



DIRTY MARTINI by J.A. Konrath. Copyright ©2007 by J.A. Konrath. Available in paperback and hardcover by Hyperion Books, and on CD, MP3, and cassette by Brilliance Audio, wherever books are sold. All Rights Reserved. Unauthorized reproduction or distribution will result in a stern lecture. This version probably contains typos. Boy, this is tiny print.

Dirty Martini

2 oz Vodka

1 tbsp Dry Vermouth

2 tbsp Olive Juice

2 Olives

Fill a mixer with all ingredients including garnish.
Cover and shake hard 3 - 4 times. Strain contents
into a cocktail glass.

Prologue

No security cameras this time, but he still has to be careful. The smaller the store, the more likely he'll be remembered.

He's dressed for the part. The mustache is fake. So is the shoulder length hair. His facial jewelry is all clip-on, including the nose ring and the lip ring, and his combat boots have lifts in them, adding almost three inches to his height. He's wearing a *Guns 'N' Roses* Tee that he picked up at a thrift shop for a quarter, under a red flannel shirt that cost little more. The long sleeves hide the tube.

When they interview witnesses later, they'll remember his costume, but not his features.

He picked a good time of day—the store is busy. The woman behind the counter is speaking German with one of the patrons, three people in line behind her. To the left, an old lady is pushing a small cart, scrutinizing some imported canned goods. In the rear of the store, a fat man is picking up a .5 liter bottle of Weinstephaner beer.

At the deli section, he finds the cooler with the fresh fruit. Pretending as if he's trying to decide, he eventually picks up a red apple.

He cradles the fruit in his left hand, avoiding the use of his fingertips. Palmed in his right hand, attached to the tube that runs up his sleeve, is the jet injector. It's four inches long, shaped like a miniature hot glue gun. He touches the orifice to the surface of the apple. Pulls the trigger.

There's a brief hissing sound, lasting a fraction of a second. He puts the apple back and selects another, repeating the process.

Pssssssttttt.

After doing four pieces of fruit and a plastic container of yogurt, the jet injector needs to be armed again—something that will attract attention. He leaves the deli without buying

anything, stepping out onto Irving Park Road and into the pedestrian traffic.

Ethnic stores are easy. He's already done a supermarket in Chinatown, contaminating some star fruit and dried fish, and a Polish butcher shop on the West Side, injecting almost the entire stock of kielbasa. In Wrigleyville he visited a large chain grocery store, and made quick work of some apples, pears, and packages of ground beef, mindful to keep his head lowered so the security cameras didn't get any good facial shots. Just south of Chicago's Magnificent Mile he paid for admission to the Art Institute and spent thirty minutes in the cafeteria, using his jet injector on practically everything—cartons of milk, juice boxes, fruit, candy bars—and when the clerk turned her head he sprayed a cloud burst into the nozzles of the soda pop machine.

He has two stops left; an all-you-can-eat buffet on Halsted, and another grocery store on the North Side. Then he's done.

For today.

Tomorrow he has another eight stores picked out, news permitting. The incubation period is anywhere from a few hours to a few days. There's a chance people will get sick sometime tonight. Paralysis is terrifying, and once it begins, the infected will rush to the hospital. Diagnosis isn't easy, but the agent will eventually be discovered. Then the alphabets will be notified; the CDC, WHO, FBI, CPD.

If the panic spreads ahead of schedule, he'll have to move up with the Plan and do the second round in a different way.

It will be interesting to see how things turn out.

He heads down Lincoln, stopping in a fast food chain. In the bathroom he detaches the injector from the tube, placing it in his pocket. He washes his hands with soap and holds them under the air drier, which is labeled *For Your Sanitary Protection*. This prompts a smile. When he's finished, he removes a moistened alcohol towelette and goes over his hands again.

At the counter, he orders a burger and fries, and eats while surreptitiously watching the kids frolic in the indoor playland.

Children's parks are a cesspool of germs. All that open-mouthed coughing and sneezing, all those sticky fingers wiping noses and then touching the slides, the ladders, the bin of a thousand plastic balls, each other. It's practically a hot zone.

When he finishes eating, he returns to the bathroom, attaches the jet injector to the tube

running up his sleeve, and lightly shakes the cylinder strapped to his waist under his shirt.

There's plenty left.

He arms the injector using the key to torque back the spring, and walks out of the washroom over to the cubby where a dozen pairs of brightly colored kids' shoes lay in wait. Getting down on one knee, he pretends he's tying a lace.

Instead, he injects the rubber soles of five different shoes.

A small child pokes him from behind.

"That's my shoe."

He smiles at the boy. "I know. It fell on the floor. Here you go."

The child takes the shoe, switches it to his other hand, and wipes his nose with his palm.

"Thanks," says the boy.

The man stands up, winks, and heads north on Lincoln to catch the bus to the all-you-can-eat buffet.

Chapter 1

Three Days Later

“Is that a real gun?”

The little girl probably wasn't much older than five, but I'm not good with children's ages. She pointed at my shoulder holster, visible as I leaned into my shopping cart to hand a bag of apples to the cashier.

“Yes, it is. I'm a cop.”

“You're a girl.”

“I am. So are you.”

The child frowned. “I know that.”

I looked around for her mother, but didn't see anyone nearby who fit the profile.

“Where's Mommy?” I asked her.

She gave me a very serious face. “Over by the coffee.”

“Let's go find her.”

I told the teenaged cashier I'd be a moment. He shrugged. The little girl held out her hand. I took it, surprised by how small it felt. When was the last time I'd held a child's hand?

“Did you ever shoot anyone?” she asked.

From the mouths of babes.

“Only criminals.”

“Did they die?”

“No. I've been lucky.”

Her eyebrows crunched up, and she pursed her tiny lips.

“Criminals are bad people.”

“Yes, they are.”

“Shouldn’t they die?”

“Every life is important,” I said. “Even the lives of bad people.”

A woman, thirties, rushed out into the main isle and searched left, then right, locking onto the girl.

“Melinda! What did I tell you about wandering off!”

She was on us in three steps. Melinda released my hand and pointed at me.

“I’m okay, Mommy. She’s got a gun.”

The mother looked at me and turned a shade of white appropriate for snowmen. I dug into my pocket for my badge case.

“Lieutenant Jack Daniels.” I showed her the gold star and my ID. “You’ve got a cute daughter.”

Her face went from fraught to relieved. “Thanks. Sometimes I think she needs a leash. Do you have kids?”

“No.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it again. I watched her puzzle out what to say next.

“Nice to meet you, Ma’am,” I said in my cop voice. Then I went back to my groceries. An elderly man, who’d gotten into the check-out line behind me, gave me a look I usually received from felons I’d busted.

“It’s about goddamn time,” he said.

