

GODSLAUGHTER

A SUSPENSE NOVEL

BY

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Uncorrected proof

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Prologue

St. Mary's County, Maryland

Wednesday, 1:14 am

The road appeared just like any other country road; one lane in each direction, faded striping, lined with lanky loblolly pines on both sides, and illuminated only by the moonlight, when and if the moon bothered to show up. It was miles removed from any major highway, and the only sound was the *swish-swish* of a 13-point buck moving majestically through the woods. As the brown-coated animal approached the road, the faint drone of an automobile could be heard in the distance. Hearing no other sound, the buck quickly crossed the road before the automobile's headlights came into view.

The car's engine slowed, and the car, with Maryland tags, came to a stop on the side of the road near an opening in the trees. Three other sets of headlights were visible farther down the road and were slowly approaching.

With the car's engine still running, a man climbed out of the driver's seat and pushed open a wrought-iron gate stretched across the opening in the trees. On the other side was an unpaved driveway that led deep into the woods. The man got back in his car and drove down the driveway. Two of the three cars that were approaching followed the first car into the darkness of the woods. One car had Pennsylvania tags, and the other had Delaware tags. The final car, with Maryland tags, drove just past the gate, then stopped. The engine and the lights switched off. A man, roughly six feet seven in height, got out.

The man, wearing an Army combat camouflage uniform that meshed with the late summer foliage, walked to the mouth of the driveway and poised himself against a tree, making him almost impossible for passers-by to see him unless he revealed himself. And he would do just that if some poor inquisitive soul dared to figure out what was at the end of that driveway.

What was there was very nondescript. The driveway ended abruptly at a bank of trees, and a narrow, almost invisible trail led to a circular clearing in the trees. At the center of the clearing, a 25-foot diameter patch of dirt dotted with a

few tufts of grass and a mixture of fresh and decaying leaves, sat a bunch of smooth stones arranged in a circle, with ashes in the center. At 5-foot intervals along the edge of the clearing were Tiki torches. To the casual observer, it appeared to be a camping site. But this was private property, converted to be a clandestine meeting spot, that due to the curving of the tree branches above forming a natural canopy, was invisible even to aircraft.

Three white men and three black men climbed out of the three cars that had parked at the end of the driveway. Each carried a folding chair. Using flashlights, they trudged along the path until they came to the clearing. One man lit two of the torches using a cigarette lighter, but left the others untouched. They arranged the chairs around the circle of stones and sat down.

They remained silent for a moment, listening and looking around to ensure there were no interlopers or eavesdroppers nearby. The site was fairly remote, with no dwellings or other buildings within a half mile. But their paranoia and need for extreme secrecy demanded that they be extra careful and vigilant.

Satisfied that no other human was anywhere within earshot, one of the black men, the leader of the group, broke the silence. "I have an update on Gary Walls."

The other men leaned forward in interest.

"The Southern District, Georgia sector reports that Mr. Walls was located. He has been duly silenced."

Another man, wearing a gray suit, answered. "That's good news."

The leader said, "Indeed it is. If Mr. Walls had told any more preachers about us, we might have had to suspend operations. And that, gentlemen, is not an option." He looked around at the other men, the orange glow from the Tiki torches flickering on his face. "I hope we're on the same page here."

The other men nodded.

"Good. Our man in the Georgia sector is working to silence any other preachers he may have told." The leader looked at the man in the gray suit. "What about the preacher he talked to at the conference?"

The man with the gray suit said, "The plan is in place. Roth's going to take care of that tomorrow, during the rally."

"Make sure Roth knows to do it before he talks to any media. We don't want him blabbing to any news stations about what he knows."

"Don't worry. Once we take care of this, the Maryland and D.C. sectors should be sound."

"Good." The leader looked at another man. "Any news from the Pennsylvania sector?"

The Pennsylvania sector leader said, "Nothing to report."

"Delaware sector?"

The man representing Delaware said, "Nothing to report."

"So, after we take care of the preacher, we can confirm that there are no security risks in this district."

The men nodded again.

"Good. We can't afford for anyone to find out about us. It was a huge mistake bringing Gary Walls into our fold to begin with. My team is working on tightening up vetting procedures so that this does not happen again. Gentlemen, I'll stress again that in order for us to accomplish our mission effectively, society at large cannot know that we exist. Our adversaries cannot win this war if they have no idea who they are fighting against. Even if we have to silence more people, we cannot give the dogs any trace of our scent. I hope we are clear on that." The leader removed a bulging folded envelope from his jeans pocket and handed it to the man with the gray suit. "Hand this to Roth on the way out. Make sure he doesn't botch this."

The man in the gray suit scoffed while taking the money. He motioned toward the driveway, where the tall man was keeping guard. "Roth is the most effective enforcer in this country. When have you ever known him to botch anything?"

"He's also the most expensive," the leader pointed out.

“Well, you get what you pay for. Trust me, in less than twelve hours, Pastor Benjamin Lyons will be dead, and no one will know what happened.”

The leader rushed to correct him. “Pastor Benjamin Lyons will be *silenced*. Remember, we do not use the word *dead* or *kill* or any such words.”

The man in the gray suit nodded while parting his jacket to put the envelope in his inner jacket pocket. As he did so, he revealed a security access badge hanging on a lanyard around his neck. The badge was labeled with the words *Senior Pastor, Harbor Christian Cathedral*.

The man with the gray suit closed his jacket and said, “My mistake. Pastor Lyons will be *silenced*.”

CHAPTER ONE

Freedom Plaza

Benjamin Lyons

11:16 am, Wednesday

Freedom Plaza,

Washington, DC

The preacher stood behind the red oak pulpit and looked out over his audience. As he prepared to speak, his heart felt both elation and disappointment. He and his pastor's coalition had been planning this Rally for Racial Reconciliation for over three months. Several suburban white churches and several urban black churches had agreed to come together to sing, preach and pray, presenting a united front against racism. He quickly estimated there were over 500 people in the crowd standing shoulder-to-shoulder on the concrete plaza in the blazing sun on an eighty-degree day. A few witnessed the event from the fringes. Some stood on the steps of the Wilson Building, the seat of the District of Columbia government, directly across Pennsylvania Avenue from the south side of the Plaza. Others filed in and out of the Marriott Hotel on the north side of the Plaza, stopping long enough to see if the event would interest them and then either staying or moving on. Despite his rally having been scheduled on a weekday morning, Pastor Ben Lyons was pleased with the turnout.

However, Pastor Lyons was not happy about the lack of news media. He saw only one reporter with a tripod-mounted camera close-by. He wasn't sure how many print reporters were there, but there didn't appear to be many. He had sent out press releases and called media contacts weeks before the event, trying to draw attention to societal racism. Pastor Lyons was disappointed there had been no requests for on-location interviews. He knew that without substantial press coverage, events like this were not as effective. *Maybe I would have drawn*

more media had I held this event on the Capitol grounds instead of the Plaza, he thought. From his vantage point on the Plaza, he could actually see the Capitol dome, even though it was fourteen blocks away.

Knowing he would probably get only 15 seconds of coverage on a local station during the C block, he would press on. He pulled a cotton handkerchief from his pants pocket and wiped the sweat from his bald, dark head. He saw he had the crowd's rapt attention—they had been waiting to hear from the man who had championed this cause of racial unity ever since his 17-year-old son disappeared in a Birmingham suburb two years before. Speculation from local residents was that his son was killed by a white police officer, then disposed of to cover up the crime. No evidence had ever come forth to support this theory, but Pastor Lyons felt in his spirit that the theory was likely correct.

