

THE DEFENCE

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CHAPTER ONE

“Do exactly as I tell you or I’ll put a bullet in your spine.”

The accent was male and Eastern European. I detected no tremors or hints of anxiety in his voice. The tone sounded even and measured. This wasn’t a threat; it was a statement of fact. If I didn’t cooperate, I would be shot.

I felt the unmistakable electric pressure from a handgun pressed into the small of my back. My first instinct was to lean in to the barrel and spin sharply to my left, turning the shot away from my body. The guy was probably right-handed, which meant he was naturally exposed on his left side. I could throw an elbow through that gap into the guy’s face as I turned, giving me enough time to break his wrist and bury the weapon in his forehead. Old instincts, but the guy who could do all of those things wasn’t around anymore. I’d buried him along with my past. I’d grown sloppy. That’s what happens when you go straight.

Without pressure on the faucet, the patter of water falling on porcelain faded. I felt my fingers shaking as I raised my wet hands in surrender.

“No need for that, Mr. Flynn.”

He knew my name. Gripping the sink, I raised my head and looked in the mirror. Never saw this guy before. Tall and slim, he wore a brown overcoat over a charcoal suit. He sported a shaved head, and a facial scar ran vertically from below his left eye to the jawline. Pushing the gun hard into my back, he said, “I’ll follow you out of the bathroom. You’ll put on your coat. You’ll pay for breakfast, and we’ll leave together. We’re going to talk. If you do as I tell you, you’ll be fine. If you don’t—you’re dead.”

Good eye contact. No blushing of the face or neck, no involuntary movement, no tells at all. I knew a hustler when I saw one. I

knew the look. I'd worn it long enough. This guy was no hustler. He was a killer. But he was not the first killer to threaten me, and I remembered I got clear last time by thinking, not panicking.

"Let's go," he said.

He stepped back a pace and held up the gun, letting me see it in the mirror. It looked real: a snub-nosed, silver revolver. I knew from the first second the threat was genuine, but seeing the short, evil weapon in the mirror set my skin alive with fear. My chest began to tighten as my heart stepped on the gas. I'd been out of the game too long. I would have to make do with thinking *and* panicking. The revolver disappeared into his coat pocket and he gestured toward the door. The conversation appeared to be over.

"Okay," I said.

Two years of law school, two and half years clerking for a judge, and almost nine years as a practicing attorney, and all I managed to say was *okay*. I wiped my soapy hands on the back of my pants and ran my fingers through my dirty-blond hair. He followed me out of the bathroom and across the floor of the now-empty diner, where I lifted my coat, put it on, slid five bucks under my coffee cup, and made for the door. The scarred man followed me at a short distance.

Ted's Diner was my favorite place to think. I don't know how many trial strategies I had worked through in those booths, covering the tables with medical records, gunshot wound photos, and coffee-stained legal briefs. In the old days, I wouldn't have eaten breakfast at the same place every day. Way too risky. In my new life, I enjoyed the routine of breakfast at Ted's. I'd relaxed and stopped looking over my shoulder. Too bad. I could've used being on edge that morning: I might have seen him coming.

Walking out of the diner into the heart of the city felt like stepping into a safe place. The sidewalk bustled with the Monday-morning commute, and the pavement felt reassuring under my feet. This guy wasn't going to shoot me in New York City, on Chambers Street, at eight fifteen in the morning in front of thirty witnesses. I stood to the left of the diner, outside an abandoned hardware store. I felt my face reddening with the pinch that November brings to the wind as I wondered what the man wanted. Had I

lost a case for him years ago? I certainly couldn't remember him. The scarred man joined me at the boarded-up window of the old store. He stood close so we couldn't be separated by passersby. His face cracked into a long grin, bending the scar that bisected his cheek.

"Open your coat and look inside, Mr. Flynn."

My hands felt awkward and clumsy as I searched my pockets and found nothing. I opened the coat fully. On the inside I saw what looked like a rip, as if the silk lining was coming away from the stitching. It wasn't a rip. It took me a few moments to realize there was a thin black jacket inside my coat, like another layer of lining. I hadn't seen it before. This guy must have slipped the jacket sleeves into my coat when I was in the bathroom. Slipping my hands across my back, I found a Velcro seam for a pocket that sat low down, just above my waist. Pulling it around so I could get a look at it, I tore open the seam, put my hand inside, and felt a loose thread.

