

*Chapter**1*

THE MAN WALKED WITH A HESITANT, CHANGING-GEARS kind of limp that mirrored more than twenty years of painful osteoarthritis. Flipping up his collar to ward off the wind and chilling 38-degree West Virginia coal-country mist, he slowly paced the final half mile of the more than two-mile trek to his cabin. It would be warm there, and safe, and above all familiar. His bed with the sagging thirty-year-old mattress. The pot-bellied stove. The well-worn Navajo rugs—even the creaky heart-pine floors and the smoky, dull gray, coal-dust-laden windows. The cabin had been his safety net for thirty-four years, tucked invisibly into the side of a West Virginia mountain, yards away from a petered-out coal mine.

He had walked the path that snaked its way up to his cabin more times than he cared to count. Over the years he had jogged, run, trotted, and even skipped his way home, until now, after half a lifetime, he knew the outline of every blackberry and gooseberry bush, every tree and rock, every hump in the earth that lined the narrow trail. It was almost as if they were well-placed stage props, there to add stability to his life.

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Slowing his pace, he scooped a handful of gooseberries from a convenient bush, popped several of them into his mouth, and crunched down, marveling at their eye-watering tartness. He noticed a fresh half-dollar-sized impression in the dirt at the trail's edge and dropped the remaining berries onto the trail as he knelt to examine it. Chalking the imprint up to the partial hoofprint of a deer, he rose and continued walking, rolling the bitter skin of the gooseberries around in his mouth. When he spotted a second small imprint in the dirt, he stopped abruptly, realizing with sudden urgency that the two perfectly curved notches in the soil were far too close together to be the tracks of a deer and too deeply stamped into the moist loam to be the imprint left by a darting animal.

Painfully taking a knee again, he studied the second imprint, examining it closely for more than a minute before realizing that a third and then a fourth imprint dropped off the trail, disappearing into the thick grass at the margin. Rising slowly, the man forced back a cough as he methodically eyed the surrounding terrain. His cabin was fifty yards uphill and a slight dogleg to the west. Behind the cabin, Rosebush Mountain jutted up four thousand feet into the foggy, cloud-covered West Virginia sky. Attentive now to the familiar sounds of the backwoods, he froze and listened to the rustling of sycamores in the brisk northwesterly wind, the intermittent cawing of the pesky birds he knew as camp robbers, and the rush of Willow Buck Creek gaining speed as it charged downhill through a rocky mountain corridor in the distance. All seemed perfectly normal. Even so, there was something unusual about the sounds enveloping him—

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something strange and unnerving. Something he couldn't quite put his finger on. A sound—no, perhaps it was a smell, or a tiny mutation in the sunlight as it faded for the day. There was something! For a moment he had the uneasy feeling that finally, after thirty-four years of self-imposed isolation, he might actually be going stir-crazy. Maybe the two-week-long high-country rains had finally thrown everything in his head completely out of kilter.

Perhaps he'd been thinking too much about the letter he had received the day the rains began. It had come in an oversized business envelope with a barely legible Denver postmark and return address and a two-inch-wide masking-tape seal. Now, three weeks shy of his fifty-eighth birthday, he was sensing and seeing things that shouldn't be in his woods. Maybe it was time for a meltdown. Maybe the letter stuffed securely in his shirt pocket was meant to keep him confused.

From the depths of the woodsy quietness he heard a chirp, then another and another, and finally the muted rustle of something in the dead wet leaves fifty yards ahead. The sounds were both disturbing and familiar, the trademark warning chirps of squirrels and chipmunks as they scurried from danger for holes in the dirt and hollows in the trees. Perhaps they were attempting to avoid a fox or a badger on the prowl. It didn't much matter—something ahead had the army of animals that served as his warning beacon clearly agitated.

Now, as intent on avoiding danger as he'd been during his days as a platoon leader during the Vietnam War, Langston Blue decided to circle his cabin's perimeter. He had no reason to sus-

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pect anything was seriously wrong, but after years of hiding he'd learned to play it smart as well as safe. His thoughts returned to the letter in his shirt pocket as he started working his way around the cabin. He had stepped close to twenty yards away from the trail when he heard what sounded like a snapping twig and then a lengthy, vacuum-like *whoosh*. Seconds later his cabin imploded before erupting into a ball of flames.