Pastor Lyons adjusted the microphone, the clunking noise ringing loud over the speakers and the constant roar and drone of nearby traffic. Several pastors, both black and white, stood behind him on the raised platform, fanning themselves under a green tent. Feeling their energy, he started his speech. "First of all, I want to thank all of you for being here today. It warms my heart to know that so many of you are willing to come together to present a united front, to show our elected officials, our communities, our families and our churches that people of different racial backgrounds can lock arms together, despite the continued racial animosity that exists in our country."

His remarks earned a few amens from the crowd. He looked over briefly and saw that the news crew was recording his comments on camera. Pastor Lyons couldn't see what station was recording him. He hoped it was the AP, or maybe Reuters, which gave him the chance of getting broader coverage beyond the local channels.

He acknowledged a few key individuals who were there, men and women who had helped him to organize the rally, and several who weren't—his wife, who was at his upper northwest Washington church preparing a luncheon for rally organizers, several D.C. councilmembers, the mayor, a few other prominent pastors. For good measure, he threw in the reps the National Park Service, with jurisdiction over Freedom Plaza.

Pastor Lyons continued. “We stand just across the street from the hotel where Dr. Martin Luther King wrote his ‘I Have a Dream’ speech, and this plaza is named in honor of him. It is unfortunate that although we have made a few strides in the area of race relations, the—”

They were the last words out of his mouth before something slammed into the outer corner of the pulpit and shattered a chunk into splinters. A few seconds later, Pastor Lyons jerked back and then fell backward on the raised platform.

The crowd stood shocked for a moment. Someone yelled, “He’s been shot!” Then, chaos broke loose. Amid screams, shouts, and confusion, some spectators dropped to the ground. The rest of them scattered in various directions, causing traffic to screech to a halt on Pennsylvania Avenue and on 15th Street to avoid hitting them. The spectators spewed into the street as fluid as water, knocking down the green metal barriers that surrounded the Plaza, some tripping and falling over them. The pastors standing on the platform ran to the rear and crouched down behind it. A few bravely ran up to the platform to attend to Pastor Lyons. They could see the jagged hole in his jacket just above his waist, and the widening pool of red moisture surrounding it.

A few spectators ran up the steps and inside the Wilson building, which alerted the guards inside to the melee. “Somebody’s shooting,” the spectators yelled. The lieutenant in charge of the guards quickly sprang into action. Using an active shooter scenario, he ordered the building shut down, and sent word through the building’s intercom that all employees should shelter-in-place, at least until they can ascertain there was no greater threat. He ordered another guard to dispatch police and an ambulance to Freedom Plaza, although myriads of people had dialed 911 on their cell phones.

Two police officers, who were already in the area, sprinted to the Plaza, guns drawn, to see what was going on and to mitigate any threat. After seeing the officers and deciding there was no longer an immediate threat, the people that remained at Freedom Plaza gathered around the pastor and prayed. The pastor had slipped into unconsciousness. A woman cradled his head in her lap and rebuked whatever demons interrupted a peaceful event with sickening violence.

A man knelt next to the pastor, his head nodding as the woman prayed, his hand laid on the pastor's shoulder. His actions appeared genuine and caring to everyone around him, but were as fake as the knockoff Gucci loafers he wore.

This man had not only engineered the attack, but secretly hoped that the pastor would die right there on the Plaza.

Wynn Delano

9:30 am the same day

Freedom Plaza

The assignment editor had called him earlier that morning on his day off. "Windy, get down to Freedom Plaza. Pastor Lyons is giving some sort of rally down there. I'll shoot you the NR."

Wynn Delano, a one-man-band reporter at local station NewsNetwork 10, had only been at the station for a year, not long enough to ruffle feathers by refusing to work on his day off. And besides, all the station's other reporters were across town covering the aftermath of a violent storm that had blown through the night before. Wynn was often assigned to do filler stories that aired after sports, stories not important enough to merit airing during the coveted A block. Wynn knew that almost every producer in town thought Pastor Lyons to be a blowhard using his son's disappearance as an opportunity to gain publicity for himself and his church. Most producers had decided to no longer accommodate Pastor Lyons' media hogging. But one producer for NewsNetwork 10's dinnertime broadcast was a member of Lyons' church. Wynn was assigned just so the producer could save face, although the story stood almost no chance of airing.

Wynn arrived at Freedom Plaza and parked his black Ford Escape in the prohibited zoning parking spots along the northern neck of Pennsylvania Avenue. According to the news release that his station had sent to his cell phone, the rally was scheduled to start at ten; at least three hundred people were already present and watching the stage hands as they installed sound equipment. A group of nattily dressed men and two women stood off to the side of the platform and appeared to be in an impromptu meeting. Wynn saw Pastor Lyons among the group and was tempted to approach and get comments from him before the rally

began, but decided against it. He was probably too busy and hectic right now. If need be, he could always pull Lyons to the side afterward. Best to see how the event would progress.

Wynn checked himself in his car mirror, hoping that his carefully coiffed black hair, peaches-and-cream skin, and his boyish good looks would one day win him an anchor position, or, at least, the attentions of one of the lovely young corporate ladies he had seen walk past his vehicle.

Wynn popped out of the vehicle and surveyed the Plaza for a moment. He walked to the rear of the SUV, popped the hatch, and pulled out his camera, tripod, and a fistful of cords and microphones. He approached the Plaza, walked up three steps to the Plaza floor, and found an abutment, raised higher than the floor, where he could set his tripod and record the events without worrying about people walking in from of his camera.

Just as he had set up, a multi-racial choir of about 40 singers took the stage. Wynn pointed the camera toward them, found a good angle, and let the camera record. He hadn't been to church in almost four years, but from the looks of it, he would be getting plenty of church today.

Celia Rayburn

11:10 a.m. the same day

"So, did I get the job?"

That was always Celia's last question at interviews. If she had absolutely no chance at getting the job, that question would make interviewers squirm, which was her sign she should not expect a call back. But if the interviewer was engaging and encouraging, she figured she might have a shot.

The interviewer responded with, "Well, you were better than the last two candidates. We still have a few more interviews to do before we can decide who gets the job."

Ambiguous, but at least it wasn't an outright denial. Celia thanked the interviewer, expressed once again her interest in the job, and stood to leave.

Her interview was at a corner table in the food court of a sixteen-story office building directly across the street from Freedom Plaza. The manager of the pizza place had no office in the booth where he served pseudo-Italian fast food, so he would meet potential employees in the dining area. Celia didn't mind people buzzing around while she was being interviewed. Having come from a family of six siblings, not including herself, she was used to such distractions.

Celia took the escalator downstairs to the lobby and headed for the Pennsylvania Avenue exit. She felt confident the pizza place guy would call her back and offer her the job. Her ace in the hole was mentioning that she had worked in her father's restaurants in Detroit and Canada.

When Celia left the building, she saw that the rally that had begun when she entered the building was in full swing. The message of racial unity resonated with her and struck a personal chord. She was a twenty-six-year-old African American woman who, five years ago, married Justin Rayburn, a white man four years her senior. In Celia's old Detroit neighborhood among her peers, that was an act akin to a federal crime.