I pulled the thread from the hidden pocket. But it wasn't a thread.

It was a wire.

A red wire.

My hands followed it to what felt like a thin plastic box and more wiring, and then to two slim, rectangular bulges in the jacket that sat on either side of my back.

I couldn't breathe.

I was wearing a bomb.

He wasn't going to shoot me on Chambers Street in front of thirty witnesses. He was going to blow me up along with God knew how many victims.

"Don't run, or I detonate the device. Don't try to take it off. Don't attract attention. My name is Arturas." He pronounced it *Ar-toras* through his continuing smile.

I took in a sharp gulp of metallic air and forced myself to breathe it out slowly.

"Take it easy," said Arturas.

"What do you want?" I said.

"My employer hired your firm to represent him. We have unfinished business."

My fear subsided a little: This wasn't about me. It was about my old law firm, and I thought I could palm this guy off on Jack Halloran. "Sorry, pal. It's not my firm anymore. You're talking to the wrong guy. Who do you work for, exactly?"

"I think you know the name. Mr. Volchek."

Oh shit. He was right. I did know the name. Olek Volchek was head of the Russian mob. My former partner, Jack Halloran, had agreed to represent Volchek a month before Jack and I split. When Jack took on the case, Volchek awaited trial for murder—a gangland hit. I never got to look at the papers in the case or even meet Volchek. I'd devoted that entire month to defending Ted Berkley, a stockbroker, on an alleged attempted kidnapping charge—the case that broke me, completely. After the fallout from that case, I'd lost my family and then lost myself in a whiskey bottle. I got out of the law almost a year ago with what was left of my soul, and Jack had been only too happy to take my law firm. I hadn't set foot in a courtroom since the jury delivered their verdict in the Berkley case, and I hadn't planned on returning to the law anytime soon.

Jack was a different story. He had gambling problems. I'd heard recently he planned to sell the firm and leave town. He probably split and took Volchek's retainer with him. If the Russian mob couldn't find Jack, they would come looking for me—for a refund. Cue the strong-arm routine. With a bomb on my back, what does it matter that I'm bankrupt? I'll get him the damn money. It was going to be okay. I could pay this guy. He wasn't a terrorist. He was a mobster. Mobsters don't blow people up who owe them money. They just get paid.

"Look, you need Jack Halloran. I've never met Mr. Volchek. Jack and I are no longer partners. But it's okay; if you want your retainer refunded, I'll gladly write you a check right now."

Whether or not the check would cash was another issue. I had just over six hundred dollars in my account, my rent was overdue, and I had rehab bills I couldn't pay and no income. The rehab fees were the main problem, but with the amount of whiskey I was putting away, I would've died if I hadn't checked myself into a clinic and gotten help. In counseling, I'd realized that there was no amount of Jack Daniel's that could've burned away the memory of what

happened in the Berkley case. In the end, I'd gotten clean of booze and I was two weeks away from securing a final agreement with my creditors. Two weeks away from starting all over again. If the Russian wanted more than a few hundred bucks, I was screwed—big-time.

"Mr. Volchek does not want his money. You can keep it. After all, you'll earn it," said Arturas.

"What do you mean *earn* it? Look, I'm not in practice anymore. I haven't practiced law for almost a year. I can't help you. I'll refund Mr. Volchek's retainer. Please just let me take this off," I said, gripping the jacket, ready to heave it off.

"No," he said. "You don't understand, lawyer. Mr. Volchek wants you to do something for him. You *will* be his lawyer and he will pay you. You'll do it. Or you will do no more in this life."

My throat tightened in panic as I tried to speak. This didn't make any sense. I felt sure that Jack would've told Volchek that I'd quit, that I couldn't hack it anymore. A white stretch limousine pulled up at the curb. The shining wax finish carried my distorted reflection. The rear passenger door opened from the inside, sweeping away my image. Arturas stood beside the open door and nodded at me to get in. I tried to settle myself; I deepened my breathing, slowed my heart, and tried desperately not to puke. The limo's heavily tinted windows spread an intense darkness over the interior, as if it were brimming with black water.

