

PROLOGUE

Severna Park, Maryland

Tasha Dolnick surveyed the bedroom again with her back to the naked body lying motionless on the bathroom floor. She went through the items on her list, counting them on her latex-covered fingers as she checked them off. The bag? It was just like his gym bag. Any impressions or fibers left by it would be consistent with the surroundings. The door? Wiped clean. The bed? The sheets replaced and the soiled ones placed in her bag. The condom? Also in the bag. Any remaining traces of her or the chloral hydrate would wash off in the bathtub. The carpet? Vacuumed and the contents of the vacuum cleaner safely in the bag as well. Fingerprints? None. The only things touched were the door, the body, and the sheets. Only he touched the bottle of scotch and the highball. She left both on the counter. Hair, epithelia, and fiber? A shave and a wax two days ago was a start. As for her hair, she kept it pulled back and would not let him handle it. He didn't seem to mind. As a precaution, Tasha put the clothes that he had worn earlier in the bag. The vacuum cleaner and the bath took care of the rest.

Now to finish the job.

The disposable synthetic clothing and the light crunching sound as she moved across the bathroom tiles to the tub were far from provocative. Her lightweight Tyvek suit and hood concealed the athletic body and long black hair that seduced the man in the fetal position on the floor. She looked like she was investigating the crime scene, not creating one.

Because he had drunk more than Tasha realized, he had passed out within minutes of the chloral hydrate entering his system from the condom. What a waste. He was fit for a fifty-year-old. He could have been fun. More importantly, it was inconvenient to move the body. He was not heavy, but awkward, like other bodies on other assignments. She planned that he would only become incapacitated to the point that all she needed to do was guide him to the bathroom. No matter, it was done. Time to finish the assignment.

She turned on the bath water. Hot water. The steam further corrupted any trace evidence. As the water ran, Tasha looked at the bathtub. The body needed to sit at the end of the tub. Lifeless, it would fall back into the water, cleansing the body of any transfer evidence or gunshot residue. Removal of the residue on his hand was important. If the residue stayed, it would reveal that her hand partially covered his while pulling the trigger. She left the water on, knowing that the bathroom would flood, contaminating any trace evidence left behind.

There would be no mistakes tonight. She had been trained by the best, and this was not her first assignment. She did not make mistakes, but there was always a back up down the line. A lazy clerk, an underpaid cop, an underappreciated lab technician. There was always someone down the line. She had cleaned up others mistakes. But no mistakes tonight.

Tasha propped up the body. Jeffrey Jay Speeter. Age, fifty. Caucasian. Five-foot seven, one hundred fifty pounds. Right-handed. Alcoholic. Recently divorced because of his infidelities. Self-described ladies' man. An easy assignment.

She met Speeter at his gym four days ago. She knew his habits. When he went to the gym. When he left work to go out. Where he drank. What he drank. How much. How late he stayed up.

She asked him if she was using the free weights correctly. A very physical lesson ensued with Speeter copping a feel on every available occasion. The two shared bottled waters afterward. Speeter rambled on about how hard it was to find normal women since his divorce. He gave Tasha his card, complete with home phone number and address. She said that she would call him in a couple of days after she returned from visiting some friends. An intoxicated Speeter was more than pleasantly surprised when she showed up on his doorstep wearing only pumps and a tight black cocktail dress. Some things are too good to be true.

Tasha panned her surroundings a final time. No signs of forced entry. No signs of a struggle. Just a desperate drunk man with a gun and soon to be discovered overwhelming financial difficulties stemming from extensive gambling losses.

She balanced Speeter's body at the edge of the bathtub. The position had to be right. The angle of the bullet's entry had to be consistent with the shot being fired first, followed by the fall back into the tub. Blood spatter and brain matter would reveal the angle that the shot had been fired. If she let go of the body first, there could be questions.

Tasha put the gun in Speeter's right hand, placing his index finger on the trigger. She stuck the barrel in his mouth. Speeter's gag reflex caused him to cough slightly and moan. The combination of alcohol and chloral hydrate was beginning to wear off. It didn't matter, she was ready.

As she pulled the trigger, Tasha mumbled in her soft Slavic voice, "for Salih."

ONE

"Peter!"
Slightly startled, attorney Peter Farrell stopped, stepped backwards, and stuck his head into the conference room.

"Peter Farrell, this is Paul Simon," introduced Joseph Rosendahl, Peter's boss and mentoring attorney.

"I believe we've spoken on the phone a couple of times. It's nice to put a face with the name," remarked Peter. Peter thought to himself that the last thing he needed was a half-hour conversation with Paul Simon and Joe, especially today. Not only was it a gorgeous October Friday afternoon in St. Louis, but the fact that he had only two hours to revise, file, and serve his brief in the Whitmore case weighed heavily on his shoulders.