During his two tours in Vietnam he'd watched jungle shacks, thatched huts, and even substantial buildings go up the same way, the air sucked out of them by a well-placed incendiary device before fire exploded inside their bellies. But this time things were different; now he was the outsider looking in, like the ghost of a Vietnamese peasant watching his life erode before his eyes.

As the flames danced up to lick the sky, he dropped and hugged the ground spread-eagle, trying to breathe. Shivering as the musty smell of the damp West Virginia soil crept up his nostrils, he listened to the crackling of the fire.

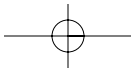
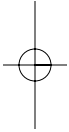
Fifteen minutes later, still kissing the earth, breathing cautiously, and hoping that whoever had torched his cabin was gone, Langston Blue crawled back to the spot where he'd first spotted the strange imprints in the soil. Patting the ground, he fingered the edges of one shallow depression and cursed himself for missing a telltale clue. In hindsight, he recognized the notch for what it was: the imprint of the rubber tip guard of a cane. "Cortez," he mouthed in a whisper. "Son of a bitch." The words came out in a stream of spittle.

Rising to a crouch, he painfully duck-walked his way back

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into the woods before finally slumping against a fallen branch. The aromatic smell of burning oak and cherry wood permeated the woods, punctuating the fact that after so many years of dodging it, the truth had finally caught up with him. Sighing and leaning back against the fallen limb, he slipped the letter he'd been carrying around out of his shirt pocket and began rereading it for what he suspected was the hundredth time. He fumbled with the dog-eared sheet of paper, inhaling the pungent charcoal smell of what was now left of his life as his eyes slowly adjusted to the letter's bold black handwriting.

The paper suddenly felt moist and heavy in his hands. He understood how Cortez had finally been able to find him. After all, tracking, searching, and destroying the enemy had once been Cortez's principal job. But he couldn't fathom how the letter writer had also been able to track him down. Reading slowly, he followed each perfectly aligned sentence to the bottom of the page until his finger came to a painful arthritic halt just below a boldly scripted closing: *Love, Your Daughter, Carmen Nguyen.*



*Chapter***2**

THERE WAS NO WAY OUT of the blind Denver alley, CJ Floyd told himself as he choked in an effort to block the smell from the mounds of garbage filling the dumpster that shielded him from the calculating approach of Newab Sha. Sha, a bond-skipping Haitian and a wife and child beater whom CJ had been chasing for over a week, caught a whiff of the garbage, smiled, clucked his tongue, and continued slowly closing in on the four-foot-high dumpster.

CJ gulped a quick breath of air, wondering as he strained to remain still how he'd ever been stupid enough to leave Mavis Sundee's house barefoot, without his gun, in hot pursuit of a masochistic Haitian with four diamond-studded, gold-jacketed front teeth and a head the size of a watermelon. Maybe his uncharacteristically juvenile response had been a protective offering to Mavis, the one sweet drop of feminine softness in his otherwise hard-edged life, served up to let her know that at forty-nine he still harbored an inner toughness.

Twenty minutes earlier, Sha had riddled Mavis's house with a barrage from a semiautomatic just as CJ and Flora Jean Ben-

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son, CJ's street-smart bail-bonding partner, had arrived at the front door for dinner. Sha had then sent a Molotov cocktail crashing onto Mavis's porch, catching CJ, as Flora Jean liked to say, with his drawers on the floor.

After beating back flames with a couple of cushions from a lounge chair and kicking off the thongs he'd been wearing in preparation for washing Mavis's car, CJ had taken off after Sha. He had chased Sha for more than three blocks through the alleys of Mavis's Curtis Park neighborhood without seeing a soul. The chase had then wound through the very heart of Denver's once jazz-rich, predominantly black Five Points community without so much as causing a head to turn. Most of the people were gone, hostages to the Fourth of July holiday, scores of free baseball tickets, and the promise of free food and postgame fireworks at Denver's Coors Field.

Now, as he crouched barefoot and winded, hugging the back side of the foul-smelling dumpster and looking for an escape, CJ could only kick himself for taking Sha's now very obvious bait.

