

A sample of
ASSASSINATION OF A DIGNITARY
by Carolyn Arnold



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"I'm an avid reader and thoroughly enjoyed Assassination of a Dignitary. I particularly enjoyed the relationship between Detectives Clinton & Wingham and the realistic portrayal. I have made a note of the author so I can find more of her works."

—Jeff Queen, Sergeant (Ret.) Northport, Alabama, United States

ASSASSINATION
OF A
DIGNITARY

CAROLYN
ARNOLD



Excerpt from *Assassination of a Dignitary*
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CHAPTER 1

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

THURSDAY, JUNE 3RD, 3:50 PM

THEY SAY THE PAST HAS a way of catching up with you. Mine was in my living room when I came home.

Christian Russo, son of the Italian Mafia Don, Pietro Russo, sat on my sofa making himself comfortable. The side table had a glass of amber liquid sitting on it. He raised it for a sip.

The clock read three fifty. Brenda would be home with the kids soon. I hadn't seen the man in fifteen years.

"What are you doing here?"

"Now is that any way to greet an old friend?" His Italian accent laced each word.

I couldn't show the man fear. This is what he wanted. He craved a reaction. He always had. "If I saw one before me, I may greet him differently."

"Oh." A fake pout had his lips pinched together only a second. He put the drink down and placed a hand over his heart. He laughed when it touched the silk of his silver jacket. "If only I had feelings, Hunter. Maybe you'd hurt mine." Silence fell between us like a cloak. I stood in front of him. He studied my face. "Sit."

"Get out of my house, Christian."

"Sit!" His voice rose, and he straightened his posture as he barked the command.

I sat. I desired to stretch my leg, one over the other, but didn't want to appear too comfortable either. I kept myself leaning slightly forward, apprehensive this would give the impression I

was eager to hear what he would say.

“We have a job for you,” he continued.

“I don’t do this anymore.”

“Tsk. Tsk.” He raised a finger to his lips. “You don’t interrupt me.”

“But, I don’t...” I let my words trail off into non-existence based on the reflection in his eyes. I wasn’t the type who could take a life for a wad of cash anymore. I had too much to lose, too much to live for.

“Pays one hundred k. Half up front.”

“I’m doing fine. I have been—”

He dropped a wad of cash on the table between us. I knew from the banding it was ten thousand.

“How can you be fine? After you turn your back on The Family? Surely you must miss us.”

I missed the paycheck, the one that padded my bank account with thousands at regular intervals, but not the control they held over me.

“Seriously, there must still be a fire in you.” Christian’s mouth lifted, slightly to the left as it always did when he schemed manipulation.

His eyes contained more evil than had been there the better part of two decades ago. In all honesty, I was shocked to see that he was the one the Don sent to me. Christian was more hurt than Pietro when I turned my back on The Family.

My eyes scanned my living room, settling only briefly on the family photographs, on the children’s school portraits. My eyes came back to Christian. “Like I said, I don’t do that anymore. I wouldn’t even know how to—”

“Fire a gun.” Christian finished my sentence and cocked his head to the side. “You should know better than to lie to me. Want to try again?”

When I was offered a permanent role in The Family’s business, I had declined. I saw my way out and took it. There were times the nightmares of what I had done would slither back into the darkness of night, but I worked to shutter them out. I justified

my actions as responding to directions. It was nothing personal. A kill never was. I reminded myself they were marks, not individuals. But over the years I had never lost the love for firing a gun. The fall of the hammer and the slight kickback as the bullet exited the chamber.

"I know you go to the gun range." Christian took another sip of what looked to be my Scotch.

I pointed a finger at him. Many men would not dare to. "Don't follow me."

"You tell me what to do now? Things changed, yes?" Christian laughed. "I believe every Thursday afternoon. I trust that's why you're home now and not at the office."

How closely had he been watching me? In fact in such an economy, I was fortunate not only to have a job but to own a modest accounting practice. I chose the career hoping the rumors were true; accountants lead uneventful lives. I looked at the clock. Within fifteen minutes, my family would be walking through the door. My eyes went back to the cash on the table.

"How does it pay you, Hunter?"

"I'm not that person anymore." My last name improvised as my nickname among the Russos. They viewed it as evidence of a life calling. I was predestined to be their hitman.