"Nice to finally meet you, Peter," replied Mr. Simon.

"Peter, why don't you sit down with us for a minute," directed Joe Rosendahl as he closed the conference room door behind Peter.

"This is a lovely view you gentlemen have," remarked Paul Simon, who was one of Golde & Rosendahl's wealthiest clients.

"Actually, this building is the joke of the real estate industry. Everyone says that the view from our International Tower is the best view in the city, because we're the only ones who don't have to look at this eyesore of a building.

Peter politely smiled at Rosendahl's joke, the same joke he had heard at least a dozen times before. Peter sized up Paul Simon. Oddly, he'd expected him to be a taller man given the big shoes he had to fill. The Simon family was one of the wealthiest families in St. Louis, a true American

success story. Paul's father, Thomas Simon, had immigrated to the United States in the mid-1920s from what is now called Lebanon. He not only sought economic freedom, but given Christianity's new-found power in his homeland, he wanted no part in the once-persecuted becoming the persecutors.

Christened Tuma Simon, the twenty-year-old immigrant changed his name to Thomas Simon when he landed at Ellis Island and entered the United States of Opportunity. Adaptability would be a key to success in this brave New World. He would not fail. As a peddler of shoelaces, tools, kitchen utensils, fabrics, materials, or anything he could carry, Thomas Simon set forth to make his fortune.

After only six months of eighteen- and nineteen-hour days, young Thomas Simon's hard work had paid off; he'd saved enough money to allow him to buy a horse and wagon. With this transportation, he established himself as a legitimate businessman. Shortly thereafter he sent for the young woman he had promised to marry two years earlier. Upon her arrival in America, Lillian Habib quickly married her Tuma Simon and the couple settled in St. Louis, Missouri. Ten months later, Lillian gave birth to a baby girl. The spring baby was appropriately named Rosalind. She was Lillian's "little Rose."

Though the Depression devastated most businesses in the 1930s, Simon managed not only to stay afloat, but also to explore and exploit new areas of merchandising. The young entrepreneur focused on men's clothing. Before long, he owned his own clothing store. That one store grew to three, then five, and soon seven. He convinced other families to immigrate to St. Louis by offering them a share of the business. After only seven years in the clothing industry, Thomas Simon had established himself as *the* men's clothing store in the St. Louis metropolitan area. Furthermore, he had founded a burgeoning Lebanese community in the New World.

Success did have its price. A distance began to grow between Thomas and the two women in his life, which led to longer hours at work. There were, however, no barriers between Lillian and her little Rose. They were as close as a mother and daughter could be. And by the age of eight, Lillian had taught her daughter to cook, clean, and sew. By nine, Rose was in charge of the housework and practically managed the Simon home.

The honing of Rose's skills could not have been more perfectly timed. For as Rose received her first communion, God blessed her with a baby brother, Paul. The distance between Lillian and Thomas disappeared with

the birth of a son.

As the Simon family grew, so did the family business. Thomas Simon opened additional stores in the St. Louis metropolitan area. Two years later, he set up a factory to cut costs and meet increasing demand for his products. Then came the big move. A Simon's Men's Store opened in Chicago. By the '60s, Thomas Simon owned stores throughout the Midwest.

However, the cost of developing a clothing empire and establishing a Lebanese community in St. Louis proved to be far greater than Thomas Simon had anticipated. He paid the price of success with his life, dying of a sudden heart attack at the age of sixty-seven.

"Before he passed away, my father made me promise that I would take care of the family," Paul Simon remarked with the breath of hesitation.

"As you know, my sister Rose checked into the Cedar Riverside Care Center a year ago after suffering a nervous breakdown. You may also know that her breakdown resulted from the separation she was going through with her husband, Elias St. Armand. To anyone who has read a newspaper in the last five years, this is no surprise. What the family was able to keep out of papers was the severity of her condition. Elias was able to seal the court records, which found her a clear danger to herself and the safety of others. More importantly, gentlemen, the court records were sealed because Rose tried to murder Elias St. Armand."

"Tried to murder Elias St. Armand?" Peter couldn't believe that remark just slipped out of his mouth like some summer intern.

"Elias St. Armand is quite a big fish," noted Joe Rosendahl in a self-deprecating voice to cover up for his associate's lack of tact.

What an understatement, Peter thought to himself. Elias St. Armand was one of the most powerful men to ever hail from St. Louis, arguably one of the most influential businessmen of our time. Elias St. Armand's name was synonymous with world politics, big business, and special interests. His food conglomerate, the Occidental Group, had annual revenues of over \$90 billion. St. Armand's prestige was only matched by his arrogance. He commonly referred to his company as the "World's Kitchen," and he, of course, was the head chef.