"Bail bondmon, I gonna cut your nuts. Feed 'em to the dogs! Ha!" Sha's words reverberated off the dumpster's shell. "Den gon' go back and hump that girl a yours—squeeze her tits till she scream to da sky. Gon' split her wide open from hip to hip. But what da you care, bail bondmon? You gon' be dead."

CJ swallowed hard and clenched his teeth, aware that Sha's singsong mockery was meant to tease him out of hiding. Scanning the alley, he searched in vain for a rock, a broken bottle, a stick—anything to serve as a weapon.

"Come on out, bail bondmon. Got somethin' for ya, my

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friend. Gon' skin ya like a rabbit. Gon' tan your hide. Whoop, whoop, whoop."

CJ glanced behind him toward the crumbling three-story-high brick wall of a former creamery that blocked his escape. He nervously eyed the two body lengths of space between the wall and the dumpster as he ran his hand along the dumpster's rusted frame, feeling for a protective fragment of loose metal to use as a knife. Nothing. The only possible weapon was a porous, baseball-sized rock that felt like a lump of Silly Putty in his right hand.

"Gon' skin ya and leave ya for the dogs! Ha! Den gon' kill your woman, ha!" Sha sucked a loud stream of air between his front teeth, so close now that CJ could hear his labored breathing. Clutching the rock tightly as he peered around the back corner of the dumpster and telling himself his aim had better be major-league perfect, CJ rose from his crouch to find that Sha was now less than five feet away.

"I know where you at, bail bondmon. Gon' skin ya, den toss you in da dumpster wit' da rest of da trash. Ha!"

CJ duck-walked his way along the back of the dumpster, inching toward the creamery wall.

"You gotta come outta one side a dat dumpster, bail bondmon. De left or de right. Gotta pop out one way or da other, like a baby or a turd. Ha!"

Homing in on the sound of Sha's voice, CJ rose until he could see over the lip of the dumpster. He eyed the side of Sha's half-turned head, prepared to throw a temple-crushing strike.

"Ha!" screamed Sha, hearing the rustle of clothing as CJ's

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arm shot forward. Grinning, he peppered the dumpster with bullets as the rock careened off his neck, then screamed, "Gon' kill ya now, gon' snip off your nuts!" as he raced toward CJ.

CJ suddenly thought about his days as a nineteen-year-old machine gunner on a navy riverboat during the final turbulent days of the Vietnam War. As he dove toward Sha, one arm draped protectively over his head, the unmistakable sound of a 30.06 rang out, and a hollow-point bullet dropped Sha like a 250-pound sack of sand just as CJ slammed into him.

Anticipating more shots as he rose from Sha's lifeless body in confusion, CJ raced for cover behind the dumpster. Within seconds, Flora Jean Benson ran into view. CJ let out a relieved sigh, stepped from behind the dumpster, and walked back to Sha's body. Glancing down at the pool of blood that cushioned the dead man's head and then up at Flora Jean, he said, "That was one hell of a shot."

"What?" Flora Jean looked dismayed.

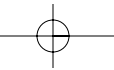
"Dropping Sha like that." CJ quizzically eyed his six-foot-one-inch, Las Vegas showgirl-sized partner, looking for her vintage Winchester before realizing that she wasn't carrying a rifle.

Flora Jean shrugged and patted the 9-mm in her pocket. "Wasn't me."

The startled look on CJ's face caused Flora Jean to pull her gun, drop to one knee, and nervously scan the alley before repeating, this time in a near whisper, "Wasn't me."

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Blocking any exit from the alley, two police cars, their roof-mounted lights flashing in unison, blared police-band static



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into the hazy dusk. Newab Sha's body remained where it had fallen. A man sporting a coroner's ID and a red-white-and-blue-striped tie with a crescent of stars just below the knot knelt over the body with a plainclothes Denver detective by his side.

A few feet away a large, rumpled man in a cheap, ill-fitting khaki suit stood quietly asking CJ questions. "Seems like you're forever dodging bullets or the law, Floyd. Now it's Molotov cocktails. And on my beat, no less. Guess I'm just blessed."

CJ shrugged, glanced down at his bare feet, and curled up his toes.

The man followed CJ's eyes. "Times so hard you can't afford shoes?" His tone was mocking.