"You always will be to me." Christian reached into a jacket pocket and pulled out a cell phone. His eyes were on me. "Disappointing."

"Why me?" I didn't know the details yet but wasn't sure I wanted to.

Christian leaned forward and appeared more comfortable than I was, at this moment, in my own home. "You're close to her. You can make this happen."

"Who?"

Christian smirked. "The Governor of Michigan, of course. Marian Behler." He leaned back into the sofa.

My heart beat as a piston in a chamber. It felt ready to explode.

Governor Behler was a client of mine at the firm. Christian obviously knew this just as he was aware of my whereabouts

on Thursday afternoons and my active fascination with guns. "I didn't think you killed dignitaries."

"An exception has been made."

My last kill was over fifteen years ago; it may as well have been a lifetime. But when I had been at my finest, I excelled both at close range and sniper hits. The versatility made me a valuable asset. "Pietro Russo ordered this hit?" I knew I was being arrogant, and even courageously stupid, questioning Christian's authority but the directive was hard to believe.

"You used to call him Pops." Christian didn't react the way I had expected, but that was partially what was frightening about the man. He had always been unpredictable.

"My life is different now." I had to stop staring at the clock, but my eyes kept drifting there.

"Different, good? Different, bad?"

I owed him no explanation for the direction my life took or an assessment of its fulfillment.

"We used to be close, you and I. We can be again."

"Did Pietro Russo order this hit?" I repeated my question.

"Why else would I be here?" He held out his cell phone. "Want to speak to him yourself?"

My stomach tossed. One normally didn't leave the Italians without there being recompense. I seemed to have been an exception to the rule. Now I wondered if the smooth transition had been afforded me because of the service I had offered and could possibly again.

"I can dial the number for you."

"Why her?" Behler was the first female to serve as Governor in the state of Michigan.

Christian laughed. He lifted the glass to his lips but lowered his arm again. He rested it on the sofa arm. "You know we don't answer those questions. Yet she must know where her death is coming from. And, to the media it must appear as an assassination."

"So you want it to take place from a distance, or close range?" I asked for clarity. His words seemed to contradict each other, *know*

where her death is coming from, yet it must appear as an assassination.

“A statement must be made.”

“In-her-face-personal then? And you want the last words she hears to be—”

“From Pietro Russo.”

“From Pietro Russo?” The woman must have wronged the man on a personal level. For all of my past close range kills, they would know where their fate came from, but the Don was never explicitly named. I couldn’t risk my family’s lives being caught up in this vortex. My wife, my parents, no one knew about my past. While I preferred it stay buried there, it might not be an option.

“So what will it be? One hundred thou richer or—” Christian stopped talking as he exchanged his drink for a nearby family portrait. “You have a nice family.”

“Don’t even think of hurting them.” My jaw tightened, the familiar adrenaline rush surged through my blood stream.

“It’s not a threat, Hunter.” His calm voice conflicted with his words. “If you don’t do this, it will be more than that.” Christian rose to his feet. “You have until tomorrow morning, 9:00 AM, to decide. After that, I can’t answer for what happens.”

“You son of a bitch!” I rose to my feet and came at him fast.

Christian turned. The barrel of a .38 was pointed at my abdomen. “Don’t think I won’t kill you just because you’re a friend. I can get new friends.”

I wanted to tell him to find a new one for this mission, but with the wildfire in the man’s eyes I needed to back down from the confrontation. I put my hands up in surrender and slowly took a step back.

“Smart, Hunter. It would be a shame to lose you. I want her dead within the week.”

“The week?” Just when I didn’t think my heart could pump faster, or the adrenaline provide more of a high, it exceeded on both counts. I glanced at the clock. *Brenda and the kids.* “If I do this—”

“You’re out for good.”

"I heard that fifteen years ago."

Christian laughed and finally retracted his gun and placed it inside his jacket pocket. "You have no reason to trust us. Keep that in mind." He stopped at the door, his hand on the knob, and spoke facing it. "The clock's ticking Hunter. Say hi to the family for me."

With him gone, I felt violated. He had been inside my house, my home that I shared with my family. They could know nothing about this. They would know nothing of it.