“Police business,” I told him, flashing my star again. Then I made a show of looking into his cart. “Sir, this lane is for ten items or less. I’m counting thirteen items in your cart, including that hemorrhoid cream. And while hemorrhoids might give you a reason to be nasty, they don’t give you a reason to be in this lane.”

He scowled, used a five letter word to express his opinion of people with two X chromosomes, and then wheeled his cart away.

Chicago. My kind of town.

I really missed living here.

Shopping in the suburbs was cheaper, less crowded, closer to home, and no one ever called me names. I tried it once, at a 300,000 square foot supermarket that sold 47 different varieties of potatoes and had carts with little video monitors that broadcast commercials and spit

out coupons. Never again.

You can take the girl out of the city, but you can't take the city out of the girl.

I finished paying for my ten items or less and then left the grocery store. The weather hung in the mid sixties, cloudy, cool for June. My car, an aging Chevy Nova that didn't befit a woman of my stature or my style, was parked just up the street, next to a fire hydrant. I stuck my bags in the trunk, took a big gulp of wonderfully smoggy city air, and then started the beast and headed for the Eisenhower to battle rush hour traffic.

"Four more dead, bringing the death toll up to nine. Hundreds more botulism cases have been confirmed, and a city-wide panic has..."

I switched the radio station to an oldies channel, and let Roger Daltrey serenade me through the stop-and-go.

It took an hour to get to the house. It never took less.

By my rough calculation, I was averaging ten hours a week driving to and from work, so if I retired in ten years, I will have wasted over five thousand hours—two hundred days—in the car.

But, on the bright side, I had a big back yard that demanded to be mowed, trees that needed trimming, a clothes dryer in need of repair, a hole in the driveway, mice in the attic, a loose railing on the stairs, water damage in the basement, and flaking paint in the bedroom.

Lately, my sexual fantasies revolved around once again having a landlord. Looks, age, and hygiene didn't matter, as long as he had a tool belt and said, "Don't worry, I'll fix it."

Being a homeowner sucked. Though technically, I wasn't a homeowner. Chicago cops were required to live within the city limits, so the house was in my mother's name. While far from feeble, Mom had recently had some medical problems, and we decided that it would be best if she moved in with me. She agreed, but insisted we buy a house in the suburbs. "Where it is less hectic," she'd said.

As far as the city knew, I still had my apartment in Wrigleyville. A dangerous game to play, but I wasn't the first cop to play it.

I exited the expressway onto Elmhurst Road, drove past several tiny strip malls—or perhaps it was one giant strip mall—and turned down a side street festooned with eighty-year-old oak and elm trees. There weren't any street lights, and the cloudy day and abundant foliage

made it look like dusk, even though dusk was an hour away. I pulled into the driveway, pressed the garage door opener, pressed it again, pressed it one more time, said some bad words, then got out of the car.

The suburbs smelled different than the city. Woodsy. Secluded. Clean and safe.

I hated the suburbs.

I lugged the groceries to the front door, set them on the porch, reached for my keys, and froze.

The new door I recently had installed—a security door made of reinforced aluminum with the pick-proof deadbolt that I always made sure was locked tight—was yawning wide open.

Chapter 2

Cop mode took over. My mother, the apple of my eye who'd guilting me into buying this suburban hell-house, was visiting friends in Florida and wouldn't be back for another week. Latham, my boyfriend, had a key, but he also had a car, which wasn't parked in the driveway or on the street.

Several times in my professional past, people had figured out where I lived. Bad people. Which is how I let my mom convince me to move to the middle of a forest preserve.

I set down the bags and opened my purse, removing my .38 Colt Detective Special, using a two handed grip, elbows bent, barrel pointing skyward. I nudged the door open with my shoulder, holding my breath, trying to listen. The hardwood floor my mother adored squeaked like a tortured squirrel with every step I took. A male voice came from deep inside the bowels of the house.

“Debemos cantar algo más...”

I considered my options. My radio was in the car. Cell phone was in my pocket, but 911 would take a few minutes to respond.

“Dios mio!”

From behind. I spun, dropping to one knee, hearing and then feeling my Donna Karan skirt tear, drawing a bead on a chubby Mexican man in a full red and gold mariachi uniform, complete with sombrero and oversized guitar.

“Jack!”

I ascertained that the mariachi wasn't an immediate threat, turned toward the other voice, and saw Latham standing in the hallway, wearing a tuxedo.

“Jesus!” I said, hissing out a breath.

Latham smiled. “Don't shoot them until after you've heard them play.”

I holstered my gun, Latham came over to help me off my knee, but somehow he wound up on his.

“Latham, what are...”

Guitars began to play, and two more mariachis joined their friend next to the breakfront. Latham dug into his tux jacket, coming out with a jewelry box. His red hair was combed back, but a lock of it curled down his forehead. His green eyes were glinting.

“Jacqueline Daniels, I love you more than I’ve ever loved anything in my entire life.”

Oh my God.

He was proposing.

I had a huge rip in my skirt. I bet my hair was a mess. Did my make-up look okay? I hadn’t checked it in hours.

“I want you to be my wife. I promise I’ll do everything within my power to make you the happiest woman on the planet. Jacqueline Margaret Daniels, will you marry me?”

He looked so damn cute, his eyes all glassy, a goofy smile on his face, that dumb music playing behind us.

Then he held out the ring, and I started to cry. A solitaire diamond, shining like it had batteries, exactly the kind of ring I’d always dreamed of having.

He took my left hand, went to put the ring on.

I pulled away.

His cute face crumpled.

“I’ve thought it all out, Jack. I know you’ve been burned by marriage before. And I know you just moved here, and you aren’t going to abandon your mother. We have time to work all of that out. I’m not setting a date. I just want... need... the commitment.”

For some insane reason, I thought about the little girl at the supermarket, and how right it felt to hold her hand. What are you thinking, Jack? You’re forty-six years old. You can’t possibly...

My cell phone rang once. Twice. Three times.

“Are you going to get that?” Latham asked.

Shit. I dug the phone out and slapped it to my face.

“Daniels.” I turned to the mariachi band and yelled, “Shhh!”

“This is the Superintendent’s Office. She’s called an emergency meeting. You need to get to police headquarters immediately.”

The secretary broke the connection. Latham knelt patiently at my feet. To our left, three fat mariachis waited expectantly. I felt like a spotlight had come on and I’d forgotten my lines.

“You have to go,” Latham said.

“Latham—”

“It’s okay. Go ahead.” He smiled, and the smile was so pure, so genuine, it broke my heart.

Then he put the ring back in its little red box, and my heart broke a second time.

“I’ll be here when you get back,” he said. “Do you mind?”

I reached out a hand and touched his freshly shaven cheek.