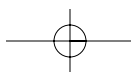
"It's a long story, Lieutenant." The word *lieutenant* lingered as CJ forced himself to say it. "But I'm guessing a big-time African American law enforcement officer like you probably doesn't have time for it."

"Surprise yourself and try me." Wendall Newburn tugged at the sleeves of his wrinkled suit coat and adjusted his stance. "Don't mind being quoted, do you?" he asked, slipping a small spiral-bound notebook from the coat's inside pocket.

"Nope. Not as long as it's what I actually said."

Newburn smiled. "Don't flatter yourself, Floyd. No need to edit the likes of you. Go ahead, sing your song."

CJ stole a quick glance toward Flora Jean, who was standing just beyond the draped remains of Newab Sha, knowing that he had one supportive witness. Catching CJ's gaze, Flora Jean, a former intelligence sergeant who'd done a tour with the Fifth Marine Division during Desert Storm, nodded at Newburn, eyeing him



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as if he were a target to be taken out, then reached into her pocket, popped a stick of Juicy Fruit into her mouth, and smiled as if to say, *I'm listening to this conversation too, asshole.*

"You lie and sweetie girl here swears to it," said Newburn, spotting the communication.

"Don't push me, Newburn. I'm not feelin' as giving as CJ today, and unlike him, I didn't go to grade school with you. We got no ties that bind, my friend."

Aware that Flora Jean hated being called either sweetie or a liar, CJ nudged her away from Newburn, who'd dropped a hand onto the butt of his service revolver. Staring defiantly at Newburn and smacking her gum, Flora Jean took the hint and walked away as CJ began recounting what had occurred, from the time he'd arrived at Mavis's house for dinner until Newab Sha crashed face first into the blacktop. Fifteen minutes later, his notebook crammed with notes, Newburn stood shaking his head. "Hell of a story, Floyd. Good enough for the silver screen. Maybe you should get yourself a Hollywood agent." Newburn glanced casually in Flora Jean's direction. His glance was met with a cold, hard stare.

CJ eyed the ground and gritted his teeth, aware that he'd just fired the opening salvo in a new conflict with Newburn. Their battles spanned twenty-five years, stretching back to the days when he'd first taken over his uncle's bail-bonding business and Newburn had been a wet-behind-the-ears patrolman. During that time they had clashed on the streets, outside courtrooms, at athletic events, and even in the sanctity of Denver's largest black church, and although the bad blood between them

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appeared at first blush to be linked to the natural friction between a bail bondsman and a cop, the real reason for their animosity boiled down to Mavis Sundee, who had long ago chosen CJ over Newburn.

CJ looked up as a pixieish crime-scene technician walked up to Newburn. "Coroner needs to see you, Lieutenant."

"Can't you see I'm in the middle of something?"

The technician took a dutiful step back. "He says it's important."

Newburn shook his head. "You'd think a deputy coroner could do his job without somebody holding his hand." Giving the technician a dismissive nod, he said, "I'll be there in a second," before turning his attention back to CJ. "This whole thing smells, Floyd. Like a sack of dripping sewer shit." He looked down at CJ's bare feet again before locking eyes with Flora Jean. "A suspicious person might even say that the whole thing smells like a hit."

Flora Jean spat out her gum and watched it dribble across the asphalt before wedging into a crack inches from Newburn's right foot.

CJ mouthed, *Cool it.*

Newburn eyed the gum wad and smiled. "Everybody knows you're an ex-marine, sweetie. Hear tell you've even got a few intelligence connections. But try taking a hint from your boss. This is my jurisdiction, not the Iraqi desert. Homicide's the operative word here, not Desert Storm. Don't push your luck."

"Are we free to go?" asked CJ, locking an arm in Flora Jean's and giving her a half turn before she could respond.

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"Yeah."

CJ quickly began walking Flora Jean down the alley.

"Take the hint, Ms. Benson," Newburn shouted. "And Floyd, keep your ass close to home. I'll come calling."

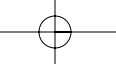
CJ didn't answer. He was too busy nudging Flora Jean toward the black SUV that had been idling fifteen yards beyond the police cruisers, air conditioner blasting, at the mouth of the blind alley for the last five minutes. The right front and rear doors of the vehicle swung open in unison as CJ and Flora Jean approached. "Hell, I thought you and Newburn was gonna stand there and spar forever," said the man behind the wheel, shaking his head as CJ slipped into the front seat.