The clock read four ten. I had about seventeen hours to let Christian know what I decided but did I really have an option? It was either kill or be killed. I knew too much now. Christian had seen to that. I scooped the wad of cash from the table and fanned it. The smell of money lodged up my nose as nostalgia. I tucked it into a pant pocket causing it to visibly bulge.

I poured myself a few shots of single malt and swigged it back in a couple mouthfuls. As the alcohol started to work, my mind assessed the situation. It recalled my past life in detail, the people, the blood, the locations, the intensity I would feel every time I took a life. In a way, it was the type of rush I hadn't experienced since. I wouldn't dare say I missed it, but as the vague recollections transformed to shape, I knew I was capable of doing it again.

The directions were simple: kill the Governor.

But I wasn't that man anymore, and this was different. Governor Behler was my client. I was her accountant. We had grown close. Brenda and I had even been to her house for dinner before.

As the alcohol soothed me, I remembered that Behler had mentioned something about an upcoming trip to Niagara Falls, New York. I looked at my watch for the date. Next weekend I believe. I needed to get downtown to the office.

The front door opened. Yvonne, my fourteen-year-old daughter, was the first one through it. "You don't understand!"

She closed the door on her mother who came in behind her. "Get back here young lady!" Brenda cast me a passing glance as she went down the hallway after our daughter. "I told you not to

skip any more classes."

"You don't understand!"

Another door slammed and Brenda returned to me with anger brimming in her eyes. "That girl needs to be disciplined, Ray. She can't go on talking to me like that..." Her words paused as her eyes went to the glass on the side table. "Speak to her."

Max, our ten-year-old, walked through the room carrying a backpack that looked like it would tip him over backward. He waved at me on the way by.

"Ray, are you listening to me?" Brenda's eyes darted from the bar cart to the glass in my hand and back to the table. "You're drinking? And you had someone over?"

I just nodded. To say I had an old friend drop by would be a lie. And, if she didn't like the afternoon drink, she really wouldn't like what I had to say next. "I'll need to go back to the office later tonight."

CHAPTER 2

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

THURSDAY, JUNE 3RD, 11 PM

BRENDA DIDN'T SAY MUCH THROUGH dinner and despite the fact she was mad at me, how would she feel if the Mafia came after us? I took a deep breath. I needed to let Christian know my answer, and as far as I saw it, the sooner, the better. I also wished to discuss compensation in more detail. One hundred thousand for a dignitary was an undercut.

First I needed to go to the office. Hunter & Associates sat on a corner lot of a downtown property that accrued thousands in taxes a month. The building itself was an older house that had been zoned for commercial use before my time. It had been a dentist office when I bought it. Now it served as an office where people got their taxes done and their bookkeeping handled.

I had founded the company fourteen years ago. I never believed in business partners—too much room for disagreement. But I did have one other certified accountant on staff, along with six transient accounting students. Most of them just put in the time, got the experience, and waited for their break to come along.

I struggled with the front lock as it had dictated from the beginning. The deadbolt needed replacing, but it fell down the list of things to do. It just seemed more important things were piled in front of simple maintenance.

Inside the building, it was silent, not even the hum of a computer station. In less than twelve hours, Serena would open the front door and switch over the phones, transforming the

static environment to one of activity.

My office was upstairs along with a cubicle area for Serena and an office for the other certified accountant and his assistant. Really, the business should have been named Hunter & Associate, in the singular, but it made it sound more prestigious in its plural form.

The third step from the top was another item that made it on the ever-growing to-do list. It groaned under the pressure of my weight. I went straight to the safe in the back of the room. Like the one in my house, no one else knew about the existence of this one except for the company I had install it. And there was a reason for this. I didn't trust financial institutions. They were fine if your funds were mediocre, but if a large sum was required quickly, they were tiresome. I studied the contents—roughly four hundred thousand dollars. This combined with the fortune I did keep in the financial system, tied up in various accounts and investments, made my net worth somewhere around ten million. Not a vast fortune in these changing times, yet sufficient to retire on for good, or to disappear should the need arise. My wife had no idea we had this sort of money.

I pulled out a few wads of bills and sat them on the credenza. I added Christian's ten thousand to the stack. At the back of the safe, I found what I was looking for. My old weapon—a pen gun. Maybe it had been careless to keep something like this so close, but for some reason it instilled a sense of security having it nearby.