“Of course I don’t mind. I love you. I just—”

He stood up, kissed me, and the mariachis broke into song. I’d never kissed a guy with a band playing back-up music, and I found it incredibly stupidly romantic and more than a little exciting. My hips touched his, and he slipped his hand down the small of my back and pulled me even closer. It had been about a week since I’d had sex, and I moaned a little in my throat, arousal flushing through me like a drug. Then the lovely guitar strumming was replaced by screams of pain and terror.

My unfriendly cat, Mr. Friskers, had wrapped himself around one of the mariachi’s heads like a face-hugger from the movie *Alien*. He did this often enough that we kept a loaded squirt gun in the refrigerator. Latham jogged off to get it, and I tried to explain to the mariachis that pulling wasn’t going to work, because the cat just dug in harder.

They tried to pull anyway.

Mariachi blood flowed.

Latham came back with the squirt gun and some paper towels, apologizing profusely in bad Spanish. After the first spritz, Mr. Friskers fell to the floor, hissed at Latham, and then bounded off down the hallway.

The mariachi escaped with both eyes still in their sockets, but his mustache was dangling at an odd angle. His bandmates found this amusing enough to spur them into giggling fits.

“Go save the city,” Latham said, pressing a paper towel to the bleeding singer’s face,

“We’ll talk later.”

“Are you sure?”

He winked at me. “Go on. I have to find the rest of this guy’s mustache anyway.”

“Thanks,” I said, though it felt like spoiled milk in my mouth.

“Call me before you get home. I’m cooking dinner. German.”

My favorite kind of food. I felt like a super jumbo cowardly jerk.

I walked out the door, past the grocery bags I’d left on the porch, and climbed into my car. In the driver seat, head buzzing, I stared at the large tear in my skirt but found myself unable to go back into the house to change. I couldn’t face Latham.

He deserved so much better than me.

I pulled out of the driveway, thinking about my rocky relationship with the world’s most adorable accountant, Latham Conger. He was my age, attractive, intelligent, caring, good in bed, and the most patient and forgiving person I’d ever met. In all the fairy princess fantasies I’d die before admitting I had, he perfectly fit the role of Prince Charming.

Unfortunately the fairy princess fantasy didn’t mesh well with the veteran city cop reality.

The Ike got me back into Chicago in an hour and some change.

Police Headquarters was located in a sprawling 400,000 square foot building on 35th and Michigan. The lobby, like the exterior, was a mixture of orangish brown and off-white. Lots of tile. Lots of florescent light. It reminded me of a hospital.

My partner, Sergeant Herb Benedict, was pacing the hallway in front of the Super’s door. Herb was ten years my senior, and twice my weight, and he sported a walrus mustache and hound dog jowls. Worried wasn’t a look that Herb wore often, but at that moment he looked positively distraught.

“Been in there yet?” I asked.

“Waiting for you. What happened to your skirt?”

I resisted the urge to smooth a hand over the tear.

“It’s the new look. All the kids are doing it. Know what’s going on?”

Herb shook his head, three chins jiggling.

“No. But it’s big.”

“You okay?” I asked. The bags under his eyes seemed darker than normal.

“Yeah. Why?”

“You seem kind of preoccupied.”

“So do you.”

We exchanged a look that promised we’d talk later, and went into the office.

There were three people in the room. Superintendent Terry O’Loughlin—newly appointed by the mayor—was someone whom I hadn’t had a chance to meet yet, but whose reputation was well known. Behind her back, cops called her OTB, *one tough broad*. She’d forsaken her public appearance dress blues for a red pantsuit that looked like it came off the rack at Sears, and fit about as well. Subtle make-up, brown hair cropped short, and a wedding ring that looked to be cutting off the circulation to her chubby finger.

Captain Bains, my boss, stood next to her desk. Bains resembled a short, fat, unattractive version of Burt Reynolds, down to the jet black hairpiece that didn’t match the gray in his mustache.

The third man was someone I didn’t know. Tall. Blondish. Sort of geeky looking, but dressed sharp. Before anyone had a chance to say word one, geeky guy was crossing the room toward me, his hand out in front of him.

“Lieutenant Daniels.” His shake was moist but aggressive, and he repeated it with Herb. “I’m Davy Ellis, of Ellis, Dickler, and Scaramouche. Call me Davy.”

“Lawyer?” Herb asked.

“We’re a public relations firm currently working with the city of Chicago to boost the image of the police department.”

I glanced at Bains, who gave me a curt nod but no explanation. What the hell was going on here?

“Lt. Daniels.” Superintendent O’Loughlin stood up and extended her hand. She wasn’t much taller standing than sitting. We shook, and her grip was stronger than Davy’s. “I’m glad you’ve finally graced us with your presence. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“Car trouble.” I lied. “The pleasure is mine, Superintendent.”

She did the shaking thing with Herb, and then we were instructed to sit. Bains joined us. Davy remained standing.

The Super pushed a piece of paper across her desk. “My office received a letter this afternoon, addressed to me.”

Herb and I leaned forward and read.

I am the one spreading the botulism toxin. I've visited eight places so far. The last was a deli on Irving Park. You will agree to pay me two million dollars, or my next target will kill hundreds of people.

This isn't terrorism. I'm not some dumb Islamic fundamentalist. I'm a venture capitalist. I'm investing in fear and death. Pay me or I'll branch out.

Take out an ad in the Saturday Sun-Times in the personals and say "Chemist-the answer is yes."

You'll hear from me soon.

To prove I am who I say I am, this paper has been coated with BT.

Even though I could see the photocopy smudges, I suddenly wanted to distance myself from the paper. Botulism had been the top story for the last two days. The quick and deadly effects of the disease were terrifying.

“There was a powdery residue in the envelope with the letter,” the Super said. “The secretary who opened it is at Rush-Presbyterian. She tested positive for botulism toxin. Three other people at the First District came into contact with the letter. So far they're asymptomatic, but they're being treated with anti-toxin and remain under observation.”

Herb also seemed uncomfortable being so close to the note.

“I heard on the news there are nine dead so far,” he said.

The Super's mouth became a grim line. “The number is actually thirty-two, with over six hundred confirmed cases. We haven't released the figures. The CDC, WHO, and USAMRIID have been notified, but everyone else is still under the impression that this is a naturally occurring outbreak, not a terrorist act.”

My mind harkened back to the Anthrax scares after 9/11. The paranoia. The panic. Having this happen in my city was unfathomable. I thought about the tens of thousands of restaurants, cafes, bakeries, delis, supermarkets, and food stands in Chicago. One person, spreading a deadly toxin, could kill untold numbers before we even caught a lead.

“Has the FBI been contacted?” I asked.

“Yes. The Feds are sending a Hazardous Materials Response Team, which should arrive anytime. I’m sure Homeland Security will have a hand or three in as well.”

The Super took a deep breath, then hit me with a stare so intense I had to fight to maintain eye contact.

“You and Sergeant Benedict have been on high-profile cases before, and when this breaks, it will be world news. You’ve had experience with product tampering. You’ve also had experience where the perpetrator contacted the police department.”