Celia stopped for a minute, adjusted her purse on her arm, and watched the goings-on. Her parking meter would expire in fifteen minutes, but she still had enough time to hear the words of the preacher, who had just started his speech. Her silk-linen white suit, the only one she owned, was sharp and professional, yet still lightweight enough for her to survive a few minutes in the heat, although she despised wearing it with a passion. She would have preferred to wear ripped blue jeans and a crop-top, but knew it wasn't appropriate. Her bob haircut with rose-colored streaks shone in the sunlight and danced in a slight breeze around a face the color of ceylon cinnamon and eyes big and round with full eyelashes.

Celia watched as the pastor's words were cut short with a grunt and a sonorous dull, cracking sound, as if someone had taken a sledgehammer to an old rotten oak tree. Bits and pieces of the edge of the pulpit catapulted into the air, and suddenly the preacher was on the ground. There was no sound other than the crashing of wood and the muted thud as the bullet hit Pastor Lyons' body.

Despite the chaos and screams and scattering of several people from various directions of Freedom Plaza, Celia stood transfixed, shocked, unable to believe or register what she was seeing. *Did she just see a man get shot?* She felt

the urgency and fear as people ran for their lives. She heard no gunshot, and she saw no apparent assailants, but the confusion and uncertainty of what was going on compelled her to move. She quickly ran back inside the office building and stood in the lobby, watching the scene through the floor-to-ceiling windows. She saw no less than ten people gather around Pastor Lyons' body, and several people ran up the steep stairs to the Wilson Building to promptly alert the D.C. Protective Service guards inside. And just ahead of her, there was a cameraman, standing on an abutment, who was intently recording everything around him, seemingly unconcerned about his own safety.

The sounds of sirens blared in the near distance over the noise of traffic. Celia watched as two D.C. police cruisers charged the wrong way down 15th Street and screeched to a stop on the western edge of the Plaza. Two officers emerged from each cruiser, and they immediately started to squirrel to a far corner any remaining people still on the Plaza. Within three minutes, an ambulance and ten more police vehicles pulled up. Swarms of officers in Crayola blue shirts blocked off streets around the Plaza. One officer shooed the cameraman away from his vantage point just at the edge of the Plaza and stretched yellow crime scene tape around the perimeter.

An office building security guard came to the window and stood beside Celia. "What's going on?"

"A minister got shot over there."

The security guard uttered a vulgar phrase that meant, "No kidding?" He walked out of the building, but a canvassing police officer ordered him to go back inside. The security guard quickly obeyed and stood next to Celia, watching as U.S. Park Police officers arrived, adding to the throng of cops. About fifteen police vehicles and 40 police officers, some holding assault rifles, were now milling around.

"This city," the security guard huffed. "Always something."

Despite the seriousness and the fact that a minister was shot, Celia's mind now drifted to other concerns. *Lord, how angry will my husband be if I come home too late?*

Wynn Delano

This was Wynn's big opportunity to get out of the C block dungeon. This story just turned from an insignificant fluff piece to the biggest catch in D.C. at the moment. *A shooting of a high-profile D.C. pastor, and he had caught it live on camera.* And he was the only reporter on the scene. He had already texted one of his contacts in the public relations office at the MPD, trying to get some inside information on what had happened. Now he needed to talk to some witnesses, the ones that hadn't scattered away, and get their perspective. And he needed to do it quick. He had to get this story on the air before the other stations discovered it.

Using his camera. He rolled back the footage and watch it again, trying to catch any details so he could craft more compelling questions for witnesses. As he watched the moment leading to the shooting, something caught his eye, something strange, maybe inconsequential, but suspicious.

Only 30 seconds before the shot was fired, a man, standing on the dais behind Pastor Lyons, looked up and to his right. Wynn froze the footage. Yes, the man was looking upward toward one of the hotel windows. No, this didn't look like a momentary glance at something that had just invaded his peripheral vision. Wynn slowed the footage and saw the man glanced furtively around as if to see if anyone was paying any attention to him. From what Wynn could see, all eyes were on Pastor Lyons.

The man's next move told Wynn that something was amiss. The man gently took two steps back and moved to the left, away from the pulpit and several feet away from Pastor Lyons. Several seconds later, the gunshot found its target.

Wynn continued to watch. After Pastor Lyons hit the ground, the man stood there, watching. Even as everyone else scrambled away, he stood there, for more than a few seconds, with no sense of surprise or danger. Then he ran off the platform and hid behind it. His delay in retreating would have not been noticed by the casual witness due to the chaos on the Plaza, but Wynn saw it clearly. His guy was as dubious as a three-dollar bill.

A few seconds later, a beefy police officer ordered him behind the yellow police tape stretched around the block. It was not a problem. Wynn had gotten

enough footage to fill out his story. He gathered his equipment and moved outside of the crime scene tape, looking around for the man he had seen in the video. He spotted him, standing on the other side of the Plaza, behind the crime scene tape, talking with a group of men and a woman as they watched the EMTs prepare Pastor Lyons for transport to the hospital.

Wynn ran this over in his mind. This was his chance. Being on the air before the other stations was no longer a concern. He now had an angle the other stations did not have. He was certain this man knew that the shooting was about to happen and moved out of harm's way. The other stations could only report what had happened. Wynn had a suspect.

He grabbed his equipment and hauled it to the other side of the Plaza. He set up the equipment just a few yards away from his suspect and set the camera to record. He then approached the man, who had been eyeing him since he rounded the corner to the side of the Plaza where he stood.

"Hi," Wynn said to the man, ignoring the others in the group. "I'm Wynn Delano with NewsNetwork 10. May I speak with you for a minute?"

The man, wearing a crisp black suit as if he had prepared to go to a funeral, nodded affably and said, "Sure." He moved a few yards away from the group, closer to the camera, with Wynn following.

"Again, I'm Wynn Delano." He extended his hand. "Your name is- "

The man reluctantly shook Wynn's hand, then hesitated. "Um, I'm Jonathan Newberry."

"It looks like you were close to the pastor. I wanted to get some on-the-air comments from you about the shooting." Wynn removed his notepad from his pocket. "Would that be okay?"

"I'd prefer not." The man avoided eye contact with Wynn. "My friend has been shot, and I'm not in any mood to make any comments at this time." He looked to the right and saw that the EMTs were moving the pastor on a stretcher toward the ambulance.

"I understand that, but there is some footage on the video I'd like to ask you about before I turn it over to the police."

Wynn hoped his bluff would work. He had no intention of turning the footage over to the police, and such a thing would have to be handled by his front office anyway. He was surprised that no cops had requested his footage, even though he was recording. But in this age of cell phones, umpteen people probably caught that shooting on camera. Maybe the cops didn't need his footage.

The man's eyes finally turned to Wynn. "I need to get to the hospital to see about my friend."

"Not a problem, Mr. Newberry. Maybe I could speak to you there?"

Jonathan looked at Wynn for an uncomfortably long few seconds before he said, "Yes. I should be in the waiting area."

Wynn could tell he had gotten this man's attention. "Do you know what hospital?"

"Um, I don't know yet. Maybe you could give me your card, and I'll call you once I know."

"Not a problem." Wynn pulled a card out of the cardholder in his pocket and handed it to Jonathan.

Jonathan looked at the card briefly, then moved away, saying, "I'll call you."

"Please do." Wynn watched as Jonathan joined the group again as they gathered near the ambulance. He knew Jonathan would not call him. So, that angle was dead unless he decided to bum-rush Jonathan at the hospital.

He needed someone else to comment. He looked across the Plaza, remembering earlier seeing a petite black woman with rose-colored streaks in her hair standing not far away from where his camera had been perched. He remembered her because she was pretty and because she was dressed like a professional. He needed someone like that in his life rather than the emo women he usually hung out with.