The pen gun held one .22 shell, but if executed properly that was all I needed to get the job done. I fished it out of the case and held it in my hands. The five ounces felt featherish in the palm of my hands. Its overall length was five point six inches; shave about one point four when it was folded and ready to fire. It was made of stainless steel.

From the safe position, or its full length, I pulled out and bent it to expose the small handle and trigger. Holding it, the past rushed over me. I took a deep breath and looked at where the arrow on the barrel was pointed—S for Safe. When it came time

to execute the hit, the barrel would be loaded, and at this point, I would move the arrow to F for Fire.

I put it back in its original position and unscrewed the barrel. I held it to my nose and inhaled deeply. I had taken twenty-one lives with this weapon. I put it back in its case and slid it into my pants pocket. I went into the back part of the safe looking for bullets but first came out with a small envelope.

As I remembered its contents, I smiled. It could come in handy, but I would need Christian's help with it. I slid out the fake identification. A driver's license and passport, both of which would need updating. I placed them back into the envelope and put it in my jacket pocket along with a box of .22 bullets.

As the weight of the bullets pulled down on my jacket, I considered my wife and children. They had no idea the type of person their husband and father was, or who he had been. I had kept all of this from them—for their protection. Yet now, everything demanded one final accounting and I had no choice but to pay the bill, as it were.

I STOOD IN THE COVER OF DARKNESS, tucked into a corner untouched by the glow of a street light or motion sensor spotlight. The house was a two-story brick but only home to one man.

A man stood vigil in the corner of the porch. There would be at least one more out back. If Christian hadn't changed, both men would be carrying AK-47s.

But there would be no need to disturb them.

My heart fluttered with the adrenaline rush that used to fuel my soul on a regular basis as I contemplated the ascent to the second floor. There were two large windows that would serve as a means to propel myself upward. The brick's mortar had become deeply inset over the years and allowed for a good toe hold. I could have done things the easy way: placed a call and accepted the mission. But I needed to prove that I wasn't one to mess with either. He violated my home; I would his.

I hoisted my legs onto the bottom window sill and spent a moment thankful I had kept in good physical shape. I stood there, braced in front of the window, back to the world, vulnerable. I

heard something ruffle and realized the two guards were moving around. I froze there while I struggled to study their movements by sound. My heartbeat thumped in my eardrums and made it hard to hear. I had to recall my breathing technique. I had to tell myself that I had nothing to lose, just like before. But so much had changed since then. Brenda's and the kids' faces skipped through my mind, and I closed my eyes willing them to obscurity.

The men were still moving around. I strained to hear. As I focused, my heartbeat relaxed in my ears and receded into a dull hum.

"Carlos...pssst, Carlos."

"What are you doing man?"

The second voice sounded paranoid and at unease. Either he hadn't been a soldier or grunt, for long or he had been witness to Christian's evil side.

"He's sleeping man. Relax."

"Go back to your watch," the one named Carlos said.

The more they spoke and the more they moved around, I feared they'd do a full perimeter search. If they did, I would be dead. One bullet to the back of the head, and I'd be fed to Mitchell, Christian's pit bull. At least that's how the lucky intruders were disposed of in the past. Betrayers of The Family never received the courtesy of the gun shot first.

Mitchell had likely passed, but Christian loved the breed and would have replaced him with a younger, hungrier version.

They're good at tearing flesh from bone, he told me. Anything that can do that is worthy of my respect.

"You ever been to Popeye's? The girls are hot." The chatty soldier was from the front door. This much I could tell.

"Please go back."

"You're such a fuckin' pussy."

"Go."

I heard the man return to the front, his feet crunching on the crushed shell driveway that Christian had demanded be shipped specifically for show. Standard gravel would never suffice for a man like him.

I let the rush of air leave my lungs. I placed my gloved hands on the brick and worked the toes of my shoes into the deep grooves. I made my way to the second story like a modern day Spider-Man. As I reached for the sill of the second window, I paused and listened. My toe went into a slot, and I extended upward as far as I could reach. I needed to go up another few bricks in height. My hand reached the sill, but as I went to pull myself up, my grip slipped.

Shit!

I was hanging suspended, fifteen feet off the ground, by one arm. I needed to maneuver my legs to the side, get them into a toe hold. My body lost all willpower to move when I heard rustling in the bushes.