"I have no issues with Elias," Mr. Simon firmly stated. "My concern, which I hope you will alleviate, lies with my sister and the attorneys who represented her during the commitment proceedings."

"Quite frankly, Paul," started the former prosecutor in Joe Rosendahl, "if she tried to kill Elias St. Armand, and she is only staying at Cedar

Riverside, I don't know much else an attorney could have accomplished."

"Sealing the records was a coup," Peter chimed in, again speaking when he should probably have just been listening.

Ignoring the young attorney's comment, Paul Simon continued. "By no means is Cedar Riverside a maximum security facility, but my sister, realistically, is imprisoned. Although the thought of that sickens me everyday, I know it's for the best. That doesn't put to rest the fact that I still have doubts about her situation. Every time I visit her she rants and raves about how her attorneys cheated and lied to her. If I could have only seen the signs, maybe then I could have helped her sooner. Hell, if her attorneys cheated and lied to her, and the result is having attempted murder charges dropped, I don't care what happened. Still, all of this does not ease the burden of my guilt. And if having you look into any alleged cheating and lying eases her pain, then maybe it will ease my guilt, too. I am willing to pay whatever it takes for some peace of mind. Mr. Farrell, you look concerned."

Peter Farrell looked at his mentoring attorney first, and then asked, "What firm handled the matter?"

"The Washington D.C. firm, Miller & White," Simon answered.

"They're quite a reputable firm," commented Peter. Glancing again at Joe, Peter continued, "no disrespect intended, but you do know that even making initial inquiries will cause quite a stir."

The retail magnate and Fortune 500 CEO nodded, "I understand where you're going Mr. Farrell and appreciate your candor. Joe, you have a fine young man here. Let me address where you are really going. All I want you to do is talk to my sister, then make a couple of inquiries. I want my sister to believe that people believe in her. This seems like a lot of trouble to go through, knowing that even the slightest inquiries will cause a stir. You're right. And for what, to play a charade on my sister?"

Peter looked as if he might interrupt again, but Simon continued, "This is a small price to pay for family. You see, Mr. Farrell, there's an old Lebanese proverb: If you take your clothes off, you will feel cold."

Simon paused for an obvious dramatic effect then continued in a slightly condescending tone, "You see, Mr. Farrell, I come from a people who hold family above all else. And Mr. Farrell, if you disregard your family, you will suffer."

"Mr. Simon, I..." Peter humbly began to apologize.

"Paul," interjected Peter's boss, "what can we do?"

“Just meet with her as soon as you can and tell me how she reacts. She may want you to review some boxes of documents, too.”

“Peter,” Joe began again, “what are your plans for tomorrow?”

Knowing full well that watching college football would not be the correct answer, Peter responded, “I’ll be at Cedar Riverside first thing in the morning.”

“Joe.” The voice on the intercom was Lois, Aaron Golde’s assistant, “is Peter in there?”

“Lois, he’s right here,” Joe Rosendahl responded.

“Aaron wants him down here if you’re finished.”

“I think we’re done. Is there anything else, Paul?”

“No,” responded Paul Simon as he shook Joe’s hand.

“Then send him down,” Lois ordered.

Rosendahl smiled at Paul Simon, “Well, I guess you know now who really runs the show here at Golde & Rosendahl.”

“Yeah, I better get down there before she comes and grabs me by the ear,” said Peter as he stepped toward Simon to shake his hand.

“Has Peter left yet? Aaron is about to leave.” It was Lois again.

“I’m on my way.”

Peter grabbed his own ear then reached out to shake Paul Simon’s hand.

Simon clasped Peter’s outstretched hand with both of his hands and pulled him in closer, “You must get my sister to trust you,” he squeezed Peter’s hand tighter, “We’re running out of time.”

Simon finally released Peter’s hand.

“Peter,” Joe reassured his protegee. “I’ll be around all weekend if you need anything.”

PETER LEFT THE conference room and headed down the hall. Obviously, Joe was letting Paul Simon know that the young attorney would not be working on the file by himself. But it was nice to know that Joe would act as a safety net if there were any problems. Be that as it may, Paul Simon’s parting words still left Peter with an uneasy feeling. As he walked, Simon’s odd handshake vanished from his train of thought as the gold-plated marquee “Golde & Rosendahl” grabbed his attention. The letters hung above Lois, who guarded the door to Aaron’s corner office.

