, you're saving your own skin. You should thank us."

Dumont pushed Pickler away. "That's enough, Vince."

The pair continued walking toward the door.

"Wait." Colter said. "How will you know if I was successful?"

Pickler shrugged. "If you're here in seven days, you were. If you're not, you weren't."

Dumont said. "You own a digital camera or does your phone take pictures?"

Colter nodded.

"Get a picture of her dead or alive. Nobody knows what she looks like except you," Dumont said and walked back to Colter to hand him a card. "Memorize that number. Destroy the card. Call it only if you have no choice. Not connected to the Bureau in any way. Not an extraction team. A person I know in Vegas. That's all I can say."

Pickler's eyebrows rose as the pair turned again to leave The Silver Magnolia. He whispered to Dumont. "What person?"

"Wait. What name is Anna using?" Colter said.

Dumont said. "Sorry. Lizabetta Campana on her passport through customs but she was using the name of Maria Benedetto in Switzerland according to Interpol. Those are the two we've determined. She might have more than one set of false documents. Interpol couldn't be certain." Dumont shrugged. "This was a low level intercept for them. She's not a likely terrorist."

Pickler added. "She must look very Italian to use those names or not too bright."

Colter and Tika stared at one another in disbelief after Dumont and Pickler left.

"If you don't come back to me, Chance, in one piece, I will personally kill you."

Colter shook his head. "I'm a retired cop or at least I thought I was. The only good thing that came out of Key West was you."

"We can put off the opening. I can come with you."

"Babe. Until I finish this, wherever I am is where you can't be. I won't risk your life. The minute I'm gone, you're safe."

"That's crazy. I've always been safer with you than anywhere, Chance."

"Not this time, babe. Not this time."

Tika let out a breath, her eyes glistening with tears. “Find her. Kill her and end this forever.”

Colter fished in his pocket for his cell phone, called the number on the business card from Dumont. After a few minutes of routing he confirmed the existence of both Dumont and Pickler as Special Agents of the FBI.

Colter drummed his fingers on the bar. “She saw me in Key West twice. Once was at the Yellow Parrot Restaurant and Bar and once for an instant as I shot her in your apartment. She saw Anna Bianca Partanza there and had to have a dossier with photos of her but she only saw me those two times. If she’s any good with facial recognition, she’ll spot me and she’ll spot Anna Bianca even if in disguise. But she only had the two quick glimpses of me. I have to spot her first.” Colter’s face twisted with disdain.

“What? What,” Tika said.

“Despite what I said spotting them walking in, they will probably have an agent undercover birddogging me, at least for a couple of days. What they want most is a picture of her. An image they can send to local law enforcement. A poster they can put on billboards. Then, if I’m killed they have a chance of catching her. They want an arrest and conviction. I’m bait.”

Tika’s expression shifted to terrified. “Are you telling me Chance they expect you to be assassinated so they can get a picture of this woman? They’ll have an agent watching you but who won’t help you?”

“Bear in mind, if you remember what Dumont said, the Bureau doesn’t know what she’s done or for how long. They assumed she was a man. Without evidence, they can’t connect her with any crime. Little the FBI does well works here. They have no one to interview, no cell to penetrate, no DNA or blood evidence, no offshore money trail, no communications with the voice of the assassin. They have nothing but an algorithm that samples cell phone traffic that suggested some vague unsubstantiated pattern and profilers that connected dots that make little sense. Right now she would literally have to walk in the door of the FBI and confess. The FBI is not going to assign many resources to this. I could give their artists a vague description but she was in some level of disguise in Key West. Not too useful. Until I spot her and she takes an action that is illegal...”

“Like killing you?” Tika said.

“That would work but that’s not my plan.”

“You have a plan?”

Colter nodded. “Spot her before she spots me and take her out. Simple.” Colter was thinking it was anything but simple but he didn’t want Tika to go nuts on him.