Shit!

My arm was aching like a son of a bitch. The push-ups and bench presses at the gym hadn't prepared my muscles for this workout.

I summoned my thoughts to go somewhere more tranquil. They instantly jumped to Brenda—the smell of her perfume and the warmth of being in her arms. The recollections weren't helping as my resolve weakened. I needed to rediscover the killer inside of me, and it wouldn't come from thinking of my family.

There was silence. Not even a blade of grass blew from a breeze. I looked to my left and noticed the silhouette of a guard easing around the back corner of the house. His hands were holding onto his weapon. I couldn't see the one from the front.

My attention back on the hand that still gripped the windowsill, I swung my body.

"I think someone's here." The voice came from the man at the front.

Not good at all. Maybe he never left the side of the house.

Carlos answered, "Nah, you're hearing things. It's your mind playin—"

"Sssh."

"You're such a loser."

For the next few seconds, my breathing labored. The muscles

in my arm bit as a scorching fire. I watched the guard from the front move up the side of the house. If he looked up, I was dead. I had to stay perfectly still.

He seemed satisfied from his search and went back to his post. It was time to move, pain or not. I swung again and found a toe hold. I reached up, obtained a hold on the sill with my other hand and hoisted myself up.

I balanced in the sill and worked to pry the window open with a flat-headed screwdriver. The action brought me right back to my days of being a hitman. I would move stealthily and undetected, and the mark would be dead before they could open their eyes to see their killer. At least, those were the lucky ones.

The window was located in a hallway, at the top of the stairs, just as I had remembered. The hallway was dark, but if Christian kept his old bedroom, he was the third door on the left.

As I made my way down the hall, the oak flooring softly moaned my approach. I stopped moving and heard nothing other than the heavy breathing of a sleeping man. Christian.

I stepped inside the room and closed the door behind me. "Rise and shine!" I flicked on the light and watched him struggle to get out from under the duvet in a sleepy confusion. My eyes adjusted to the light much better than his seemed to as he had been roused from a dead sleep.

"What the fuck—"

"Am I doing here? Getting even. Now you know how it feels to have your home violated." I reached into my pocket and turned on the recorder I had also grabbed from the office. I just wanted some insurance in case I needed it.

I heard the moan before I saw her. A woman, who didn't look much older than my Yvonne, sat up. Her eyes were large, and she attempted to crawl behind Christian. He snapped his fingers. "Out!"

The girl didn't move.

"Get your fuckin' ass out!" Christian pointed to the door and slapped her bare ass without restraint as she rose from the bed. She took a shirt from a chair and made her way out of the room,

completely naked.

Christian's eyes fired at me. "You better have a damn good—"

"You want me to kill Governor Behler."

Christian rolled his eyes.

"Speak it."

"Yes, my Father demands it."

"And you want me to do this up close, and speak the words,
from Pietro Russo?"

"Yes." He let the tail end of the word drag out.

I stopped the recorder. "I'll take the job."

He remained unimpressed. "You broke into my house to tell
me—"

"I'll do it for five hundred thousand." I had given the amount
and the breakdown significant thought. If I were going to do
this, I would make it worth my while. My family's wellbeing was
already at risk. Taking the job was the only viable option. When
it was over, we may need to go far away.

Christian laughed. He was awake now. "Five hundred?"

"She's a person of office. This one's different."

"No different."

To me, Governor Behler represented *different* in several ways.
Regardless of her station, I knew her. I was relatively close to
her. And she was a woman. I had never killed a woman before. I
had to assure myself they died just the same as a man. Obviously
they were capable of making enemies the same way.

I took out my pen gun and untwisted the barrel. Christian
never moved. He would never acknowledge experiencing fear.
But I was also careful about the way I moved. I didn't need him
to feel threatened, but I needed him to know I was serious. "Five
hundred."

"Fine." Christian's jaw tightened. He rose from the bed and
positioned himself inches from my face. "Five hundred." He spat
on the floor to the side of me. "Two fifty, less the ten I gave you
earlier."

I remained steady. "Five hundred now. Five hundred upon
proof of death."

"You must have fallen. Hit your head." Christian stepped back from me and reached into a dresser drawer. He came out with a handgun if you wanted to term it that. A Desert Eagle, ten-inch barrel, likely .357 caliber. He examined it almost as meticulously as I had affectionately handled my pen gun earlier. In a gun battle, mine wouldn't be a match against his.

