



The Violin - © Ken Herrera

"Don't forget, you promised" The words were from Kerry Clayton, the one and only child of Dr. Brad Clayton, who headed up the psychiatric unit of the county hospital in Hillsdale, Florida. Kerry was talking about a violin recital scheduled for the next night. A recital Brad had promised to attend if at all possible.

"If at all possible" Brad thought, "I will be unavailable" He did not choose to relay this bit of information to his daughter as she waved at him from the door of their home that morning.

Clayton thought about his daughter, Kerry. 20 years old, extremely intelligent, active in the community, but seemingly married to the violin. "Damned violins" thought Clayton, "I'll never understand why she complained so much about piano lessons when she was a little girl, only to take up an instrument that squeaks in the best of times, and grates on the nerves at its worst." Dr. Clayton could never understand what it was about that instrument that so captivated his daughter. She played incessantly, practicing early in the morning before school, picking it up in the afternoon when school was done for the day, and all but taking it to bed for the night. It had taken a great deal of persuading, including a few threats, to convince Kerry to major in business in college and to take music as a minor. The violin Kerry loved so much was a high school graduation present from Clayton, but it was much more than that. Given a choice he would have preferred to give her a new computer, perhaps a new wardrobe or even a car but the violin was the result of a promise he'd made to his late wife. Jeannine died early in Kerry's senior year of high school, and had always supported her love for the violin. Before she passed at the young age of 44 Jeannine had asked Brad to buy their daughter a really good violin to mark her graduation. No more of the 6 and 7 hundred dollar instruments, but something really substantial, something that cost thousands. Something Kerry could be proud to own, and to play. Even with that promise Clayton might not have carried through were it not for the fact that Jeannine had specified in her will that 15-hundred dollars be set aside for what she called a "special purpose that my husband will understand." Yes, Brad understood exactly what she meant, so he found and purchased a violin that costs exactly 15-hundred dollars.

He reflected for a moment on the day he gave it to her. The look that came over her face as she opened the package in which it was wrapped was one Clayton had never before seen. "Well, actually" he thought "I think it's the way she looked when Jeannine bought Kerry her first violin." That first instrument, the one that Brad thought would drive him crazy as she practiced incessantly, was a fourth or fifth hand, well worn, and well used instrument. It was covered with nicks and scratches, and the finish was terribly worn. But in Kerry's eyes it was the realization of a dream. Brad remembered hearing her cry the night she got it, back when she was only six years old. He went into her room and asked why she was crying and she could barely reply that it was because the instrument made her so happy. That night she told her mom and dad that one day she would master the instrument and make them proud.

Karl Babinsky was a very, very tired old man. His hair was thinner than it was in his younger days, but it was still in place atop his head. Gray, no doubt, but still there, and that was more than you could say about many people who had reached their 80th birthday. Karl had been confined to the county hospital's mental health ward for about a year, and everyone who came in contact with him knew him as an old-world gentleman who never raised his voice and only rarely complained. The few complaints he lodged generally had nothing to do with the hospital. He could not stomach

modern music, and when he heard it, he would generally go into a tirade about its lack of soul. The problem was, no one knew Babinsky's soul, and so no one really understood what he meant when he said the music had no soul or depth.

Very little was known about this man. He refused to tell anyone about his life. Despite constant questioning by psychiatrists on staff, no one knew where he was born, who his parents had been, what he had done during his productive years, or even what day he was born. Karl would only confide that he was 80 years old, and had been waiting for death to take him for the past 10 years. He wanted no help. Not from the nurses, and certainly not from the doctors. In that sense, he was proud man. He refused any and all offers of help, and was known to politely, but firmly, tell staff members to leave his room whenever they tried to help him tidy up. A proud but vain old man and one who clearly hated the violin, but clearly loved the music it produced. This behavior presented a contrast that even the best psychiatrists at the hospital could not understand. He was often found in his room listening intently to old tapes of concerts featuring the violin. In fact the doctors had discovered that Babinsky's passion for violin music was just as strong as his apparent hatred of the very instruments that produced that music. Babinsky loved, and hated the violin at the same time, and was soon to be given another chance to prove it, and unknown to her, Kerry Clayton would give him that opportunity.