"I was beginning to wonder too," Mavis called out from the back as Flora Jean, in full huff, slid in next to her.

Roosevelt Weeks, CJ's best friend since kindergarten, snapped on his seatbelt and adjusted both hands on the steering wheel as CJ stared back to where Newburn and the deputy coroner knelt over Newab Sha's partially uncovered body. "Wonder what that coroner found that's so interesting?"

"Think about it later," Rosie barked. "Air conditioning costs money, my man. Shut your door."

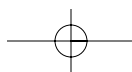
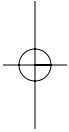
CJ pulled the door shut and adjusted his rear in the seat before turning toward Mavis and Flora Jean. "Either I've got a vigilante guardian angel out there or Sha took a bullet for me," he said, sounding puzzled. Mavis leaned forward and hugged him tightly around the neck. "I'm betting Sha's bullet was meant for me." A haunted look spread across CJ's face. It was a familiar look that still frightened Mavis after more than thirty years,

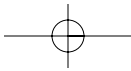
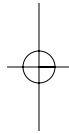
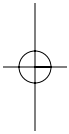


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a look that CJ had worn night and day for close to two years after coming home from Vietnam. "Like my old patrol boat captain used to say after we docked up safe from a mission, 'They missed us this time, boys, but there's always more ammunition.'"

Mavis relaxed her grip, and tears welled up in her eyes as CJ turned his head to kiss her on the cheek. "It's okay," he said, stroking her cheek reassuringly as the big black SUV picked up speed and he began to think about just who might want to see him dead.





*Chapter***3**

THE SMELL OF SPICY HOT SOUTHERN FRIED CHICKEN, candied yams, collard greens, and buttermilk biscuits hung in the air of CJ's apartment. The food that had filled the bellies and soothed the fears of black America for countless generations had been delivered moments earlier by a coal-black near midget of a man wearing a baseball cap, bib overalls, and a grease-stained white apron. At Mavis's request, the hastily delivered bounty had come from Mae's Louisiana Kitchen, the landmark soul food restaurant that her family had owned for more than seventy-five years. The man quickly disappeared into the night before Flora Jean had the chance to offer him a tip.

CJ had lived in the second-floor apartment above the bay-windowed downstairs wing of the ninety-year-old Victorian that housed his bail-bonding business since the day he'd returned home from Vietnam. Over the years, he had refurbished the once near derelict of a building to its original painted-lady splendor so that it now sparkled as the lone jewel among seven decaying downtown Delaware Street Victorians that sat across the street from the Denver police administration build-

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ing. The assemblage of painted ladies had become known as Bail Bondsman's Row, and CJ's gold-colored gem with its purple filigree trim stood out as the queen. Only his vintage 1957 drop-top Chevrolet Bel Air engendered the same kind of pride in his heart.

It was close to 10 p.m. when CJ, Mavis, and Flora Jean huddled around the antique inlaid walnut table that occupied most of CJ's tiny dining room. Aside from the building, the table represented the only tangible piece of real property left by CJ's uncle, the man who had raised him, when he had died twelve years earlier.

Watching CJ and Flora Jean devour their meals, Mavis shook her head. "You'd think the two of you had never seen food before."

"They say it soothes the savage beast," Flora Jean mumbled between bites.

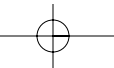
"It's not food that does that, Flora Jean. It's music. And it's 'breast,'" said Mavis.

Flora Jean scooped up a forkful of collards, eyed Mavis, and shrugged. "Whatever."

"At least it's stopped the two of you from rambling on about Newab Sha," said Mavis, who'd been forced to listen to CJ and Flora Jean dissect the evening's events nonstop for nearly an hour.

CJ reached across the table toward a platter filled with fried chicken. "For the moment," he said, picking out a thigh.

Mavis set aside the partially eaten biscuit she was toying with and frowned, knowing that the meal was only a brief respite from the treacherous world CJ and Flora Jean negotiated every

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day—a world filled with what her seventy-eight-year-old father called pond scum.