"You need to start using a real gun," Christian said.

With his words, conflicting energy surged in the room. Reality must have struck him. Killing Governor Behler meant a lot to The Family and he had been entrusted to ensure that it happened. How would he explain to Pops that he killed the hitman?

He placed the gun back in the drawer and closed it slowly. "Five hundred? Fine. Agreed." He looked at me and went to another drawer. This one was full of cash. He tossed wrapped wads of bills on his bed. "How'd you get in past Rocco and Carlos?" Christian kept fishing out the cash. Each wrapped amount valued ten thousand, making for forty-nine of them. "There, that's it." His finger pointed at me, his eyes reflecting with the likes of a human Lucifer. "You better make good."

For an instant, I feared being on the receiving end of Christian's wrath. He was only one year younger than me but held the maturity of a raging hormonal twenty-year-old eager to prove himself to any trespassing mammal. "I always have." I looked at the cash on the bed and at Christian. "I'll also need you to pack this up to go."

"And you never answered my question, what'd you do? Climb up the wall like Spidyman?" Christian's laugh ended abruptly when my eyes responded to the question. "You still have skills."

"That's why you pay me the big bucks." As the words slipped out, it felt reminiscent of my earlier years and the tight friendship that had once existed between us. I handed him the envelope with the fake IDs.

He took it with a smile. "You held onto these. All this time. See, you are meant for this."

"I need them updated right away."

"For certain." The smile remained pasted to his lips.

"And I'll need you on the way out."

Christian led me through the house to the front door; his man there jumped back ten feet when it opened. His gun came up to the ready.

"What the fuck? You shoot your boss now? In the house!" Christian's arms flailed with each word.

"Sorry, Boss. Sorry." When his eyes reached mine, he shook.

Christian snapped his fingers. The man hustled through the front door. With him out of earshot, Christian said, "The rest will be brought to your office once it's done."

As I walked away, I heard the back door swing open. I knew Rocco and Carlos may become pit bull food, but that wasn't my problem. Right now, I had to focus on myself and keeping my family safe—and I would come out one million dollars richer. The bills that I held in the bag were blood money, but they spent just like the rest of it did. I felt the old, familiar tug on the corner of my mouth.

CHAPTER 3

DETROIT, MICHIGAN

FRIDAY, JUNE 4TH, 9:30 AM

BRENDA GAVE ME THE SILENT treatment through breakfast and left for work without saying goodbye. We normally kissed and hugged before going our separate ways. But I couldn't focus on that; I had to dwell on the entire picture. I'd go into work today, but I wouldn't get much done, at least when it came to clients' financials.

"Good mornin', Ray. The sleepy bug must have bit ya." Serena had come up to Michigan from a southern State and held onto her twang. She followed me down the hall to my office. It was nine thirty, but Serena had the work ethic of a pig farmer—in the trenches early and up to her armpits with shit to shovel.

"I got your coffee ready for ya a while ago now. Let me refresh it." She reached for my cup.

I placed a hand on hers and smiled. "I'm fine."

She withdrew her hand, and her cheeks flushed a modest hue of red. "K then, I'll be down the hall if ya'll need me."

"Actually, Serena." She stopped and turned in the doorway, appearing ready to please. It was hard to find good help these days, but I struck it rich with her. "Can you close the door on your way out?"

"Course." She smiled, seemingly deflated that's all I requested of her. She was working toward her accounting certificate and was hungry to get any real-life experience she could. I did my best to pass things on to her as she grew in her knowledge.

I loosened my tie as I sat behind my computer. The timeline

compressed on me from all sides. One week. I needed to become intimate with Governor Behler's itinerary. I snuffed the conscience that attempted to creep in. It made no difference who she was. All of my marks had been people. All of them had family and friends who loved them. Behler would be no different.

I logged on to my email to verify the date of her trip. My mind remembered the mention of a trip to Niagara Falls, New York, but I couldn't risk a sloppy recollection with fact. I needed to verify everything, and it pivoted on her location.

Scrolling through emails, I found everything but the one I was looking for. I opened up seven from the Governor all in relation to her business account with us.