Babinsky had learned of Kerry's musical abilities by accident. While working as a kind of trustee in the hospital reception area, emptying garbage cans, he had overheard a conversation between Kerry and her father.

"But daddy, you promised you'd come to the recital tomorrow, I'm really counting on it" she had told Dr. Clayton. "I'm sorry, Kerry, I just can't make it. I have a mountain of patient charts to update, and they all have to be done as soon as possible. I'll be lucky to make it home by 10 tonight, and I'll certainly be tied up at least that long tomorrow night. I just can't make it, please try to understand, I am very busy right now and I just can make it to your violin recital" he had responded. It was the way Clayton said "violin" that drew Babinsky's attention to the conversation. He could tell this doctor was no devotee of the instrument, and he continued listening. "Dad," Kerry continued, "can you even remember the last time you actually came out to see me play my violin?" Babinsky looked at the girl. She was really a woman, but Karl considered her but a child, maybe 18, 20 at the most he thought. "Honey" doctor Clayton responded, "I hear you play that thing every night, so it's not like I'm really missing anything. The only difference is during a recital there are more people in the room. Now go on home and practice. I'm really sorry, and I'll do my best to make the next one, okay?" With that Clayton turned and walked away leaving Kerry standing alone with a forlorn look on her face. As Karl watched his eyes were drawn to a shiny black case. A violin case. It sat on a chair behind the young woman. Babinsky again looked to Kerry, and for the first time realized that she was crying. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she tried to hold back the sobs. Babinsky's heart went out to her, but his attention remained focused on the black case. Something he had seen in the woman told him that he simply MUST have that violin. He MUST examine it, handle it, and pass his judgment on it.

Babinsky's chance came when Kerry walked to the receptionist and began speaking with her. He could not hear what they said to each other, but he didn't care. All of his attention now was focused on the black case sitting alone, with no one within 30 feet of it. He pushed his garbage can over to an area just behind the seat, and when he could clearly see that Kerry was not looking he grabbed the case and stuffed it into the can, covering it with trash. Karl Babinsky broke into a sweat as he nervously pushed the can and its ill-gotten contents out of the room before anyone noticed his treachery. He didn't stop sweating until he was safely in his room with his prize. "It won't do to open this now" Babinsky thought, "no, I'll hide it under my bed and examine it later tonight, when the halls are quiet and the nurses watching television. Yes, tonight. Tonight I will pass judgment on this instrument."

It was past midnight when Babinsky got up and carefully pulled the case out from under his bed. He switched on a lamp beside him and set the case on his pillow. Then carefully, so very carefully he reached down and opened first one latch, then two, then three. As he pulled open the lid he caught his breath, hoping against hope that he would see an instrument worthy of the young woman who owned it. Instead what Babinsky saw sickened him. By most standards the violin that lay before him was close to the upper end of good, but to Babinsky it was garbage. So much junk, waiting for a junkyard. So much wood, waiting for the fire. He was saddened by what he found, especially when he thought of the beautiful young woman who must be equally tormented by this foul device of the devil. Babinsky knew it was not at all worthy of that lovely creature, and he vowed then and there to learn more about her and to perhaps one day make things right. "If she is the one" he thought to himself, "I will be happy for the first time in decades, and I will be obligated to make things right. I will take care of her. I will see to it that she gets what she deserves" But what did young Kerry deserve? Even Babinsky did not yet know so he made plans that very night to find out.

Kerry Clayton was devastated. The one true source of joy in her life was gone. The violin she cherished so much had simply disappeared, and no one had any idea what had happened to it. For the briefest of seconds she thought about her father. "Maybe he finally did it, maybe HE was the one who took it" She had known for many years that her father did not like the violin, did not like its music, and quite possibly did not care very much for her. "Okay," she thought to herself, "maybe he does care for me, but he certainly does not care for the one thing I love in life above all else. My music, and my violin."

Kerry's life had seemed charmed until her senior year in high school. That's when her mother was snatched away from her by death. It was also the last time her father had attended one of her recitals. She remembered both with great bitterness. It seemed her father remembered only the death of his wife. While she lived Kerry's mother had been tremendously supportive of her passion for the violin and the music she could make with it. Her father did not know it, but Kerry was well aware of the fact that her graduation gift, the violin that was now gone, had in fact been a gift from her mother, who had died months before the ceremony. That made the loss of the instrument all the more unbearable. It was as if she had lost her mother all over again. Kerry sat in the hospital waiting room and cried. This time she did not try to hold back the sobs.