Wynn gathered his equipment again and walked to the other side of the Plaza, near the office building where he had seen the woman. If she was still there, he might kill two birds with one stone: get a comment for his story, and get her telephone number. If he did that, it would be a relatively successful day.

Jonathan did not take his eyes off him.

Celia Rayburn

There didn't appear to be an urgency of danger outside anymore, nor anything else to see, so Celia decided to get home before her meter expired and a D.C. parking control officer slapped her car with a pink love note. As she walked out of the building, a man approached her directly, as if he had every intention to speak with her and no one else.

"Did you see that?" Wynn asked her.

"See what?" Celia responded, thinking how rude of this man to ask questions before he introduced himself.

"Pastor Lyons get shot."

"Yeah. I was looking right at it."

"Would you be willing to be interviewed on camera?"

"Who are you?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." Wynn was a little miffed that he still had to introduce himself, even though he had been filing stories on the air for the station for a year now. Maybe she wasn't local, or maybe she didn't watch the news. Wynn gathered his equipment on his left arm and extended his right hand. "I'm Wynn Delano, a reporter with NewsNetwork 10."

Celia shook Wynn's hand. "Celia." She intentionally left out her last name.

"Celia, would you be willing to give an interview on camera about what you saw across the street?"

Celia quickly agreed. Being on the news would give her a readily confirmable alibi on why she was getting home so late. Plus, the exposure couldn't hurt her job prospects.

"Cool. Give me a minute to set up." Wynn found a spot directly in front where he could interview Celia against the backdrop of Freedom Plaza. Once he was set up, he motioned for her to come over and had her stand in front of the camera, her back to Freedom Plaza. Wynn pulled a notepad and pen out of his pocket, switched on the camera, and started his interview.

“Please state your full name,” Wynn asked.

Celia hesitated. Wynn quickly reassured her. “We won’t be using your full name on camera. Just for our information.”

“Okay. Celia Rayburn.”

“Celia, can you tell me what you saw over there?”

Celia recounted everything she had seen from the moment she walked out of the office building following the interview. Wynn periodically interrupted with questions to get more detail. When it was done, he switched off the camera and nodded his thanks.

“Appreciate it, Celia.” Wynn offered his business card. “You know, I’d really like to thank you by taking you to dinner.”

Celia scoffed at first, but then checked him out. He was decent looking. Not the most handsome man she had ever seen, but since she was certain she would be in divorce court with her husband within a year, she would entertain his interest. A dinner wouldn’t hurt. She wondered what it was about herself so many white boys were attracted to.

“I’ll call you,” Celia said, intending to control the communication so her husband didn’t discover.

Wynn had heard that before. He knew he would never hear from her again. “Not a problem. Call me anytime, day or night.”

Celia heard a siren and looked back at the Plaza. The ambulance, with Pastor Lyons inside, was speeding away to the hospital. Some police officers were milling about, while others were talking to the witnesses who had not run away. She watched as Wynn dismantled his equipment and made his way back over to the Plaza, hoping to speak to an on-site police supervisor about what had happened.

Celia, feeling as if there was nothing more to see, headed back to her car, knowing she would have a whopper of a story to tell when she got home.

CHAPTER TWO

Celia and Justin

12:16 p.m., Wednesday

Celia's apartment was on the 10th floor of a luxury sixteen story high-rise in Silver Spring, a city in Maryland at the upper northeastern edge of the District of Columbia. The neighborhood was downtown Silver Spring, located just over the D.C. line, boasting a large shopping and dining district. The one-bedroom apartment cost \$1700 per month and had a great view of downtown Silver Spring. It was the only apartment she had lived in since leaving Detroit five years before, and was a far cry better than any flat she had rented in the Motor City.

Yet she still dreaded coming home because of who was waiting for her inside.

When she inserted the key in the door, she hoped—prayed—that he wasn't at home. Her hopes were dashed when she opened the door, and a strong smell of hybrid strain weed assaulted her nose.

Celia rushed inside, dropped her purse on the carpet, and headed for the kitchen just to the right of the door. She grabbed the aerosol air freshener from under the kitchen counter and sprayed liberally around the living room and in the outside corridor near the door. Lord, she couldn't stand that smell. She quickly closed the door and headed to the bedroom.

Justin Rayburn lay on the queen-sized bed, a joint smoldering in the ashtray on a nightstand next to the bed. He wore only a pair of dingy, wrinkled boxer shorts. A daytime talk show was playing on the flat screen TV affixed to the wall across from the foot of the bed. Justin never took his eyes off the TV as Celia entered.

"J, I thought I told you you can't smoke in here," Celia said with a slight tremble in her voice. "This is a non-smoking building."

"Who are these people to tell me what to do in my own apartment?" Justin's defiance rode on a very smooth, deep voice. It was that voice, his

perpetual tan, his unruly brown hair, his square face and prominent cheekbones that attracted him to Celia. She was sure there were other things, but she had long forgotten them.

"It's *my* apartment," Celia said with an edge that on any other day would have earned her a smack in the face. But thanks to the effects of the weed, Justin was much too mellow now. It was a different story when he had three or four boilermakers in his system.

"How'd the interview go?" Justin feigned interest.

"Might be a possibility."

"What took you so long?"

"Something happened downtown. Somebody shot a preacher speaking at a rally. I saw the whole thing."

Justin grabbed the remote and switched channels. "Nothing on TV about it."

"It's probably gonna air on Channel 10 tonight. The reporter interviewed me."

"Why'd you do something dumb like that?"

Celia was used to Justin criticizing her, but this time, it especially bugged her. She had told him she saw a shooting, and all he could think to do was to call her dumb. Maybe she was, for thinking that Justin would care about her enough to ask how she was doing.

"Don't be dramatic. I just told him what I saw." Celia turned toward the door.

"Where are you going?" Justin asked.

"To make lunch," Celia responded. "And to put something out for dinner, if you don't mind."

Getting no further response from Justin, Celia kicked off her shoes, left the room and headed to the kitchen. The kitchen was a lot smaller than she desired, with only a stove, a refrigerator, and six feet of faux oak counter space spilt in half by a stainless-steel sink. It was a kitchen made for people who didn't use kitchens.

However, Celia, back when he first rented the apartment, didn't see it as an issue. There were so many restaurants nearby, she knew she wouldn't spend much time cooking.

She opened the refrigerator and found one package of chicken legs, the only thing edible in the fridge except for a carton of milk and two half-drunk bottles of beer. Food was scarce these days. Justin had been unemployed for several months after losing his job as a car mechanic because he couldn't stop getting high. They were two months behind in rent, and Justin's meager unemployment payments weren't helping much.

Celia's attempt to find employment was the last-ditch effort to get money flowing into the house before they got evicted. At least, that's what she wanted Justin to believe. But Celia's real plan was to make enough money so she could get as far away from Justin as humanly possible.

Celia switched on the kitchen radio, hoping the smooth sounds of Jill Scott would infuse pleasure into what had been a challenging day.

It was 5:30 pm when Justin suddenly announced, "I'm going out for a minute."