I didn’t volunteer that both of those cases were actually the same case, and that the MO was entirely different than this one. Instead I said, “So we’re here to consult?”

“No,” she said. “This case is yours.”

Herb made a tiny gagging sound. I tried to get my head around this. Bains glanced at me like he didn’t believe it either.

“We appreciate the vote of confidence, Superintendent O’Loughlin. But if this is simply because I’m a woman—”

“Spare me the kiss ass and the righteous indignation, Lieutenant. I didn’t choose you because you’re the best cop in the city, or because you have tits. There were ten people on the list ahead of you. All of them men. The mayor got roasted when he appointed a woman in charge of the CPD. I’m not anxious to commit the same career suicide.”

That’s what I figured. “So why—”

Davy stood behind the Super, the smile on his face so wide it touched his ears.

“You’re approval rating is at 83%,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

Davy sat on the corner of the desk and gave me a friendly Dale Carnegie pat on the shoulder. I could feel his hot, moist palms through the silk of my blouse.

“The people of Chi-Town love you, Lieutenant Jack Daniels. You caught that crazy family last year, that brain tumor guy before that. Plus, the Gingerbread Man. Putting you in charge of this case will counteract some of the negative publicity we’ll receive when the story goes public. You’ll be giving hope to the hopeless.”

Unbelievable. I wasn’t the best qualified to run this case, but they picked me because I

could smile pretty for the camera.

“Superintendent O’Loughlin—”

“The decision has been made. You have a blank check on this. Unlimited resources. If you aren’t competent, find people who are.”

The Super hit the Intercom button, asking the nurse to come in with the botulism toxin vaccines.

I looked at Herb. He was staring into space, either in deep thought, or unable to adequately process the situation.

I could relate. This wasn’t just a bad case. This was a career killer. They hadn’t caught the Anthrax terrorist. Had he continued, he could have crippled the nation. And decades earlier, Chicago had been plagued by another tamperer, the Tylenol Killer, who had laced the pain reliever with cyanide. TK had single-handedly and irreversibly changed the face of over-the-counter drugs. Capsules to tablets. Tamper-proof bottles. Blister packs and double-sealed boxes. Seven dead, and billions of dollars in revenue lost. And he’d never been brought to justice.

Catching bad guys required evidence and eye witnesses. Poisoners were the hardest perps to catch. A single, organized, motivated individual, with a basic knowledge of chemistry, could wreak more havoc on Chicago than all of the crime in the last fifty years combined.

I felt like hiding under the desk. O’Loughlin read my mind.

“Failure isn’t an option, Lieutenant. This is the second largest police force in the nation. I’ve got 16,538 people under my command. Less than one quarter of them are women. You fuck this up, you fuck it up for me and for every female who has busted her ass to be treated like an equal in this sexist, chauvinist pig pen. Catch the guy, you’re a hero and we’ll give you a parade. Screw up, and your career is over.”

The nurse came in, toting a little white case.

“And if I refuse?” I asked.

O’Loughlin didn’t blink. “You can pick up your white gloves and whistle down the hall. We’ll start you at the intersection of Congress and Michigan. Make sure you brush up on your traffic signals before you report for work tomorrow at 5am.”

She grinned, and it was chilling. “If you want to speak with your Union rep, I have him on speed dial. Or I could voice your concerns when I have dinner over at his place tonight.”

I looked at Herb again, but he was still spacey. The nurse rolled up the sleeve of my blouse and dabbed my arm with an alcohol pad.

“Okay then,” I said. “Let’s get started.”

Chapter 3

The Super had a table brought into her office, and Herb and I made a list of cops that we trusted. We picked from different areas, so there wouldn't be shortage in any particular district. When we were finished, we had a task force of a hundred cops. O'Loughlin added eight secretaries to the group.

"First thing we need to do," I said, "is close every deli on Irving Park Road."

"Be discreet," Davy suggested. "Panic won't help the situation. This city tends to riot when its sporting teams win a championship. They won't react well to terrorist threats."

Herb folded his arms, but his heart didn't seem into it. "The public needs to know."

Davy shook his head. "Not a good idea. The tourist business in Chicago is a billion dollar industry." Davy held up his fists and began ticking off fingers. "Hotels. Airlines. Taxis. Restaurants. Museums. Shopping. Who would go out to eat if they knew someone was randomly poisoning the city's food?"

"That's the point," I said.

"We're also talking thousands, tens of thousands, of jobs here. Plus Chicago might never recover from the stigma. Look at Toronto after the SARS scare. Hundreds of millions in lost revenue."

I didn't know who I despised more, the homicidal killers or the bean counters. I gave the Super my brightest *us girls need to stick together* smile.

"Second thing we need to do is lose the PR guy," I jerked my thumb at Davy. "There's a shark out there, and he doesn't want to close the beaches."

The Super shrugged. "The Mayor wants him here. He stays."

Herb looked sour. "Are we going to tell the public?"

"I'll pass along your recommendation to His Honor."

My turn to look sour. “What about the lawsuits that are going to rain down when the public finds out we knew there was a threat and didn’t tell them?”

“We weigh that against destroying businesses, irrevocably hurting the economy, and yelling fire in a crowded movie theater and the resulting panic it would cause.”

“But there is a fire,” Herb said.

She wouldn’t budge. “There’s already been a lot of media speculation that a tamperer is involved. People are being careful.”

Davy smiled at me like the annoying little brother I never had.

“Not careful enough,” I insisted. “Let’s confirm the rumors. If everyone is on the lookout, maybe he’ll stay in his house and stop poisoning our city.”

Now the Super folded her arms. “The decision has been made. We sit on it for now.”

You can’t fight City Hall. I changed gears. “How many other contaminated scenes have we found?”

O’Loughlin picked up one of the folders littering her desk. “None have been verified yet, but there are eleven possibles. The CDC is taking patient histories at area hospitals to pinpoint outbreak epicenters. We’re meeting with them later today.”

“Any evidence from the scenes?” I asked.

“That’s what you’re here for.”

“Have they been closed? Even the possibles?”

“Yes.”

I put Herb in charge of that.

“Also,” I told him, “interview the people exposed so far. The sick, and the families of the deceased. Plus the cops and the mail carrier who handled the letter.”

The Super raised her eyebrow in a question.

“Sometimes big crimes are committed to cover up smaller crimes. Maybe the Chemist had a specific target, and the rest of this is all smoke and mirrors.”

“I’ll need more cops,” Herb said.

“Retirees,” I said. “Put them back on limited duty.”

The Super nodded, then took a phone call.