For a moment everything became remarkably still—it was just me and that open door. If I ran, I wouldn't get far—not an option. If I got into the car and stayed close to Arturas, I knew he couldn't detonate the device. At that moment, I cursed myself for not keeping my skills sharp. The same skills that had kept me alive on the streets for all those years, the same skills that helped me to con million-dollar-salary defense attorneys before I'd even been to law school, the same skills that would have spotted this guy before he got within ten feet of me.

I made my decision and climbed into the rabbit hole.

CHAPTER TWO

I felt the bomb pressing into my flesh as soon as I sat down.

There were four men in the back of the limo, including Arturas, who followed me inside, closed the door behind him, and sat on my left, still wearing that disconcerting smile. I could hear the engine purring, but we remained parked. The smell of cigar smoke and new leather filled my nose. More tinted glass separated the luxurious rear of the vehicle from the driver.

A white leather gym bag sat on the floor.

To my right, two men in dark overcoats filled a seat built for six people. They were freakishly large, like characters from a fairy tale. One had long blond hair tied up in a ponytail. The other had short brown hair and looked truly enormous. His head was the size of a basketball, and he easily dwarfed the big blond guy next to him, but it was his expression that frightened me the most. His face appeared to be bereft of all emotion, of all feeling, the cold, dreaded look of a half-dead soul. As a hustler, you rely on being able to spot a “tell.” You rely on your ability to manipulate emotions and natural human responses, but there’s one class of individual who’s immune to the usual moves, and every hustler can spot them and knows to stay the hell away from them—psychopaths. The giant with the brown hair looked like a textbook psycho.

The guy opposite me was Olek Volchek. He wore a black suit over a white shirt, which lay open at the neck. Graying stubble covered his face, and the same coloring ran into his hair. He might’ve looked handsome if it weren’t for a simmering malevolence in his eyes that seemed to temper his good looks. I recognized him from newspapers and TV; he was a mob boss, a killer, a drug dealer.

But he sure as hell wasn’t going to be my client.

I'd dealt with people like Volchek my whole life, as friends, enemies, and even as clients. Didn't matter if they were from the Bronx, Compton, Miami, or Little Odessa. Men like this respected only one thing—strength. As shit scared as I was, I couldn't let him see it or I was a dead man.

"I don't work for people who threaten me," I said.

"You don't have choice, Mr. Flynn. I'm your new client," said Volchek. He spoke with a thick Russian accent in slightly broken English.

"Sometimes, as you Americans say, shit happens. You can blame Jack Halloran if you like," said Volchek.

"I blame him for most things these days. Why isn't he representing you? Where is he?"

Volchek glanced at Arturas, and for a second he mirrored Arturas's indelible smile before he looked back at me and said, "When Jack Halloran took on my case, he said it was impossible to defend. I knew this already. I had four different law firms look at the case before Jack. Still, Jack could do things other lawyers could not. So I paid him and I gave Jack a job. Unfortunately, Jack couldn't hold up his end of the bargain."

"Too bad. Nothing to do with me," I said, struggling to keep the nerves from my voice.

"That's where you're wrong," said Volchek. From a gold case beside him, he removed a small chocolate-colored cigar, bit it, lit it, and said, "Two years ago I ordered a hit on a man named Mario Geraldo. I ask Little Benny to do it for me. Benny did his job. Then he got caught and he talked to FBI. Benny will give evidence at my trial that I ordered the hit. All the lawyers I spoke to said that Benny would be the prosecution's star witness. His evidence will convict me. No doubt about it."

My jaw was clenched so tight it began to ache.

"Benny is in FBI custody. He's well protected and well hidden. Even my contacts can't find him. You're the only one who can get close to him because you are my lawyer."

He lowered his voice and said, "Before you cross-examine Benny, you will take off your jacket and, when the court is empty, we will tape the bomb underneath the chair in the witness box. Benny takes his seat, and we detonate the device. No more Benny, no more

case, no more problem. *You* are the bomber, Mr. Flynn. You'll go to prison. The prosecutor won't have enough evidence for a retrial, and I will go free."

"You're one crazy son of a bitch," I said.

Volchek didn't react at first. He didn't fly into a rage or threaten me. He just sat there for a moment before tilting his head as if he were considering his options. There was no sound, other than my heart jackknifing in my chest, and I wondered if I'd just earned myself a bullet. I couldn't take my eyes from Volchek, but I could feel the others staring at me, almost quizzically, like I was a guy who'd just put his hand into a snake pit.