Celia knew what that meant. He was headed to a bar, where he would hang out for a few hours and then come home drunk, if he came home at all. Celia almost wished he *wouldn't* come home. When he stayed out all night, the buzz would wear off, and she stood little chance of being beaten at the least little thing she said. She tried to convince herself that when he stayed out all night, he was just sleeping it off in his car, or on a park bench somewhere. It couldn't be that he was with another woman, because who, other than her, would want a drunk, unemployed stoner? These were the things she told herself to make herself feel better. But her woman's intuition always reigned supreme, and she knew he was likely hanging out with some woman who was as much a loser as he was. But it also meant that between his episodes of intoxication and womanizing, he had little interest in her, which was all right with Celia.

At 5:58 p.m., Celia sat on her living room couch, a modernesque aqua leather one she had bought during more lucrative days from a nearby furniture store. She favored pastels, as everything else in the living room was white or pink.

She switched the flat screen TV to channel 10, and watched the teaser while she enjoyed fresh-out-of-the-oven barbecue chicken and some green beans out of a can. She was disappointed to see that the teaser did not mention the pastor's shooting.

Celia grabbed the remote and switched to another channel, and then another, and then another. All local channels had the pastor's shooting as the lead story and were working the angle that the shooting was likely a hate crime in response to the racial unity aspect of the rally. Some channels had obtained cell phone footage from attendees at the rally.

Celia turned back to channel 10, hoping that maybe they would cover the story later. She eventually watched the entire half hour telecast, but there was no mention of the Plaza shooting. Her fifteen minutes of fame dwindled to nothing.

Celia grabbed her purse and pulled out her phone and Wynn's business card. Within five minutes she had accessed several TV and print news sites on her phone-all of them listed the Plaza shooting as one of their top stories. NewsNetwork 10-nothing.

Celia read all the stories and pieced together a few facts. Police were investigating the shooting as a hate crime. They speculated that the shot likely came from a sniper in one of the buildings surrounding Freedom Plaza and that the bullet that had struck the pastor was from a military grade weapon. This wasn't a casual drive-by from some street hood. This was a carefully calculated assassination attempt.

But the best part of the story for Celia was that the pastor was still alive. In critical condition, but alive. She prayed, as she had done several times that day, that the pastor would recover from his injuries.

Then she looked at Wynn Delano's business card. She thought about calling him, if only to discover why NewsNetwork 10 had no coverage of the shooting. At least, that would be her excuse for calling. She knew that after discussing the reasons for the lack of coverage, that Wynn would segue the conversation into a more personal one. Then, she could decide if she wanted to risk cheating on her husband and go out with this guy.

After a few minutes, Celia thought the better of it and decided not to call, at least not now. She had no desire to sneak around Justin, although she was

certain he was sneaking around her. No, first things first. Get enough money, then an apartment away from Justin, then the date with the forlorn news reporter.

Celia slipped the card back into her purse, hoping that within a month, she could put that card to use.

George and Marjorie Wise

Forest Hill, Toronto

8:24 p.m.

With his stomach pleasingly overstuffed from another of his wife's fabulous dinners, George Wise headed toward his study just down the corridor from the living room. On the way, he opened a door, walked into the garage, and checked the garage side door to make sure it was locked. He then headed to his study.

He checked his postal mail immediately upon arriving. Amid the voluminous pieces of junk mail and bills was a statement from Royal Bank with his daughter's name on it. He sat at his desk and gently opened the envelope. He pursed his lips and gently shook his head as he read the numbers on the statement. He ran his hand over his closely cropped gray speckled hair as if trying to assuage a non-existent headache.

Seconds later, his wife, Marjorie, walked in. She flipped on a light switch. "Honey, what have I told you about reading in the dark?"

George did not respond to her comment, although he took pride he could still read so clearly in the dark at fifty years of age. Instead, he said, "Honey, come over here and look at this."

George watched his wife as she walked over. There were those who thought they were brother and sister because they looked so much alike. Both were thin, tall, well-spoken, and well-educated. Marjorie's dark-chocolate complexion was a tad darker than George's, but that didn't stop the comparisons.

Marjorie stood just over George's shoulder and peered at the statement. "Only \$218.00?"

"That's right."

“She had almost ten grand last year.”

“Should I be worried?”

“Maybe she has another account?”

“When she calls tonight, I’ll ask her. And if I find out Justin is bleeding her dry-”

“Now, George, please don’t go prodding into her affairs. You know how proud and independent Celia is.”

“Marge, I can’t just sit back and do nothing.”

“That’s *exactly* what you’ll do,” Marjorie said emphatically. “If Celia needs our help, she’ll tell us. The last thing I need is for your trigger-happy self to go down to Maryland and catch a case.”

The desk telephone rang, the one attached to the number for family only. George knew it was Celia, calling them faithfully as usual once per week. “He answered quickly. “Hey, Pookie.” He put the call on speakerphone so Marjorie could hear.

“Hey, Daddy.”

George noticed her voice was devoid of the usual spirit. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Celia lied. “How’s everyone?”

“Everyone’s great. Your mother’s here, too.”

“Hey, Mommy.”

“Hey, sweetie.”

“You wouldn’t believe what I saw today.”

George and Marjorie answered together. “What?”

“I was in downtown D.C. today, and this pastor who was leading a rally got shot.”

Marjorie drew in a sharp breath and covered her mouth “Oh, my God. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, Mommy, I’m fine.”

“Is he dead?”

“No. The news said he was alive.”

“Thank Jesus for that,” George chimed in. “And you saw all this happen?”

“Yeah. I was right ‘cross the street. It wasn’t like in the movies, where somebody gets shot, and blood and guts fly all over the place. He was just giving his speech, and then he just fell like somebody gave him an uppercut.”

“What were you doing in downtown D.C.?”

“Meeting a friend for breakfast,” was the quickest lie Celia could come up with. She hoped it worked.

It didn’t. George knew something was going on. He shot his wife a disappointed frown for forbidding him from prying any further. “Pookie, are you sure you’re okay? It must have been scary to see someone shot like that.”

“Yeah, it was scary. But I’m okay. It reminds me of that time you took me up near Runners Mill, and we went hunting, and you shot that deer.”

“And you cried for two days and would not eat any of the meat.”

“The funny thing was, I didn’t cry for that pastor. I don’t know why. Why would I cry for an animal, and not a human being?”

While George searched his mind for an answer that would never come, Marjorie broke in with, “Sweetheart, maybe if you knew this pastor, you’d feel differently.”

“But why should that make a difference? The man gets shot, and I feel nothing.”

“Maybe you’re distracted by something.” George hoped his subtle hint would draw something out of her on what was going on in her life. If this girl was okay, then he was a Chinese bamboo salesman.

Celia quickly skipped the subject. “How’s business?”

“Business is great. We got a write-up in one of the local papers. We were one of the 10 best charbroiled chicken restaurants for Millennials. How’s that for a ringing endorsement?”

“Wow, that’s great, Dad,” Celia said with barely detectable sarcasm. She could not understand how her father became a self-made millionaire off of his special organic recipe for charbroiled chicken. She cared little for the chicken herself, but with an average 1.2 million in sales at each of his restaurants around Ontario and in Detroit, there were a lot of customers who begged to differ. *Must be all those Millennials.*

Not that she was complaining. Once her father struck it rich, he moved the family from a rough neighborhood in Detroit to the tony Forest Hill village of Toronto. That allowed Celia to spend a few months in the splendor of wealth before she eventually hit rock bottom with Justin.

“Thanks, hon,” George replied. “Speaking of Runners Mill, we might be opening up another location there soon.”

“Dad, isn’t that a little far? It’s like a two-hour plane ride.”

“I know, but it’s a great opportunity. Rent is dirt cheap, and a good location right across from a Mickey D’s. But enough about me and my business. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, Daddy. Really.”