The extortion letter had gone on ahead to the crime lab, and I dug out my cell and spoke

briefly with my guy there, Scott Hajek. He'd confirmed botulism in the envelope and on the letter through the wonder of mass spectrometry. Postmark came from the post office around the corner, mailed yesterday. Stamp and seal on the envelope both self-adhesive, so no saliva. Eleven prints found on the envelope and paper. The letter had been printed on an inkjet, using Arial Black font, available on almost every computer made after 1994. No hairs or fibers or business cards revealing the Chemist's address had yet been found, but Hajek was still on it.

"Priors," Captain Bains said. He'd been silent for so long I'd forgotten he was there. "I can get a team searching for anyone in our system with a past record of poisoning, product tampering, or extortion."

"Keep it open to women," I said.

O'Loughlin cut off her phone conversation in mid-sentence and gave me the eyebrow.

"Poisoners tend to be women," I said. "It's a crime that doesn't involve physical aggression or personal contact."

"How about the botulism itself?" Herb asked. "Any way to trace that?"

"Maybe I can help with that."

I looked over my shoulder, and in walked... a hottie.

While I appreciated a good looking guy as much as any woman, my days of getting dreamy-eyed and giggly were thirty years behind me.

This man, however, made me feel sixteen again.

He was gorgeous. Early thirties, tall, broad shoulders and narrow hips, a Marlboro profile, and piercing blue eyes that were otherworldly. His suit wasn't as expensive as Davy's, but he filled it out a lot better. It was as if God had taken half of Brad Pitt's genes, and mixed them with half of Sean Connery's, and added more muscles and thicker hair.

"Special Agent Rick Reilly, HMRT."

He did a round of hand-shaking. When his fingers touched mine I felt a shock, then spent the next few seconds wondering if I'd imagined it or not.

"Clostridium botulinum is a bacteria that occurs naturally in the soil throughout North America," Rick said. He had a rich baritone, with just a hint of Southern lilt. "It produces a toxin that has the honor of being the most poisonous substance in the world. A single gram could effectively kill a million people. Symptoms of food-borne illness can begin as early as two hours

after exposure, or may be delayed for as long as two weeks.”

“What are the symptoms?” Herb asked.

Rick sat on the Super’s desk, facing me and Herb. His crotch was just below eye level, and the very fact that I was even thinking about it meant my mind wasn’t in the game. I refused to look.

“Let’s say you ate some contaminated seafood. It doesn’t matter if it came straight from the freezer, or the microwave. Heat and cold might kill the bacteria, but the poison they produce is still deadly. The next morning, your mouth might be unusually dry. You might also have some abdominal cramps. Maybe even some vomiting. But no fever. It feels like a hangover. What’s happening is that your bloodstream is circulating the toxin to your neurological junctions, where it binds irreversibly, blocking acetylcholine release.”

“English,” O’Loughlin barked.

“It goes where your nerve endings meet your muscle fibers, and paralyzes them. You can’t walk or move. Your face droops. You get double vision and lose your gag reflex. And eventually, you can no longer breathe.”

I thought about the shots the nurse had administered the hour previously, and wondered if my dry mouth was the result of nerves or the result of a bad batch of vaccine.

“What’s the treatment?” I asked, my voice cracking slightly.

“Anti-toxin and ventilation. It can take months to fully recover, and there may always be some residual paralysis. With effective treatment, there’s less than a twenty-five percent loss of life. If treatment is delayed, or if there’s a shortage of adequate equipment, the death toll rises.”

“Can people transfer it to each other?” the Super asked.

“Normally, no. Botulism isn’t contagious. But we seem to be dealing with a weaponized form that may have inhalation properties, so if someone has BT on their hands or clothing, cross-contamination is possible. For example...”

He reached over and stroked the back of my hand. I felt another spark.

“...if I had BT on my fingers, I could have transferred a lethal dose to Lt. Daniels. The toxin can enter the body many different ways. The lungs, the stomach, wounds, mucus membranes,” his eyes met mine, “or through sexual contact. The spores will remain on her skin until they’re washed off.”

“Bleach?” I asked.

Rick smiled at me.

“A bubble bath would be fine.”

Then he lowered his eyes, for just a fraction of a second, and eyed the tear in my skirt. I felt my whole body blush.

Thankfully, he hopped off the desk and walked over to the corner of the room, where he’d left his briefcase. He dug around inside and pulled out a syringe, a salt shaker, and a spray bottle.

“I’ve been with the CDC crew all day, and we’ve been trying to imagine a delivery system to contaminate food. A syringe would be able to penetrate food products and offer the highest likelihood of spreading the disease. A squirt bottle, used by someone polishing fruit in the fresh produce aisle, would work, but the toxin doesn’t last too long when exposed to O₂. But if the Chemist is using dry spores, which last longer in an oxygenated environment, a salt or pepper shaker would do the trick.”

“Do you know which he’s using?” Herb asked.

“We don’t know yet. We’ve found contaminated food, but no needle holes. And we haven’t seen spores on the outside of food in quantities that would suggest a shaker. He might be soaking food in the toxin at his home, then bringing it to the stores.”

“Where would he get the toxin?” Bains asked. “Can it be ordered online?”

Rick sat on the desk again, his crotch again at eye level. This time I looked. *Ay carumba*. Rick didn’t lack in that area, either.

“The toxin is available for sale at hundreds of locations throughout Illinois,” he said. “Anyone with a few wrinkles will pay big money to get their hands on some.”

“Botox.” Davy smiled, and I noted that he had no smile lines at all.

“Exactly. In small doses, the same toxin that paralyzes your diaphragm can paralyze the tiny muscles in the face that cause frown lines and crows feet. But pharmaceutical Botox sprayed on food wouldn’t cause the kind of epidemic we’re seeing here, and because Botox uses the toxin, not the bacteria, it can’t be cultured. A much easier source of botulism is honey.”

Rick waited for a response. I bit. “Honey?”

“Yes, darling?”

Bains thought this was hilarious. No one else laughed.

“Sorry,” Rick gave me an aw-shucks look that made my hormones gush. “Serious topic, thought some comedy might help. Honey contains botulism spores. That’s why it carries warnings on the label, not to feed to children under the age of one. Their intestinal bacteria aren’t mature enough to handle it.”

“You can culture botulism from honey?” Herb asked. He didn’t look happy.

“It isn’t easy, but it’s possible. Even from pasteurized honey.”

“So there’s no way to trace the bacteria strain?” Herb again.

“Anyone with some basic lab equipment and a few biology books could learn to culture botulism. Weaponizing it would be more difficult, but there’s a wealth of information on the Internet. This particular toxin has been identified as type E. It’s common to this area.”

O’Loughlin grunted, then said, “Botulism cases are monitored by the CDC, right?”

“They keep track of all reported cases, and hospitals are required by law to report them.”

“Is it possible the Chemist contracted botulism as some point? We could track past cases to find him.”