"Have a look at this before you decide," said Volchek, nodding to Arturas.

Arturas picked up the white gym bag and opened it.

Jack's head was inside.

My stomach cramped. My mouth filled with saliva. I retched, covered my mouth, and coughed. I spat and fought to hold on to my senses and gripped the seat beneath me until I could feel my fingernails scraping the leather. All traces of a calm facade left me completely.

"We thought Jack could do it. We were wrong. But we take no chances with you, Mr. Flynn," said Volchek, leaning forward. "We have your daughter."

Time, breath, blood, motion—everything stopped.

"If you so much as touch her . . ."

He took a cell phone from his pants pocket and flipped it around so that I could see the screen. Amy stood on a dark street corner in front of a newsstand. My little girl. She was only ten years old. I saw her standing somewhere in New York, hugging herself against the cold and staring warily at the camera. Behind her, the news banner carried the headline on the cargo ship that sank on the Hudson on Saturday night.

I hadn't realized how much I was sweating; my shirt was soaked, along with my face and hair, but I was no longer afraid. I no longer cared about the bomb, the gun, or the pair of mute giants staring at me with their dead eyes.

"Give her back to me and I'll let you live," I said.

This produced laughter from Volchek and his crew. They knew me as Eddie Flynn, the lawyer; they didn't know the old Eddie Flynn: the hustler, the backstreet fighter, the con artist. In truth, I'd almost forgotten him myself.

Volchek inclined his head before speaking. He seemed to be considering each word carefully. "You are in no position to make threats. Be smart. Nothing will happen to your daughter if you do as I tell you," said Volchek.

"Let her go. I will do nothing until I know she's safe. Kill me if you want. In fact, you'd better kill me, because I'll go to my grave with my thumbs in your eyes if you don't let her go now."

Volchek took a pull from his cigar, opened his mouth, and for a moment, he let the smoke play over his fat lips, savoring the flavor.

"Your daughter is safe. We picked her up outside her school yesterday while she waited for the bus to take her on her field trip. She thinks the men looking after her are security guards, working for you. You've had death threats in the past, and she knows this. Your ex-wife thinks Amy is on the school trip, hiking in Long Island. The school believes she's with you. She won't be missed for a day or two. If you refuse to carry out your instructions, I will kill her. But that will be a relief. Your daughter will suffer if you don't cooperate. Some of my men . . ."

He trailed off deliberately, pretending to search for the right words, letting my imagination build me a nightmare. My whole body tensed, as if preparing to repel a physical attack. I felt adrenaline washing my system with rage.

"Well, some of my men have *unusual appetites* for pretty little girls."

I lunged at Volchek. Out of my seat before I knew what I was doing. Cramped, no purchase, ducking my head, but fired up, I still managed a decent right cross that connected sharply with Volchek's left cheek. The cigar went flying out of his filthy mouth. My left hand drew back, and I steadied myself before I punched him in the throat.

Before I could throw that second punch, a huge hand grabbed me and picked me clean off the floor. Turning, I saw the giant psycho had taken hold of me. He was about to put me on my ass like an errant child when my old habits took over. My right hand grabbed

for his face, hard, driving my fingernails into his fleshy forehead. It was an automatic, unconscious response and distraction. My left hand slipped into the big guy's jacket, and I lifted his wallet. It took half a second. Fast and soft. I hadn't lost much speed over the years after all. It was a clean lift. The big guy hadn't noticed; he was too busy trying to take my head off. As I slipped the wallet into my pocket, a fist the size of a dinner plate appeared in front of my face. I turned away from the blow and felt the impact burn across the back of my skull. I fell, smacking my head on the limo floor.

I stayed on the deck and felt the pain roaring into my head. It was my first pocket dip in fifteen years. It was instinct; it just happened because that's who I was.

No—it's who I *am*.

The skills and techniques that I'd developed and used as a successful con artist—distraction, misdirection, persuasion, suggestion, the load, the switch, the drop—I'd used these methods just as much on the street all those years ago as I had for the past nine years in the courtroom. I hadn't really changed. I'd just changed the con.

My eyes and my mind closed as I gave in to the thickening dark.