“You know I’m here if you need anything.”

“I know.”

“Okay, Pookie. Well, we have to hang up now. Me and your mother are going to turn in early. She’s joined a morning prayer group, and they pray at 4 in the morning.” George rolled his eyes at his wife.

Marjorie clicked her teeth at him and said to Celia, “No distractions, no TV, no cell phone. Good time to pray, sweetie.”

“Good time to sleep, too.”

Celia laughed.

Marjorie gave George a playful punch on the shoulder. “Okay, sweetie. Talk to you later.”

“Bye, Mom. Bye, Dad.”

CHAPTER THREE

On the Run

Celia Rayburn

After talking to her parents, Celia enjoyed a bath in the apartment's Jacuzzi tub, then settled in the bedroom to moisturize with Mānuka honey and shea butter and catch the ten o'clock news. Justin had not yet returned home, and she was thinking this would be another one of his overnights. It was fine with her, as she had another interview the next morning, and she didn't need any drama with Justin to affect her focus on getting a job.

Unfortunately, the ten-o'clock news had no added information on the Plaza shooting, so she watched another half-hour, then go to bed. She felt strange yet relieved that she didn't have the typical concerns about where her husband was at this time of night, but it didn't matter. Including the \$218 she had in her checking account, she squirreled away some money every now and then from Justin's unemployment checks. She hoped to have enough money to hire a divorce attorney. She was determined to do this on her own and not ask for money from her parents.

Celia turned off the TV, checked a few emails on the laptop next to her bed, and slid down under luxurious sheets. Before she closed her eyes, she remembered the glory days. She had met Justin five years ago at a Detroit disco nightclub and bonded with him over Moscow Mules until 1 in the morning. He was in town attending an automotive conference associated with his six-figure job as an automotive engineer in Baltimore. Within days of their meeting, they started dating, which caused Justin to amass huge long-distance phone bills and take weekly flights to Detroit to see her.

Celia's parents never approved of the relationship. Though they would have never approved of anyone for their baby girl who was not friendly with a Bible and had no pastor on speed-dial, they gave Justin a chance—sort of. Shortly after Celia and Justin's first official date, George and Marjorie invited Justin over for dinner. Though the Wises promoted the invitation as a get-to-know-you affair,

they intended to let him know that he would have no chance of their approval or blessings if he was not “saved, sanctified and filled with the Holy Ghost,” or became that way quickly.

During dinner, Justin would regale them of stories growing up in Baltimore, being the descendant of Scottish immigrants who fled to the ports of Baltimore during the Great Irish famine. He would try to impress them with his strong family ties—his mother and father were office workers in Leesburg, his sister was married with two children and living in Locust Point, his cousins, aunts and uncles were numerous and scattered between Maryland and Virginia; just for good measure, he even threw in a mention of his uncle, who was a pastor in Columbia, Maryland. But with all of Justin’s talk about his family, the Wises heard nothing about a spiritual side—no regular church attendance, no mention of God or Jesus, no prayer or devotional life. Their disapproval had nothing to do with Justin being white, but they sensed this guy did not have the spiritual pedigree to date their youngest daughter. Celia dismissed his parents’ concern as hyper-religious judgment. The type of man that her parents wanted for her was the churchgoing type who couldn’t have a conversation without citing Scriptures every few sentences, and Justin was definitely not that type. However, she was twenty-seven years old and felt she was old enough to make her own decisions without her parents’ intervention.

After a year of dating, Justin and Celia got married in a ceremony that her parents reluctantly paid for, only because it was traditional for them to do so and they didn’t want their daughter estranged from them. But before she moved to Maryland with her husband, her father gave her a piece of advice which she never forgot:

Make sure you have your own. Don’t mix anything of yours with his. Trust me, in this day and age, that’s the best way to go. Keep your own bank account. Get the apartment or house in your name. Never let him have that much control over you. I would say that no matter whom you married. Let him prove himself before you start bringing everything together.

That was the one piece of advice she kept. To her knowledge, Justin had no clue about the checking account, because the statements went to her parents’ house in Toronto. The apartment they shared was in Celia’s name, which was not an issue for Justin since he was so smitten he would do anything she asked.

My, how times had changed.

Celia went to sleep remembering those times and trying to put out of her mind the monster that Justin had suddenly become.

She was jerked awake by a crash coming from the living room. At first, Celia thought it was Justin in one of his drunken tirades. But when the walls thumped and shook, and another crash was heard, along with grunts and screams, terror struck Celia's heart.

She jumped out of bed and ran toward her bedroom door, forgetting she had nothing on but panties and a T-shirt. As she cracked open the bedroom door, she heard another huge thump, then the crashing of dishes and glass. Another groan and a scream rang out, this time from a voice not her husband's.

Knowing there was some type of fight going on, Celia backed up and grabbed a baseball bat from the corner of her walk-in closet. She hated her husband, but she would not let him get beat up, either. She walked out of the bedroom and turned the corner, the bat poised, ready to strike whomever her husband was fighting.

A tall man, dressed in a white T-shirt, blue jeans, and a ski mask, stood near the living room window, his back to her and about seven yards away. He knelt over Justin with his right boot on his head. He reached behind his back and pulled a pistol from under his shirt. Celia's heart went cold, and she froze, hoping that she was having only a nightmare.

The tall man aimed. Celia saw a flash and heard a small crack, like a firecracker far away, not loud enough to register much beyond her apartment. Justin's feet, bloodied from the fight, jerked and then lay limp.

Celia suppressed the urge to scream as adrenaline kicked in. She knew she could not traverse the distance between the bedroom door and the attacker, across broken glass, before he turned the gun on her. Instead, still holding the bat, she made a mad dash for the open front door, just three yards ahead of her, and did not look back. As she ran into the hallway, she heard the crunching of glass behind her, which told her that the gunman was coming after her. She screamed as loud as she could to draw attention and picked up speed running

down the hallway. Just as she reached a corner, she heard a loud clang against a fire extinguisher just inches from her and felt the pressurized chemical spray out against her side. She turned the corner just before another bullet thudded into the wall just over her head.

Celia shoved open the fire exit door and ran down a flight of stairs to the ninth floor. She continued to run down the hallway, finding herself quickly running out of breath, as she hadn't run like this in years. She took another corner, found another fire exit, and then ran back upstairs to the tenth floor. Directly across from the fire exit was the trash chute room. She opened the door and squeezed herself into the narrow room, shut the door, turned off the light, and then plastered herself against the wall so the door could be opened partway without anyone seeing her.

Her heart was beating so fiercely she could literally feel the blood pumping through her head. The brilliance and the stupidity of hiding in this trash room quickly became apparent to her. The gunman, if he were still pursuing her, would likely not think she had returned to the tenth floor. But if he found her, she had no escape. She closed her eyes and tried to pray the fear out of her trembling body, and hoped that the gunman had given up trying to find her.

2:30 a.m., Thursday

She hadn't fallen asleep, but she hadn't realized that she had been in the trash room for almost two hours. Celia was petrified to take one step out of that room. Twice, she felt bugs crawling on her naked feet, but she didn't care. What if the gunman was still standing around somewhere, waiting for her to show her face? Whenever she heard footsteps in the hallway, she squeezed her eyes shut and hoped that it was just someone coming home from a late shift.

What had her husband gotten into that someone wanted to kill him? Thanks to her father, who had owned plenty of guns during his time in Detroit, she knew enough about guns to know that the attacker's was not a typical street model. It was a pricey one, with a suppressor. Professional quality.