Rick nodded. “Good thinking, but there are less than one hundred reported cases of botulism reported every year in North America, and all have highly detailed patient histories. I’m guessing the Chemist hasn’t been infected with botulism. He’s probably being extremely careful. You don’t develop an immunity to BT, even if you’ve been exposed before.”

“I thought we all got vaccines,” Bains said.

“Those are experimental, and it’s unlikely that the Chemist has access to the vaccines. So far the public sector can’t obtain them.”

“What if he works for the government?” I asked.

“It doesn’t really matter. The only vaccines in production are for type A and type C strains.”

A little alarm went off in my head.

“You said we’re dealing with type E.”

“Correct.”

“So these vaccines won’t protect us from this illness?”

I watched Rick’s confidence slip a notch. “They may offer some protection.”

“Really?”

Rick frowned. “No.”

“How about antibiotics?” Bains asked.

“Works on the bacteria, not the toxin. The toxin is what kills you.”

Herb asked, “How about that anti-toxin you mentioned?”

“That can halt advancing symptoms, but can’t reverse them. Once the nerve ending is paralyzed, it’s paralyzed forever. Which is why recovery takes so long—you have to grow new neurological junctions. But right now we’ve got two pharmaceutical companies working non-stop to supply Chicago with more doses. They should be able to provide us with a thousand by the week’s end.”

“We’ve already had three thousand reported cases,” I said, my stomach clenching. “What are we supposed to do?”

Rick looked at O’Loughlin.

“The Federal Government doesn’t make deals with terrorists,” he said, just as my cell phone buzzed. “But if I were you, I’d give the guy his two million dollars.”

I excused myself and answered the phone.

“Hi, Lieut. Hajek here. We’ve traced a print. It’s strange, though.”

“Cut the drama and spill.”

“Jason Alger, 63 years old, lives in Humboldt Park.”

“Record?”

“No. He’s one of ours. CPD, retired. I’d ask if maybe he came into contact with the envelope somehow, maybe visiting the station. But except for the Super’s secretary and the cop that got sick, all of the prints are his, and one is beneath the adhesive stamp. He has to be the one that sent the letter.”

“Good work, Officer.”

I explained the situation to the room, and we were out the door thirty seconds later, off to interview one of our own.

Chapter 4

Four Hours Earlier

He calls himself the Chemist, but he isn't a chemist. He isn't a botanist either, although the extensive greenhouse that takes up his entire backyard makes his neighbors think otherwise.

He's just a simple government employee, unhappy with the system. But unlike the thousands of other government employees, punching their clocks, hating their lives, he's devised a way to make the system pay.

The Plan is still in the first phase. He's been working on it, refining it, modifying it, for six years, three months, and eleven days. Though he is not perfect, the Plan is. In four days, two hours, and sixteen minutes, it will all be over. He'll be rich, on a bus to Mexico. And Chicago, along with the entire Midwest, will be permanently crippled.

People will die. Many more than anyone could possibly expect. Thousands more.

The apartment is all set. Has been, for over a week. A baited trap, waiting for the mice. It will make the TV news tonight for sure. Possibly even national. He considers setting the Tivo, but quickly dismisses the thought. He isn't going to miss anything. They'll repeat the footage.

The summer air is cool and crisp. It's night, so activity will be minimal, but he puts on the netting just in case. It's in a sealed plastic bin next to the greenhouse door. He places it over his head, then reaches for the gloves. They're made of neoprene, chemical resistant, and he's careful not to touch the outside of them as he slips them on.

The greenhouse door is locked with an electronic keypad beneath the knob. This high-tech addition was relatively cheap, and circumvents having to mess around with keys while wearing the gloves. It won't deter someone serious—after all, the greenhouse is made entirely out of glass and plastic—but it will keep the neighborhood kids out.

That kind of attention would be most unwelcome, after the years of planning.

He punches the code and opens the door. The thermometer on the wall reads 102 degrees

Fahrenheit. Part of this is due to the gas heaters. Part is due to the towering compost heap in the back, which recently received a particularly large infusion of organic matter.

The Chemist loves being in the greenhouse. An untrained eye would only see the beauty of nature expressed by the ranks and files of growing, thriving plant life. A keener eye would be able to spot the cruelty beneath the veneer.

It's the cruelty that the Chemist adores.

He checks the hydroponics on a castor oil plant. Castors resemble hemp, but with six leaves rather than five. Next to it is a pallet of short green plants sporting delicate white flowers—Lily of the Valley. Behind them, oleander, the majestic flowers yawning open in the artificial light like pink fireworks. To their right, azaleas, with their startling blood-red buds, surrounded by netting much like his pith helmet, so the bees can't get to them.

The Chemist steps over a tank of Nitrox, navigates around several stacks of fertilizer, past piles of piping and boxes of roofing nails, and approaches a ten gallon salt water aquarium. Roaming along the bottom, among the sand and bits of dead coral, are over a dozen brilliantly colored cone shell snails, none longer than two inches. In the tank behind them, next to the cockroach pen, are fingerling goldfish. He takes the small net off its suction cup hook, scoops up several feeders, and drops them into the snail tank.

Normally he'd stay to watch the feast, but he has other things to do tonight.

Near the rear of the greenhouse, between the nightshade and the jimsonweed, is his workbench. Assorted beakers, Petrie dishes, test tubes, flasks, stoppers, swabs, eyedroppers, and a variety of tools are arranged carefully in the six foam-lined drawers. He drags a large plastic garbage can over to his stool, then bends down and lifts a case of premium vodka onto the bench. Removing a fresh bottle by the neck, he holds it over the can, and shatters it with a hammer, glass and vodka spilling onto his gloved hands.

He picks through the mess, finds what he wants, and sets it on a place mat atop the bench, next to half a box of shotgun shells. A pair of garden clippers catch his eye, their blades stained with dirt and dried blood.

The Chemist smiles at the memory they invoke.

He picks up the shears and carries them to the large industrial sink, between the refrigerator and the autoclave, near the rear of the greenhouse. He turns on the faucet and scrubs

the shears with anti-bacterial soap. He also scrubs the remaining vomit from the ball-gag and the handcuffs, and then drops all three items into a bucket with a twenty percent bleach solution.

When everything is rub-a-dub-dub clean, he glances at the clock and decides to head over to Police Headquarters on 35th and Michigan.

He doesn't want to be late.

Chapter 5

Jason Alger received his pension check at his home on the corner of Cortland Street and Hoyne Avenue, in the heart of a neighborhood known as Bucktown. He lived in an unassuming two story residence with an ample backyard.

When we arrived on the scene, eight members of the Special Response Team—Chicago’s version of SWAT—had already secured the perimeter and were scanning the building with optics. Their vehicle, a souped-up bus known as the Mobile Command Post, was parked on the street alongside several patrol cars.