Realizing he'd said the wrong thing, CJ inched his chair back from the table and smiled at Mavis. "Good thing my main squeeze owns a restaurant."

"Cut the con, CJ."

"Significant other, then."

"Main squeeze, significant other, love of your life, whatever."

Mavis slammed the biscuit down in frustration. "In case you missed it, a few hours ago a man tried to kill us."

"He's dead," said CJ, hoping to lower the flame under the waters he could see about to come to a boil.

"But whoever killed him isn't, and the bullet he took may have been meant for you. Both you and Flora Jean as much as said so."

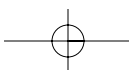
"So somebody's pissed at me." CJ clasped Mavis's right hand reassuringly. "That's nothing new."

"And that's the problem. There'll always be someone after you. Second-rate thugs, wife beaters, scam artists—the drunks you spend half your days bonding out of jail. They're leeches, CJ, and they're sucking you dry."

"It's what I do," CJ said defensively, aware that he was getting older and slower, more callous, and clearly, in Mavis's eyes, less charming. He turned to Flora Jean for support.

"I'll get dessert," Flora Jean said, heading for the kitchen, in no mood to become a lightning rod.

Looking defeated, CJ watched the swinging kitchen doors close behind her.



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"And what you do is turning you into something I don't like." Mavis slipped her hand out of CJ's and began nervously biting her lower lip.

"I'll slow down. Promise."

"No, you won't, CJ. Your job's your elixir. Has been since the day you came home from Vietnam. It's your postadolescent phase, midlife crisis, old-age jitters, and adrenaline fix all rolled into one. The bungee cord that connects you to life."

"I'll try."

"You've said that before."

Looking frustrated, CJ said, "Then what do you want me to do, Mavis?"

"I don't know."

Watching tears well up in her eyes, CJ lowered an elbow onto the table and rested his chin in his palm. "Damn! Mavis. I'm way too old a dog to learn new tricks. But I'll work on cutting back—let Flora Jean carry a bigger part of the load."

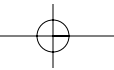
"Promise?"

CJ clasped her hand again and nodded, watching as Mavis forced a reluctant half smile.

"Heard my name," said Flora Jean, reentering the room with three plates, each one top heavy with a wedge of sweet-potato pie. Aware from the looks on their faces that the stormy seas had at least momentarily settled, she said, "Got pie?" failing miserably to sound like a celebrity from a *got milk* commercial.

"None for me," said CJ, forcing himself to pass on his favorite dessert. "Had too much chicken."

"Mavis?"

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"No."

"Suit yourselves." Flora Jean placed the plates in the center of the table. "Guess that means more for me."

"Guess so," CJ and Mavis said in near unison.

Flora Jean inched one of the plates her way, hoping there'd be no more need to play referee that evening. On the heels of the temporary truce, the room turned silent until she picked up a fork, tapped the plate in front of her lightly, and started on her first slice of sweet-potato pie.

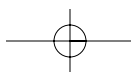


The light rapping on the metal door that led to the fire-escape landing and the turn-of-the-century wrought-iron staircase that wound its way from CJ's apartment to the driveway below was halting and barely audible. Mavis had said her good-byes forty-five minutes earlier, leaving CJ and Flora Jean puzzling over how best to deal with the police investigation that was certain to follow the death of Newab Sha. Mavis had given CJ a departing *I expect you to do better* kind of kiss and said, "See you both tomorrow." She had left without another word being spoken.

"Someone's at the door, CJ," said Flora Jean, interrupting CJ's calculation of how long they had before Newburn resurfaced.

When CJ didn't answer, she nudged the toe of his boot. "Didn't you hear me? You got a visitor."

"Oh!" CJ rose from his chair, moved slowly to the door, still crunching numbers in his head, slid back the deadbolt, and swung the door open without his customary glance through



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the peephole. He found himself facing an exotic-looking woman. Her face was illuminated by a dim yellow, insect-caked, sixty-watt bulb that jutted from a globeless fixture above the door. Even in the unflattering light, the woman was stunning. Her skin was smooth, the color of butter caramel, and her deep-set eyes were an intriguing shade of aquamarine. In contrast to his six-foot-three, 240-pound girth, she seemed very small. Taking a step back, he noticed that she was dressed in a loose-fitting, eggshell-white blouse, stylish designer shorts, and the kind of casual seaside wedges that added a few inches of height.