She owned a florist business by the name of Rose Buds. When she first approached me, we laughed about the name of the company, but she said it always made her smile, and she hoped it would bring joy to others. It must have held appeal because Rose Buds grew from a single location to a nationwide franchise.

I had to shake aside my personal recollections of the woman and dwell on the hard facts. Governor Behler's first name was Marian. She was fifty-six and hailed from a family of six children. Her parents were into scrap metal and had struck a small fortune before Marian graduated from diapers. As with most Governors, she was wealthier than God and didn't draw a salary from the state. She viewed it as her duty to be used in any capacity the State required of her. When I had asked about her decision to get into politics, she told me it's up to each of us to use our talents to the best of our abilities.

I took a deep breath. I doubt she referred to a natural talent for taking people out.

Where the hell was the email where she mentioned going away? I knew she had put it in writing. My eyes went to the phone on my desk. I had no other choice. "Vanessa? This is Raymond Hunter—"

"One minute—"

"No, please don't put me on hold," I said.

"I'll get the Governor for you."

"No, there's no need to bother her."

"Okay." Vanessa dragged out the word.

Vanessa was her assistant for nearly two years. I had met her in person and could envision her biting on the tip of a nail while on the phone with me.

"I just need to verify when she's going away again. I have some papers for her sign. She mentioned Niagara Falls."

"Yeah, she's going this weekend."

This weekend? My heart cinched in my chest. That was tomorrow.

"No, wait a minute." Vanessa paused and laughed. She must have removed the finger from her mouth. "I'm a week ahead of myself. She goes on the twelfth. Well, she leaves on the eleventh, but she'll be gone that weekend. It's been a long week."

It's been a long week? It's been a long twenty-four hours. "Thanks."

"So you want to make an appointment? I can squeeze you in before she leaves."

Maybe I wasn't ready for this mission. "The paperwork's not quite ready. I just wanted to know the timetable I'm looking at. I'll call when she gets back. So she's expected back on the—"

"Fourteenth, yes, Mr. Hunter."

"Thanks." It was merely a token word and served as a closure to the conversation. I had the information I needed. The location and date had been confirmed. Christian would have to accept it was just over his mandated week.

I would be killing Governor Behler.

As the sentence repeated in my head, the main verb punched out more each time. "I'm going to *kill* Marian."

First I had things to do. Whatever the Governor's purpose it was likely I'd need to look the part to fit into her world. Passing Serena's cubicle, I said, "I'm stepping out."

She looked up from her computer monitor. Her eyes said, *but you just got here*. Verbally she just thanked me for notifying her.

I drove to Salvatore's Clothier, a designer fashion boutique with the wealthy man as its target, on the outskirts of the city.

They only carried high-end items, with the lowest priced item likely being a belt at five hundred dollars. The effects of the downed economy weren't seen here, and it would be easy to fall prey to the thinking that it held no impact. It was effortless to dismiss troubles when one wasn't personally affected.

"May I help you?" The sales associate must have been a size zero. Her black hair was slicked back into a tight ponytail, and she wore an Armani dress suit complete with stilettos. Her feet must have killed her by the end of the day. My wife bitched enough about heels after a four-hour wedding and reception.

"I need a tuxedo. Armani. Double-breasted jacket. Wing-tipped collar shirt and black cummerbund to match the suit. A bowtie, as well."

The clerk's mouth lifted. Her eyes read of calculating how much commission she'd receive. "Certainly. A size thirty-eight waist, am I right?"

I nodded. She did her best to impress me, but it would take more than that. These people were trained to visually assess a person's measurements.

She came back minutes later, and I walked up to the till. "I want the finished suit to be ready for pick up at your Niagara Falls, New York location."

The clerk's eyes fell. "Sir, we don't have a location there."

"This was a waste of time." I placed my Visa back into its slot in my wallet.

"No, no, sir. We do have an affiliate store. I can arrange this for you."

Now she was starting to impress me. "Good then. I need it ready no later than June the eleventh, noon."

"Of course. We can call you once it's ready."

"No calls. I will just show up, and I expect it to be ready. But you should make note of a new number for the files."

"Go ahead." She smiled. Our connection existing solely on the dollar signs she saw in me.

I gave her my cell number. At least if something went wrong, I would receive the call, not Brenda.

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