Golde & Rosendahl is the creation of Aaron Golde. The Golde family name is above reproach in St. Louis, not only because Golde established himself as a pillar in the community, but also due to the role his father

played in financing Charles Lindbergh's flight over the Atlantic. And in St. Louis, a plume in a family's pedigree went a long way. However, Aaron never traded in on his good name. In fact, Aaron Golde, one of the most highly-respected attorneys in the country, lied on the very first document he filed with the United States government. As he always retold the story, the fifteen-year-old Golde simply made a mistake as to his age when he enlisted in the Army to fight in France. On the rare occasions when Golde relived his colorful past, it was apparent that he battled the Axis powers in nearly every country in central Europe and in the Mediterranean. Upon his return from the war, Golde stayed with the Army and worked in Washington D.C. and Virginia. In the mid '50s, he returned to St. Louis as a special deputy attorney for Hoover's FBI. After ten years of public service, he entered into private practice.

"Is he in?" Peter asked Lois as he peeked into Aaron's office. Aaron Golde was old school. His office reflected that fact. Lining the wall behind his desk were several sets of statutes, reporters, treatises, and hornbooks. Only law books, no computer. In fact, the only technology in his office other than the lights was a phone that may have been one of Alexander Graham Bell's original models. A push-button pad had replaced the dial, but everything else clamored turn-of-the-century innovation. He was an old-fashioned gentleman, Mark Twain in a contemporary gray suit. Folksy, without being disingenuous.

"No."

"No?"

Lois rolled her eyes at Peter then tilted her head toward the side door that led out into the outer hallway by the elevator banks.

"He just walked out," she noted before scolding the young attorney. "I told you he was leaving."

"Aaron?" Peter checked the other hallway and came back to Lois.

"Did he say anything?"

Lois shot Peter a deadpan gaze, "He told me to tell you not to screw up the Simon matter."

"Were those his words?"

"I'm a messenger, not a tape recorder."

Message received.



His view had been irreparably altered. Nothing was the same. Nothing will be the same. Now, he thought, more than ever, was the time.

Clutching a grayish-colored cross attached to a thin strap of brown leather, Elias St. Armand turned away from his bay window overlooking the Manhattan skyline and picked up the newspaper from his desk to skim the front page.

The New York Herald

U.S. AID TO LEBANON?

Associated Press International

BEIRUT, LEBANON—Secretary of State Madeleine Scholfield will meet with Lebanese President Michael Berri and Prime Minister Yusuf Azar today in Beirut only days after a car bomb killed four American businessmen and wounded 28 bystanders.

The White House maintains that Scholfield's scheduled visit relates only to the increased terrorist activities by the Lebanese National Liberal Party, more commonly known as the "Tigers," not the thirty billion-dollar aid package to Lebanon. White House Press Secretary Hugh Oberfoell further denied that the President would endorse the bill.

Although the proposed congressional foreign aid package aims at restoring stability to the entire region, since announcing the aid package last month the Tigers' terrorist activities have escalated dramatically.

Such terrorism had previously prompted sharp criticism of the bill. However, opponents to the package have dwindled, as noted by the defection of Senator Pro Tempore John Jay Knox. The Texas senator had previously called the package "blood money." Despite his earlier statement, he joined Speaker of the House Randolph Sexton in support of the bill last week thus ensuring congressional approval of the package.

After two days in Beirut, Secretary of State Schofield will travel to Tel Aviv where she...

FEC Official's death not a homicide

WASHINGTON D.C.—Yesterday afternoon police found the body of Federal Election Committee Commissioner Jeffrey Speeter at his

home in Severna Park, Maryland. Speeter, 50, died of a gunshot wound to the head. Police have ruled out homicide, but have been unable to determine whether his death was accidental or suicide.

Speeter is best known for his role in last year's Senate campaign finance hearings...

The green light on his console blinked. St. Armand pressed two other buttons, then pressed the blinking one and picked up the phone.

"Yes?"

"Everything is finished and I'm on my way to St. Louis."

The woman's voice was Slavic; St. Armand knew it was Tasha.

"I see," he picked up the newspaper and set it back down.

"Are you sure there are no issues left unresolved?"

"The crime scene tape is being taken down as we speak."

"Good," replied St. Armand, "we can move ahead as scheduled."

"I will arrive in St. Louis in a couple of hours."

"You will be meeting someone on Saturday. All the arrangements have been made."

"I prefer to work alone."

"I prefer not to be second-guessed."

St. Armand hung up the phone. Another paper had been placed on his desk with a Post-It note attached to the front page stating, "The framed copy will be ready later today."

He picked up the smaller publication and began to read the cover story.

The Maronite Letter

On October 18th, the Cross of St. Maro was bestowed on Elias St. Armand for his outstanding charity and foundation work. Mr. St. Armand is the first U.S. citizen to be awarded the Cross of St. Maro and the only recipient in the past 20 years. The ceremony...

St. Armand set down the paper. He returned to his bay window and faced the Manhattan skyline with his hands behind his back. The time is now.