The head of this SRT, a bull-faced sergeant appropriately named Stryker, was squinting at some fuzzy pink images on a laptop display. He wore the standard tactical gear; black jumpsuit, body armor, riot helmet, radio headset, and a utility belt stuffed with equipment, including a gas mask.

“I’ve got a two heat signatures on the first floor, and one on the second,” he said into his comlink. “No movement.”

“Human beings?” I asked.

He didn’t bother looking at me.

“Unconfirmed.”

I watched an SRT member reposition the thermal optics, and another, a woman, sweep the building with a DOX sound canon—a device that looked like a bullhorn but was actually an ultra-sensitive unidirectional microphone. Two others were examining a printout that showed the floor plan of the building.

These guys were fast.

“Stryker,” I said, tapping him on the shoulder. “Has your team been briefed?”

Again, the team leader didn’t so much as glance at me.

“Sixty-three-year-old Caucasian male, considered armed and dangerous, probable location in the rear bedroom on the second floor, no other civilian activity, possible presence of biological agents. Two by two surgical entry, tazer capture takedown.”

“He’s a cop,” I said. “His name is Jason Alger. I just cracked his file—his record on the force is golden. I also spoke to his former commander on the ride over. Alger was a straight-shooter, family man, wife passed away six years ago, has a daughter and grandchildren in California. This isn’t in character for him.”

Stryker grunted, or perhaps it was a laugh. “Sometimes good apples get rotten.”

“And sometimes they get thrown away while they’re still good. Take it slow in there. Something isn’t right.”

“That’s the only time we get called.”

“Yeah. Well, good luck, Sergeant.”

“Luck is for the unprepared.”

I took a step back before the testosterone surging off his body caused me to grow a mustache. Special Agent Rick Reilly sidled up behind me, so close I could feel his body heat.

Or maybe that was my imagination.

“These guys any good?” he asked under his breath.

“They’re good.”

“They’ve got a lot of fancy equipment. Is the subject inside the house?”

“We’re not sure. Thermals have a few readings. Could be a person. Could be a radiator, or a fireplace.”

“In June?”

“Or a water heater or a stove.”

“I like his utility belt. He looks like Batman.”

Normally I didn’t mind jokes, but I was on edge.

“You’re a biology guy, right?”

“I’m a doctor, actually. But saying *Special Agent Dr. Rick Reilly* is too much of a mouthful.”

“Will those gas masks they have protect against BT?”

“They’re standard NBC masks—nuclear, biological, chemical. NATO threaded filters.

Should be fine. You look worried.”

“I am worried. Show me a leader worth her salt who doesn’t worry.”

Rick pointed his chin at Stryker.

“GI Joe doesn’t seem worried.”

“And that worries me. Confidence is essential, cockiness is lethal.”

This was my show. I wondered if there was anything more I should be doing. Go in with them? I didn’t have that kind of training. And if I got into a “whose balls are bigger spat” with Sgt. Stryker it might be distracting, and I wanted him focused.

They know what they’re doing, I assured myself.

“Why aren’t you married?”

I narrowed my eyes at Rick, knocked off guard by the non-sequitur.

“What does that have to do with this case?”

“Not a thing,” he said. “But it might have everything to do with grabbing a bite to eat later.”

“I have a fiancé,” I said.

“Forget to wear the ring this morning?”

His eyes had a playful glint to them, which annoyed me. This wasn’t the time or place for flirting. And cute guys had no right coming on to me only a few hours after the man I loved proposed marriage.

The man who was waiting patiently for me back at the house.

I excused myself and walked into the street, hitting the speed dial button on my cell phone.

“Hi, Latham.”

“Hi, Jack. Any chance you’ll be home soon? I made your favorite. Weiner schnitzel and spaetzel.”

German food was comfort food to me. I mentioned it offhandedly on one of our early dates, and the next time I went to his place Latham cooked it for me. Men who could cook trumped men with sexy bedroom eyes.

Not that Latham didn’t have sexy bedroom eyes.

I involuntarily glanced at Rick, noticed he was watching me, and gave him my back.

“You’re a sweetheart, Latham. I’ll try my best, but I’m in the middle of something big.”

“I understand. I’ll wait for you.”

The man was a saint.

“No. Go ahead and eat without me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I insist. I don’t know when we’ll finish up here. It could go late.”

“I’ll keep it warm for you.”

“The food?”

“Everything.”

Some paramedics pulled up. Standard procedure for a smash and grab, but it made me even more uneasy.

“How’s that mariachi?” I asked. “Did he ever find the rest of his mustache?”

“No. I think Mr. Friskers ran off with it.”

I smiled for the first time in hours.

“Look, Latham, I know I owe you an answer...”

“Focus on work, Jack. Keep your mind on the matter at hand. Everything else can wait until later.”

That proved it. Latham was an alien pod person. No man could be this perfect.

“I love you,” I said, and meant it.

“Love you too. Stay safe.”

Stryker rallied his troops, and my leadership role was relegated to the sidelines to impotently watch his “two by two surgical entry.” I stood alongside Herb, who’d been on the phone for over an hour organizing the task force teams, and snagged a headset from the SRT member monitoring the infrared. Beta Team marched around back, Stryker gave the radio command, and they rushed the front door. His partner did a knock-and-announce, Stryker hit the door with a handheld Thunderbolt battering ram, and they both stormed inside, weapons drawn.

“Team Alpha in,” the radio squawked. *“Hallway clear.”*

A similar banging came from the rear of the house.

“Team Beta in. Kitchen clear.”

The headsets were so sensitive I could make out four different breathing rates, four

different footfalls. They had gone in under the assumption that anyone inside would have looked out the window and noticed the police carnival camped on the street, so this arrest was about speed rather than stealth.

“First bedroom clear.”

Shuffling sounds. Some clicks.

“Hallway clear.”

Then came a gunshot.

And screaming.

“Beta team leader down! Repeat, Beta Team Leader down! We have gunfire!”

A horrible gurgling came through my earpiece, like someone choking in a shallow pool of water.

“Alpha Team has been hit! Possible IED! Alpha—”

There was a popping noise, another gunshot, and static.

“Team Alpha, do you read,” I said into the comlink. “Team Alpha, do you read.”

Moaning, but no coherent response.

“Team Beta, do you read. Beta, are you there goddammit.”

More gurgling, weaker this time.

Herb closed his cell phone and said, “Jesus.”

I looked at the laptop monitor, and could spot the heat signatures of all four SRT members. None were moving.

“Stryker, are you there.”

The moaning became a keening cry, like a sick dog. It made the fillings in my teeth vibrate.

“Gamma Team going in!”

Two more SRT members, a man and the woman working the cartoid mike, rushed the house.

“Hold it!” I yelled.

They didn’t listen, quickly disappearing through the front door.

“Gamma Team, stand down,” I said into the radio. “Repeat, stand down. I’m OIC. I want your asses back here now.”

White noise. A groan.

“They’re dead. They’re all dead.”