CHAPTER THREE

I woke up on leather seats, the back of my head aching. One of the gorillas held a bag of ice on my neck. It was the big blond guy who looked as if he'd just lost his spot in a Swedish heavy metal band. The sweet, acrid smell from Volchek's cigar made me feel sick. I figured that I'd been picked up from the floor of the limo and dumped in the seat. My eyes burned a little from the smoke, but it took me only a second to realize the giant psycho who'd knocked me out was no longer in the car. I took the ice pack and dropped it to the floor.

"We're at the courthouse now," said Arturas.

I sat up.

"Why are we at the courthouse?" I said.

"Because Mr. Volchek's trial starts this morning," said Arturas.

"This morning?" I said. I summoned the image of my daughter on Volchek's phone and felt the anger building more pain behind my neck and iron tension in my muscles.

"Trial starts in an hour. Before you go, we need to know that you can do this. Otherwise we kill you now and your family later," said Arturas. He took out his revolver and placed it on his folded knee.

Arturas handed me an expensive-looking glass with a splash of urine-colored liquid swilling within. It smelled like bourbon. I downed it and felt that familiar, sour heat. It was my first drink since I'd checked out of rehab for alcohol addiction. For a second I thought about how much money I still owed the clinic, then dismissed the thought. There was a time and place for falling off the wagon, and right then seemed as good a time as any. I held my hand out for another, and Arturas spilled more of the liquor into my glass from a matching crystal decanter. I swallowed it fast and

enjoyed the burn. A shudder ripped through my body from the strong alcohol, and I shook my head. I was trying to clear my mind, like shaking a Magic 8-Ball; I didn't come up with any answers.

"Where's my daughter?"

"Safe and happy for now," said Arturas. He poured me another drink. I tucked that shot away and started thinking.

"Why'd you kill Jack?" I asked.

Volchek nodded to Arturas; he was happy to let him fill in the details.

"All of the lawyers we saw said Benny's evidence would convict Volchek. So it made sense just to kill Benny; it's a simple solution, but we can't find him. We . . . *persuaded* Jack to wear the jacket, so we could kill Benny when he got to court. But he couldn't do it."

I wondered what kind of persuasion they'd tried on Jack. No doubt he would've been tortured. He was an asshole and a gambling addict, but he had been my partner, and my feelings toward him softened a little then. Whatever Jack used to be, he wasn't cut out to carry a bomb. Most days he was lucky if he could carry his briefcase without tripping over his own feet. They must have worked him pretty hard.

"Why Jack?" I asked.

"It had to be a certain kind of lawyer. We know you and Jack started that firm with loan-shark money. Jack had a bad reputation for lying and not paying his debts. He needed money; clients started leaving the firm after you quit, and we needed someone who could carry the bomb through security. Security at the courthouse is good. It will be better today. We couldn't smuggle a bomb in there; everybody's searched going in, body scanned and then searched again—everyone except you and Jack. We know this. We watched both of you walk into that court building every day for months. Neither of you were ever searched. The security guards let you two straight through—like old friends. We told Jack what we told you; plant the bomb and take the hit."

Arturas leaned back in this seat and shot a quick glance at Volchek. It was almost like they were a tag team; Arturas had laid out the facts, straight and clear. After that, he seemed happy to let his boss handle the intimidation.

"Jack sat where you are now, Mr. Flynn, just three days ago. He wore the same jacket as you, with the same bomb inside. We told him what we told you. I opened the door of this car and told him to go and do his job," said Volchek, lowering his eyes to the floor.

His head came up through the pall of smoke, framing his face in the gray mist as he continued. "Jack froze. He shook like a . . . what you call it? Epileptic? Like he was having a fit. He had piss running down his leg. We closed the door and took him to our place."

He sucked on the cigar again and watched the warm glow at the tip.

"I tied him to a chair. I tell him I will kill his sister if he doesn't do as I ask. Victor here"—he pointed at the blond guy—"brings the sister to us. I take my knife and I cut her face in front of him. '*Will you do it now?*' I ask him. Nothing. I go to work on her with my knife and he just sits there."

I could almost feel a clamp coming down on my chest. This monster had my little girl. A noise startled me slightly; my knuckle joints cracking with the tension in my fist. In my other hand I held the empty bourbon glass, and I thought about punching it into Volchek's eye before deciding against it. Given that my last attempt at taking him on had gone so badly, I didn't want to take another shot.