"Pardon me, but I was told that I could find Flora Jean Benson here."

CJ looked the woman up and down, concluding that she was Asian or Polynesian and noticing that she wore her closely cropped jet-black hair much the same way as Mavis.

"It's past midnight."

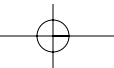
"I'm sorry, but this is important."

"Hope so." CJ called back into the house, "Flora Jean, got a visitor."

Flora Jean came to the door, looking perplexed. Eyeing the woman with a hint of suspicion, she asked, "What can I do for you, sugar?"

The woman flashed a look of relief at hearing Flora Jean's signature greeting. "I'm Carmen Nguyen. I'm in Denver doing a sabbatical at the University of Colorado Cancer Center."

Flora Jean's lower jaw relaxed momentarily before dropping open. "Damn!" She edged past CJ and wrapped her arms around Carmen, smothering her in a hug. Turning to CJ, she said, "Don't



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just stand there, let the sista in. And that's *doctor sista*," Flora Jean boomed.

CJ stepped aside to let Carmen in, surprised that Flora Jean would refer to someone so exotically Asian looking as a "sista." But as Carmen walked into the room's light, he recognized the subtle facial features of a person who was also African American.

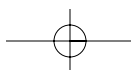
"The man in the doorway looking totally befuddled is none other than the elusive boss I've told you about, CJ Floyd." Flora Jean shot CJ a broad *gotcha* kind of grin.

"Pleasure," said CJ, nodding as Carmen extended her hand.

"Believe it or not, this is the first time Carmen and I have met. We've talked to each other a lot, but always by phone. She's the one I told you about who got her butt in a sling over in Grand Junction a year or so ago behind some nutcase mad scientist type tryin' to develop a uranium-based potion capable of creatin' supermen. Carmen blew the whistle on him."

Recognition spread across CJ's face. "Yeah." He remembered Flora Jean telling him about saving the bacon of a former marine buddy of hers and some Amerasian doctor, but he'd always thought the woman was some white-bread GI's war baby, not a brother's. Aware that children fathered by GIs during the Vietnam War were called *my den* and were treated in Vietnamese society as half-breeds who were no more than trash, most ending up as street thugs, hookers, drug dealers, or lost souls, he was curious as to how Carmen had been able to escape that cycle. "You're the lady whose boyfriend served with Flora Jean during Desert Storm."

Flora Jean answered before Carmen had a chance. "Right on



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the money, sugar. By the way, how is our lover boy, Rios? Still runnin' that river-raftin' business of his?"

"Sure is," said Carmen, blushing. "Right now he's on a white-water shoot down in South America with his brother."

"Men!" Flora Jean pivoted to face CJ. "Sometimes I think they're nuts."

Carmen hesitated before responding, as if hoping not to offend CJ. "But before he left he gave me this." She extended her left hand to show Flora Jean the two-carat diamond engagement ring on her finger.

"Hot damn! Diamonds on the soles of my shoes. Go on, sugar." Looking directly at CJ, she mouthed the word *Mavis*. "Maybe someone around here should take a hint."

"What?" said Carmen, looking confused.

"Nothin'." Flora Jean examined the ring, making certain CJ took notice, until Carmen slipped her hand out of Flora Jean's and smiled self-consciously. There was a brief moment of silence before Flora Jean said, "Now, sugar, sabbatical or not, I know you didn't come all the way over here from Grand Junction just to show off that ring. What's up?"

Carmen flushed.

"Ain't no problem with your aunt, is there?" asked Flora Jean, aware that Carmen's overly protective sixty-one-year-old aunt had been the one to end Carmen's troubles with the rogue scientist by taking out the hit man he'd sent after Carmen and Walker Rios with a point-blank blast from her shotgun.

"No, Ket's fine. It's . . . it's my father."

"What? Thought you told me he got killed during Vietnam."

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"No. Just forgotten." Carmen's face was awash in guilt. "And now I'm afraid he's headed for trouble. Serious trouble. The kind that could get him killed."