I gripped the headgear so tight my fingers shook. “Get the hell out of there!”

“Jesus, what happened to his eyes—”

“This place is rigged. It’s all rigged. Oh my—”

A snapping sound, then coughing.

“Gamma Team, do you read? Gamma Team, come in, over.”

More coughing, and then the horrifying wail of someone screaming while throwing up. My skin got prickly all over.

“Gamma Team, come in.”

The silence was suffocating. Then, after almost thirty seconds: *“Please... someone help me...”*

The final two SRT members made a try for the door. Herb tackled one. I used both hands to grab the other by the wrist.

“No,” I told him.

“That’s my team!”

“We’ll get them out.”

His nametag said James, Joshua. A kid, early twenties, barely old enough to shave. His eyes were wide, panicked, and he looked like he desperately wanted to believe me.

“How?” he asked.

I turned to the Super, who appeared shaken, but not nearly as shaken as everyone on the line.

“I need a Hazmat Team, and the Bomb Squad, and that robot they have, the remote control one with the cameras.”

“Bomb Squad is at the 21st District, the other side of town,” she said.

“Tell them to drive fast.”

Rick took my arm. “Make sure the Hazmat uses self-contained breathers. I think something got through the NATO filters.”

“I thought the NATO filters were safe.”

“For BT, yes.” Rick glanced at the radio unit, painful gurgling coming through the

speaker. “That doesn’t sound like BT.”

“Do you have... what are those protective suits called?”

“Space suits. Back at Quantico. Not with me.”

“...help me... please God help...”

I racked my brain. Who would have a space suit? Fire stations? Nearby laboratories? I just saw a suit like that a little while ago. Where the hell was it?

Then I remembered what neighborhood I was in, and who lived nearby.

“Goddammit,” I said, yanking out my cell phone, wondering if I’d ever bothered to erase his number.

It was still there. I hesitated two full seconds, then pressed the dial button.

“Harry’s House of Love Juice, one hundred percent natural with zero carbohydrates, stop by for a free sample.”

“McGlade,” I said, swallowing my pride. “It’s Jack. I need your help.”

Chapter 6

Harry beat the Bomb Squad and the HazMat Team to the scene, which was both a good thing and a bad thing. Good because we desperately needed his help, bad because being around McGlade was slightly less enjoyable than pulling out your own toenails with pliers.

“Hiya, Jackie,” he said through the driver side window, pulling his Corvette alongside the curb. “You want me to park this big boy here, or shall I use your rear entrance?”

I briefly wondered what happened to his trademark 1968 Mustang, then realized he couldn’t drive stick shift with his newly acquired prosthesis. Harry had been a player in a homicide investigation of mine not too long ago, and he hadn’t come out of the debacle entirely intact.

“Got the space suit?”

“I got it. You’re lucky too—I just had it cleaned. There were stains, Jack. Lots of stains.”

I put the thought from my mind. An eternity ago, Harry and I were partners. Since his dismissal, he’d been earning his living as a full time private eye and part time television producer. Along with boasting the IQ of a tire iron, McGlade also had the unwelcome distinction of being one of the biggest perverts I know, and I’d met quite an assortment of them working Vice. Whatever he was using this space suit for had nothing to do with science.

“Where is it?” I asked.

“In back.”

He popped the trunk, and I stared at a big pile of Dayglo Orange. I grabbed a sleeve and pulled the suit out of the car. The material felt like a combination of rubber and nylon.

“I should be the one going in,” Rick said, coming up behind me.

“Those are my people in there, Agent Reilly. I’m going.”

Herb ran over, looking even shittier than he had earlier.

my finger inside of a trigger guard. Herb noted this and promised he'd be right back. The headpiece went on over the radio headset, a large hood with a Plexiglas faceplate.

It was hot in the suit. Steam-bath hot. And it smelled bad, like chili dogs. Sweat beads popped out onto my forehead, and my silk blouse clung to me at my armpits.

"Let me know when you feel the air."

Rick turned the dials on my self-contained breathing apparatus, and a wave of cool air bathed my face and circulated throughout the suit. The chest and legs began to puff out, like a balloon.

"I'll be with you on the radio," Rick said through the comlink. "Keep the chatter going, describe everything you see, maybe I can help."

Herb jogged back, cradling a Remington 870MCS shotgun with a pistol grip. He stepped over McGlade and passed it to me. My gloved finger easily fit into the oversized trigger guard.

"Bomb squad is still ten minutes away," Herb said. "Robby took a bad hit last week and is out of commission."

Robby was their remote controlled robot.

"Give my respects to his family," I said, starting for the house.

"We could still wait for them. They've got better protective gear."

"No time."

"Dammit, Jack." Herb came up after me. "You're not even wearing a vest."

"Armor didn't seem to help the SRT."

I jogged toward the house. Herb and Rick flanked me.

"Her suit is leaking." Herb said. "I can feel the air."

"Positive pressure. It's supposed to do that. With air blowing out, nothing can get in."

Herb appeared ready to burst into tears.

"I've got a bad feeling about this, Jack."

"Me too."

I paused for just a moment, and stared at my partner through the Plexiglas face shield, wondering why this moment seemed so final.

"Okay." I took a big gulp of canned air. "Let's do this."

Chapter 7

The Chemist watches the cop in her space suit approach the front door. The suit offers more protection than the previous batch of cops had, but it still isn't enough.

She has seconds left to live. Minutes, if she's extremely lucky.

The Chemist has spent a very long time getting things ready. There are enough traps to kill at least a dozen cops. Even careful ones in protective biohazard suits.

He hadn't expected that the next death would be Jack Daniels, however. She's a celebrity. Now this will be national news for sure. He should have set the Tivo after all.

He wonders which one will get her. The modified M44? The rat traps? The pull-loop switch? The metal ball? So many terrible things await her.

And which toxin will it be? BT is perfect for food contamination, and the slower onset of symptoms has the desired effect of overburdening the hospitals and spreading panic and paranoia. But situations like this one called for something more immediate. More dramatic. *Convallaria majalis*. *Ricen*. *Rhododendron ponticum*. *Ornithogalum umbellatum*. *Thevetia peruviana*. *Strychnos toxifera*. Each of these induces instantaneous, messy death.

Of course, nothing is quite as cinematic as good old homemade napalm. Or potassium cyanide gas. He's covered those bases too.

The Chemist spent several months researching this particular phase of the Plan. Booby trap diagrams are easily found on the Internet, but he's taken them to the next level. They've become works of art. Fatal works of art. The slightest scrape of skin, the tiniest tear of fabric, the smallest misstep, and you're dead.

So exciting. So amusing. And he has the perfect view of everything.

He wishes he had a bag of popcorn.

A television news truck pulls up. It's about damn time.

The money will be nice. But what will really keep him company in his old age are the memories of moments like this.