Not yet.

"I realize then that I could not rely on Jack. Before I kill him, I gave the sister some satisfaction. I hand her my knife. I helped her cut him, cut him bad."

A hellish fire kindled in his gaze, bathing his eyes in light. He appeared to find the memory delicious.

"Jack was in over his head, so I cut it off and gave it to his sister before I killed her, too. She was brave. Not like her brother."

I looked at the gym bag on the floor, now mercifully closed, and thought of Jack. My opinion swung back to hating him. If I could, I would have kicked his severed head into the Hudson. Just plain kicked the shit out of it. Jack deserved to lie at the bottom of the river next to that sunken ship.

“We don’t have time for a dry run for you,” continued Arturas. “You take the bomb in now, Mr. Flynn. Calm yourself. Remember your daughter. You get the bomb in—you are a step closer to her. If you get caught, you go to jail for trying to blow up a public building. You’d get life, no parole. What do you think?”

I thought he was right. People who try to blow up public buildings in this city don’t usually fair too well in sentencing. I would be in the running for life imprisonment without doubt. The only saving grace would be that I’d planted the bomb because they’d threatened my daughter. Extreme duress isn’t an absolute defense, but I might avoid life.

That sickening smile spread over Arturas’s face once again. I almost got the impression that he could guess what I was thinking. Volchek stubbed out his cigar and peered at me through the dying smoke. I thought that they were both intelligent, ruthless men, but each had a different kind of intelligence. Arturas seemed to be an adviser, the man with the plan who thought through the eventualities and carefully weighed up the risks, a calculated thinker. His boss was way different. Volchek’s movements were slow and graceful, like a big cat sitting in the long grass, stalking its prey; his intellect was primal, instinctual—almost feral. My instinct told me that these men weren’t going to let me live to tell my tale, no matter what happened.

“I haven’t set foot in that building in a long time. What makes you think I’m going to be able to just walk in today without being searched?”

“You know the security guards and, more important, they know you,” said Arturas. His voice began rising, and he sat forward to hammer home his point. “We’ve been watching the courthouse for a long time, lawyer. I’ve spent nearly two years planning this to the last detail. Whoever carries the bomb has to be someone the guards trust, someone they least expect. There is no other way of getting a bomb into that building. I’ve watched you myself, running through the doors late for court, waving at the guard on the desk when you jog through the sensors and set off the alarm. They ignore it and wave you on. You talk to the guards. They know you. They even take your calls for you.”

I didn't carry a cell phone. I never liked the thought of anyone being able to pin my location to the nearest cell phone tower. It was a hangover from the old days that I'd never shaken off despite Jack having bought me more than one cell phone. I lost them all. When I was practicing, I'd be in the courthouse most of the day. If anyone needed me urgently, they rang the pay phone in the lobby. Usually somebody in security had a good idea what court I'd be in and they'd come get me. A couple of bottles of whiskey for the security guys at Christmas and a basket each at Thanksgiving was a small price to pay for that kind of help.

My head began to clear a little.

"Why can't you kill this guy some other way? A sniper could take him out as he travels to court."

Arturas nodded. "I've thought about that. I've thought over every possibility. We don't know where he is or how he will get to court. This is the only way. We had lots of law firms look at the case. Those big firms practiced all over the city. You and Jack had nearly all of your cases here, in Chambers Street. You got to know the staff. Those other lawyers charge nine hundred dollars an hour. You think they have time to talk to a security guard? No. I knew this had to be the way the very first time I saw you and Jack run through security, setting off the alarm, and no one batted an eyelid. You showed me the way."

Arturas was the brains here. This was clearly his plan. He seemed somehow detached, coldly rational, and I imagined he'd be that way even when it came to pulling the trigger. The opposite could've been said for Volchek. Even though he appeared calm after I'd hit him, I could sense that a monster lay behind his restrained pose, pawing at the surface, ready to break free at any moment.

I put my head in my hands and breathed deeply and slowly.

"There is one more thing, Mr. Flynn," said Volchek. "You should know that we are fighters. We are proud. We are Bratva: This means *brotherhood*. I trust this man." He put his hand on Arturas's shoulder. "But much can go wrong. You must get the jacket inside. Your daughter's death is one phone call away. You will get in. I know this. I can see a fighter in you, too. Do not fight me."