But then Celia had a frightening thought. What if the gunman was after *her*? She had just seen an attempted murder earlier in the day. But how would

the assailant have known anything about her, especially to have found her address so fast?

Celia hoped that the police had come by now. The fight in the apartment was loud and likely would have alerted the neighbors enough to call the authorities. But her apartment was down the hall and around the corner from where she was now, so even if they were there, she wouldn't have heard them. For a murder to have just taken place on her floor, things were eerily quiet.

She still had the bat with her, although it had dubious value against a professional quality handgun. But she couldn't stay in that trash room forever. Fortunately, no one had to dump any trash in the wee hours of the morning, or they would have felt the business end of a baseball bat from a frightened, half-naked woman.

Pulling her resolve together, she finally peeked in the hallway to see if everything was clear. She had no idea what time it was, or how long she had been in the trash room, but she deduced that a man who had just murdered someone would not be still hanging around on the tenth floor all this time. That logic emboldened her, and she stood, worked the numbness out of her legs, and gently, gradually, opened the door. She poked her head out and looked down both ends of the hallway. No one in sight.

She grabbed the bat and then gently walked out into the hallway, heading toward the corner. Once she turned the corner, her apartment would be ten doors down. She leaned against the wall and poked her head around the corner. She breathed a sigh of relief. Several police officers stood around behind a strip of crime scene tape. She left the bat behind and walked down the hallway toward her apartment. She was only ten feet away when the officers noticed her.

The officers noted that she was barely dressed. One of them said, "Ma'am, are you okay?"

"No. "Celia's sobs choked the words, and she was barely comprehensible. "I live here. That's my husband in there."

One officer wrapped his jacket around Celia, while the other went inside to gather clothes, shoes and her purse. The officers would not allow her inside, not

only because of the gruesomeness of the scene, but because the medical examiner on site would take no chances that she would inadvertently contaminate the crime scene. She changed into jeans and a pair of flats in the hallway. Because Celia was the shy and silent type, she knew none of her neighbors, but that didn't keep them from standing in the hallway next to their doors, gawking at her with feigned concern.

On instructions from one of the detectives inside, an officer on site drove Celia five miles away to the County District police station. During the ride, she checked her smartphone and saw it was almost three in the morning. Upon arrival at the station, the officer led her to the reception area, where she waited for 30 minutes. Another officer, this one wearing a navy sport coat, slacks that didn't quite match the coat, and a button down white shirt with no tie, came out to greet her. She had seen him milling around with the other cops at her apartment

"Hi, I'm Detective Frank Liskey." His white face was thick and square, his smile muted. His hair was gray, except at the roots and at the temples, where it settled into a grayish-brown. His impeccably groomed full mustache curled beyond the edges of his lips, and blue eyes greeted her. He wanted to be friendly, but he knew that the woman in front of him was probably a wreck.

Celia shook his hand, which was large and rough, but she said nothing, her mind caught in a torrent of thoughts and emotions. She accompanied the detective through a door, on the elevator to another floor, through another secured door, and into a room filled with seemingly brand-new cubicles. Other than the detective, there were only two employees present. They walked into a small conference room. Detective Liskey directed her to a chair at the conference table. He sat diagonally across from her at the end of the table.

"Mrs. Rayburn, I'm going to be working your husband's case. First of all, I'm so sorry for your loss."

Celia nodded sullenly, but said nothing. Now that the threat of being killed was not imminent, it had just registered that Justin was gone, and a deep sadness came over her.

"Are you able to answer some questions for me? I know it's early in the morning, and you're probably very tired, but the quicker we get the information we need, the better chance we have of catching your husband's killer."

Celia nodded her consent. She doubted she could get any sleep anyway.

“Great.” The detective reached for a pad and pen on a satellite table and poised them in front of him. “Why don’t you tell me what happened?”

The question triggered her memories, awful and graphic. She could only see the tall gunman reach for his pistol and fire into Justin’s head. The memory sickened her, and she felt nausea enveloping her. Even growing up on the rough streets of western Detroit, she had seen no one shot. Yet in the past 24 hours, she had seen two people gunned down. It was too much for her to take, and she stood to her feet.

“Where is your bathroom?” Celia’s face grew pale.

The detective frowned. “Out the door, to your right.”

Celia gathered her purse and hurried out the door. She found the ladies bathroom quickly. She pushed open the door, headed to a stall, slammed the stall door behind her, dropped to her knees, and vomited. When she was finished, she fell back against the stall door and burst into tears. Her own tears surprised her since there were many moments, after Justin had left her black and blue, that she wished he was dead.

A female officer came into the bathroom and knocked on the stall. “Miss, are you okay?”

“Yes.” Celia’s voice cracked. “Just give me a minute, please.”

“Of course.”

Once Celia heard the bathroom door open and close again, she reached into her purse, found tissues, wiped her face, tossed the tissues in the toilet, and retrieved her cell phone. She debated on whether she should call her parents at this hour. Her parents had been worried about her ever since she moved to Silver Spring. A call to them to tell them that Justin had been murdered was just the ticket they needed to board a plane and drag her, kicking and screaming, to Toronto. And that was not an option for Celia. She prided herself on being the most independent sibling of the family. She insisted on making it on her own, even as some of her other siblings clung tightly onto Daddy’s wallet. Not her. *Mama may have, Papa may have*

She put the phone away, sat on the bathroom floor for a few more minutes to gather herself, then she left the bathroom and returned to the conference room, where Detective Liskey and the female officer who had checked on her in the bathroom were waiting.

"I'm sorry." Celia returned to her seat. "I needed a moment."

Liskey nodded. "I understand." He scribbled a quick note, in handwriting even he had trouble understanding. *Check to see if Justin had any active life insurance policies.*

"So, what happened was this." Celia recounted her entire day, from the job interview to the moment where she returned to her apartment after Justin was shot. Liskey listened carefully, asking a few questions here and there, clarifying other points. His notes were sparse, and Celia wondered how he would remember it all. Then a quick glance at the camera on a far wall answered her question.

When Celia had finished, Liskey reared back in his chair. "Describe this guy to me."

"Tall, about six-five. White dude. Wouldn't say he was skinny, but not exactly muscular. I never saw his face. He had a black ski mask on."

"What was he wearing?"

"Jeans and a T-shirt."

"Shoes?"

"Black boots, I believe."

"And you're sure you don't know of anyone who would want to kill your husband?"

Celia shook her head. "No, I don't."

"Drug debt, maybe?"

Celia hesitated.

Liskey explained. "We found marijuana on your husband's person and in the nightstand next to your bed."

“That was my husband’s. I don’t do drugs, and I have no idea where he got his drugs from.”

Liskey jotted another note. *May be a drug hit. Check.*

“Anyone else have a key to your apartment?”

Celia thought. “No, not that I know of. Well, there’s my Dad, but he lives in Toronto.”

“Have you spoken to your parents since this happened?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Hmm.” Liskey asked her about twenty more questions before he flipped his note pad shut. “Do you have someplace to stay?”

Celia could think of at least two girlfriends who would take her in, but she just wanted to be alone. “I can just go to a hotel.”

Liskey stood. “Why don’t you do that? Get some rest, and I’ll give you a call when the medical examiner clears your apartment.”

Celia’s face turned sour. “Wait, you don’t expect me to go back to my apartment, do you? I can’t go back there. What if that guy comes back? Don’t you guys have witness protection or something like that?”