Flora Jean had heard snippets of the details surrounding Carmen's father's Vietnam military stint, including his reported desertion from the army, from Walker Rios. Rios, a Persian Gulf veteran and a former marine intelligence officer, had done some homework concerning his disappearance, and he'd told Flora Jean that he had serious doubts that the highly decorated first sergeant had deserted. But Carmen had accepted the fact that her father had deserted not only the army but her and her mother as well. He'd always been an erased memory for her.

"Always thought the two of you were, what's the word I'm lookin' for," Flora Jean said before finally blurting out, "estranged."

Carmen's response was terse. "You can't be estranged from someone you've never known. But you're right. Until recently I had no use for him."

"What changed your mind?" asked CJ, walking to a nearby coffee pot and pouring himself a cup of thick, syrupy brew well past its prime.

Carmen eyed Flora Jean sheepishly, hesitant to respond.

"Spit it out, sugar. Talkin' to CJ's the same as talkin' to me."

"Ket," said Carmen in a barely audible tone. Looking at CJ, she anxiously asked, "May I have a cup of coffee?"

"Stuff might kill you. It's just this short of tar," Flora Jean responded, snapping her fingers.

"I'll chance it."

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Smiling defiantly, CJ took a cup out of an overhead cabinet and filled it to the brim with bitter-smelling coffee.

"Thanks. I'm a little nervous." Carmen took the cup and clasped it thoughtfully with both hands before taking a couple of sips, setting the cup aside, and slipping a worn newspaper clipping from her pocket. "It all began with this about four months ago." She handed the *Denver Post* clipping to Flora Jean.

The headline at the top of the well-worn clipping read, "Margolin Well Positioned for Senate Bid." The two columns of newsprint that followed read more like an editorial endorsement than news copy as the article touted the fact that Peter Margolin, currently a third-term congressman from Colorado's First Congressional District, was poised to capture one of Colorado's U.S. Senate seats.

"What's Margolin's runnin' for the Senate got to do with your father?" asked Flora Jean.

"Ket claims that Margolin knows why my father deserted." The way the word *deserted* lingered on Carmen's lips told Flora Jean that it clearly wasn't her father's military desertion that Carmen was most concerned about. "Ket as much told me so. Ten days ago she broke down—said my father might still be alive and that if he was, I might be able to get in touch with him."

"Did you?" asked CJ, attentively leaning forward in his seat.

"I sent him a letter," said Carmen, surprised that the question had come from CJ instead of Flora Jean. "All Ket had was an old general delivery address. She wasn't sure if it was any good. I sent it there."

"Where's there?" asked Flora Jean.

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"To a backwoods P.O. box in West Virginia. Ket told me that the address came to her scrawled on a postcard two days before Christmas twenty-five years ago." Carmen took another sip of the bitter coffee and forced back a frown. "She'd kept the card all these years."

"Any response to your letter?"

"Not a word. That's why I came to see you. I want you and CJ to find him."

"In West Virginia? That's a bit east of our normal beat," said CJ.

"I'll pay you. Double your normal rates, triple if necessary."

"Damn, sugar. Sounds like you wanna hook up with your daddy real bad. Why not just wait for a response to your letter?"

Carmen swallowed hard. "I can't."

Flora Jean looked puzzled. "Why not?"

"Because Ket's beside herself over giving me that West Virginia address. She's spent years claiming to hate the man who deserted her sister. Now I think she's having second thoughts, even feeling guilty. I have the feeling that Margolin's run for the Senate has opened up a whole set of old wounds for her—scratched her conscience—and made her wonder if she's been wrong about my father all these years. She even told me that if he's still alive, my letter to him could end up getting him killed."

"By who?" asked Flora Jean, eyebrows arching.

Carmen reached across the table and slipped the newspaper clipping out of Flora Jean's hand. "By him," she said, thumping Margolin's name with her index finger several times before looking at Flora Jean pleadingly. "Can you help?"



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"Ain't up to me, sugar." Flora Jean looked over at CJ.

After a lengthy silence, punctuated by Carmen's penetrating gaze, CJ nodded and said, "Yes," uncertain why he'd done so, especially in light of his earlier promise to Mavis. "What's your father's name?"

"Langston. Langston Blue." Carmen realized only after she'd said it that for the first time ever, she'd said the name proudly.