He paused to light another cigar.

“Arturas and I came here twenty years ago with nothing. We spilled much blood to get where we are, and we will not run without a fight. But we are not stupid men. The trial is scheduled to last for three days. We are giving you two days. We cannot risk more. Two days to get Little Benny onto that seat so we can kill him. If he is not dead before four o’clock tomorrow, I have no choice. I will have to run. The longer the case goes on, the more likely the prosecutor will try to revoke my bail. A nine-hundred-dollar-an-hour lawyer told me that. You are smart enough to know he is right.”

I’d seen that happen before. Most prosecutors don’t have their most damaging piece of evidence at the arraignment when the accused applies for bail. DNA and expert evidence takes time to prepare. But by the time the case comes up for trial, the prosecution have all their ducks in a row, and if the prosecutor gets a good run on the evidence, they will make an application to the judge to revoke the defendant’s bail. That usually seals the defendant’s fate. All it takes is a small, yet deliberate, delay by the custody officer for the jury to see the defendant in handcuffs. A second’s glance at those bracelets and it’s all over—the jury will convict every time.

I nodded at Volchek. He knew that I was experienced enough to know prosecution tactics, so there was no point in denying it.

As Volchek delivered his ultimatum, he struggled to hide the brutality of his true nature from his voice.

“The court has my passport as part of my bail terms. I get merchandise flown in from Russia three times a year, by private plane to a commercial airstrip not far from here. That plane arrives tomorrow at three o’clock and leaves at six. If Benny is still alive at four—you’ve run out of time. I will need to leave the court at four to make the plane. That plane is my last chance to get out of the United States. I want to stay. I want to fight. Little Benny must die before four tomorrow, or I will kill you and your daughter. Know this as a solemn vow.”

The whiskey glass shattered in my hand.

I felt like I was falling. My body slumped, my jaw trembled, and I shut my teeth tight to keep them from rattling. Blood dripped from a cut in my palm, but I couldn’t feel the pain. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t think. My breath escaped in a short, low moan.

If anything happened to Amy, the pain would kill me. I could feel my brain, my muscles, my heart, burning with the mere thought of that agony. My wife, Christine, had put up with a lot from me: the long hours in the office, the three a.m. phone calls from police precincts all over the city because the cops arrested one of my clients, the missed dinner dates and excuses I made for myself that I was doing it all for her and Amy. When I hit the bottle a year ago, she threw me out. I'd lost one of the best things I'd ever had. If I lost our daughter? I couldn't even begin to contemplate that horror.

From somewhere I heard the voice of my father, the man who'd taught me the grift, the man who'd told me what to do if I ever got made during a con—*hold it together no matter what*.

I closed my eyes and silently prayed, *Dear God, help me. Please help my little girl. I love her so much*.

I wiped my eyes before the tears came, sniffed, and scrolled though the menu on my digital watch, past my alarm call, and on to the timer. I set it to countdown.

"You need to make a decision, lawyer," said Arturas, fingering the revolver.

"I'll do it. Just don't hurt Amy. She's only ten," I said.

Volchek and Arturas looked at each other.

"Good," said Arturas. "Go now and wait for me in lobby after you get through security."

"You mean *if* I get through."

"Should I make your daughter pray for you?" said Volchek.

I didn't answer. I got out of the limo alone and saw Arturas looking up at me from the car as I stepped to the sidewalk.

"Remember. We are watching you, and men are watching your daughter," Arturas said.

I nodded and said, "I won't fight you."

I lied.

Just as they'd lied to me. No matter what they said, no matter what they promised me, come four o'clock tomorrow, even if Benny should be reduced to a stain on the courthouse ceiling by then, they weren't letting Amy go. They were going to kill me and my little girl.

I had thirty-one hours.

Thirty-one hours to double-cross the Russian Mafia and steal my daughter back. And I had no clue how to do it.

I folded my coat around me. Buttoned it, flipped the collar, and turned toward the courthouse. My father's voice still played softly in my ear—*hold it together*. My hand had stopped bleeding. It felt even colder now; my breath seemed to freeze and fall in front of me. As that cold mist cleared, I saw something that I'd never seen before in nine years of daily practice at that courthouse—a line of maybe forty people comprised of reporters, lawyers, witnesses, defendants, and TV crews—all of them waiting to get through security.