Liskey took a seat and gave Celia a serious glare. “Well, I can put you in touch with the States Attorney for assistance. But I wouldn’t count on relocation.”

“Why not?”

“There’s no continuing threat. I know the guy shot at you, but there’s no indication he plans to continue coming after you. He wore a mask, and you can’t identify him, so it’s unlikely he’s gonna pay you another visit.”

Liskey’s eyes went to the side for a few seconds before he looked at Celia again. “I’m gonna share some details about the case that I probably shouldn’t share. You’ll have to promise you’ll keep this confidential.”

Celia’s sighed. “I hope not. But I still don’t feel comfortable going back to my apartment.”

“Well, then you’ll want to get to a hotel,” Liskey said, standing again. “I’ll touch base with patrol and have an officer stationed outside until your apartment is clear. Then, the officer can accompany you to your apartment and get whatever belongings you need. And, if you don’t have any friends or relatives in town you can stay with, it might be a good idea to visit your dad in Canada for a while. I assume if we catch the guy, we can depend on your testimony at trial?”

For Celia, the thought of testifying struck the wrong chord. She was from western Detroit, and in that part of Detroit, you didn’t testify against about anything or about anybody if you wanted to stay alive. But she was not in Detroit. She was in metro D.C., and her husband had just been killed. What type of woman would not do everything possible to bring her husband’s killer to justice, especially since he had also tried to kill her, and would likely try again? She could never sleep again at night with this guy running the streets.

“Yeah, I’ll testify.”

“Great. I’m going to send Officer Fairchild back in, and she’ll have some paperwork for you to fill out, and then she’ll see about getting you a hotel room.” Liskey handed her his card. “If you need anything, don’t hesitate to call anytime.”

“Thank you.” Celia took the card and watched as Liskey left the room. Cops in Montgomery County seemed more relaxed and polite than those in Detroit, she noticed. But then again, Montgomery County didn’t have to deal with over 300 murders per year.

She again looked at her cell phone, debated calling her father, then again decided not to. She would see what options were available to her first. But with only \$218 to her name, things didn’t look good.

Detective Liskey got Celia a two-day voucher for a hotel in nearby Bethesda, which meant she didn’t have to give her name or use her credit cards. And with a patrol officer situated right outside the hotel, Celia felt safe enough she could at least try to get some sleep.

But sleep came sparingly. Every door closing, every bump in the hallway, every kid who dropped something on the floor below, forced her eyes open. By the time she finally decided to just stay awake, it was ten a.m., and she had

awakened about five times during the night, and she knew she would be awakened again when room service came by.

Just after she got up, she peered out her room window and saw that the police cruiser that had driven her to the hotel was still there, parked on the street, near the front door, within shouting distance of her window.

She showered again after still smelling the stink of the trash room on her. She stuffed her old clothes in an overnight bag she had brought with her and changed into a fresh pair of jeans, white sneakers, and a T-shirt. She checked herself in a mirror and ran a brush through her hair. Fortunately, her round face showed no signs she had barely slept.

All dressed up, with nowhere to go, she thought. She didn't feel comfortable leaving the hotel, at least not yet. Her scheduled 9 a.m. interview was an afterthought, and her car was still at the apartment. At least if she had the car, she could drive somewhere-anywhere-to put things in perspective, clear her head, and figure out her next step.

Turning on the TV didn't help. She would stare at the screen, but barely pay attention to what was going on. Her mind kept replaying the events of the previous day. Even when she was in Detroit, she had never experienced as much violence in one day. And to see her husband brutally murdered in front of her was something that she knew would haunt her for many days and weeks to come.

Her sympathy for him was almost palpable. She wished she could have stopped it. He was horrible to her, but he didn't deserve to die in that way. He may have fallen off the rails, but he didn't seem to be into anything that would get him targeted by a professional killer.

Celia tried to counteract the negative memories with pleasant ones. She remembered when Justin came home early from work one Thursday and surprised her with a weeklong cruise to the British Virgin Islands. He had just received a promotion to a supervisor of an eight-man team of engineers, and he wanted to celebrate. They had been married for a little more than a year, and the trip was like a second honeymoon. She had never been more in love with her husband than during that trip and had never been more convinced that her parents were wrong about him.

For the first two years of the marriage, Justin was a loving, doting husband who never went a day without kissing her, or telling her he loved her or squeezing her tight in his arms, which she loved. He would often send her texts with sweet, off-the-wall comments expressing his affection for her. Evenings were often spent doing the things she loved—shooting pool at the Dave & Busters in the nearby Ellsworth Place mall, watching old sitcoms on TV, or going for cheeseburgers and fries at the Five Guys. Celia was a simple soul who didn't go for a lot of fancy things, but she was still excited when Justin splurged on her occasionally, such as when he bought her a pair of \$900 black Louis Vuitton open toe pumps on her birthday.

Justin even wanted to have a child with her, but Celia urged him to wait until they had bought a house, which they planned to do soon. But the house-buying plans went down the drain when Justin came home one day and announced that he had been laid off.

This was news difficult for Celia to hear, but she did not despair. If Justin was talented enough to get an \$81,000 job, he could get another one. She constantly tried to encourage him. But it did not stop Justin from going into a deep depression, which he dealt with by smoking pot and downing occasional shots of vodka. It didn't take long for Justin to develop an addiction which kept him from getting almost every later job he applied for.

Justin eventually found a job at a mom-and-pop auto mechanic shop in Hyattsville, but his addiction to pot continued, and his drinking worsened.

The first time he hit her was on their third wedding anniversary. Justin had arranged to take Celia out after work to dinner and then to a performance of *Annie* at the Warner Theatre in downtown D.C. However, Justin never made it home in time, choosing to hang out with co-workers at a bar, and getting so tipsy he forgot the time and didn't arrive back home until 11 p.m.

When Justin got home, Celia was so angry she snapped at him, and their resulting argument was vicious and loud. When he had run out of words to challenge her, Justin slapped her so hard she spun and hit the floor.

Justin immediately apologized, and Celia, after some sweet talk from Justin, forgave him. After all, maybe her outburst caused him to strike her like he did.

And that was her mentality throughout the next two years. Whenever Justin hit her, it was because she had provoked him to uncontrollable anger. Justin's abuse was not his fault; it was hers. When Justin lost his auto mechanic job because the boss could no longer tolerate him coming to work high or hungover, she told herself that he was just a little frustrated and would be okay once he worked through all his problems. And she had convinced herself of this until he started to stay out all night. And that was when she realized that her relationship with Justin was quickly expiring.

It is amazing that in this day, a woman can tolerate a relationship with a man that beats her, but not one that cheats on her, she heard someone say on a talk show one day. The description fit her snugly. She was *that* woman. And even to this day, she struggled to understand why.

Celia reached for her purse and took out her phone. Eventually, she would have to tell her parents about this, and since she literally had nothing to do except stare at the TV all day, now was as good a time as any.

The tall man pulled the black SUV to a curbside parking space directly across the street from the hotel. The police car was parked three spaces ahead of him, its engine running. He could see a uniformed officer inside. It made sense. This was definitely the right place.

He rolled up his tinted windows, switched on the air conditioning, and pulled his binoculars and fully loaded Sig Sauer pistol within immediate reach. His eyes, covered with a pair of large sunglasses, alternated between watching the front door, watching the cop car, and examining the computer sitting on the seat next to him, which was tracking Celia's cell phone signal and had led him directly to this location.

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