Because Karl Babinsky was so well known around the hospital it was easy for him to move around unchallenged. The day after he first saw Kerry, learned that she played the violin, and then conveniently stole that very instrument, Babinsky set about learning more of the girl, and of her feelings for the violin and the music it could produce. What was it Kerry had said? Ah, yes, a recital, and one scheduled tonight. Babinsky thought that HE should attend that recital, and there he might learn what he needed to know about Kerry Clayton. There he might be able to finally pass his judgment on her instrument. But where was the recital? Babinsky knew how to find out.

Babinsky took the elevator to the main floor of the hospital. He didn't exactly know where Dr. Clayton might have an office, but he knew if he had one, it would be on that level. As the elevator doors opened, Babinsky was surprised to be confronted by none other than Dr. Brad Clayton. At first a wave of fear swept through him, fear that he had been discovered. Then he noticed Clayton was not at all interested in him but was instead talking with another man at his side. "I just can't believe how torn up she is about that damned violin" he was saying, "and I can't for the life of me understand why anyone would want to take it, and right from the reception area to boot!" Babinsky slid to the back of the elevator and listened. He could resume his search for Clayton's office later, but for now there was something he knew he needed to hear. Clayton stepped in, still talking, and still ignoring the little old man who did not get out on the first floor with everyone else. As the doors closed Babinsky hit button number 7, the top floor, so he would be able to listen as long as possible.

"I'm telling you John, it is worse than when Jeannine died, Kerry is absolutely broken up about her violin being taken. I just don't know what to do. I've offered to go out and rent one for her recital tonight, but she says she will not play without that old violin. I'm at a complete loss, and frankly I'm really worried about her mental well-being, she is completely devastated by this." Karl Babinsky began to feel blood rushing to his face. He was embarrassed, and shamed by what he was hearing. He had never intended to hurt the beautiful young woman he had seen talking with her father just yesterday, and he certainly never meant to interfere with her plans to play at the recital. After all if she didn't play, how would Babinsky know if she were the one? He HAD to hear her play, even if she was playing the foul instrument that now lay concealed under his bed three floors above. Babinsky reached out and hit the third floor button. The elevator stopped just seconds later and Babinsky headed directly to his room.

As he reached under his bed to retrieve the case, Babinsky thought again of Clayton's words, "It was worse than when Jeannine died." He wondered who Jeannine might have been. Whoever it was, it was clear that the beautiful young woman had deeply loved that person. It was also clear that Dr. Clayton's daughter loved the violin. "Maybe this time hasn't been wasted after all," thought Babinsky, and the more he thought the more he was sure that he had NOT wasted time with the girl's violin. He had been able to use it to gather some important information about, what was her name again? Oh, yes, about Kerry. She had unknowingly passed Babinsky's first test as far as the old man was concerned. She clearly loved the violin and mourned its loss.

Babinsky set the case on his bed and again opened it revealing the instrument inside. Despite his abhorrence of what that lay before him, Karl was very gentle with the instrument as he lifted it from the container. He held it to his shoulder and began softly to pluck at the strings with his free hand, stopping now and again to tighten or loosen the tension. After several minutes of this, he replaced the violin, closed the case, and slid it back under his bed. "What to do now" he thought as he tried to come up with a way to return the stolen instrument.

Brad Clayton was still deep in thought, and somewhat tormented, as he sat in his office wondering what he could do to help his daughter overcome the loss of her violin when the phone rang. "Dr. Clayton here" he answered, "Can I help you?" He did not recognize the voice at the other end of the line, but he knew it was one that offered instructions he must follow. "You'll find your daughter's violin just inside the third floor fire escape" was all it said before the connection was broken. Brad turned immediately to the door and left his office. He was in such a hurry that he didn't even notice the gray, taunt old man who was standing by a bank of pay phones just down the hall. He breezed right past the elderly gentleman, and turned the corner, heading for the nearest bank of elevators. That was exactly what Karl Babinsky expected him to do, and he smiled as he walked away from the phones, and directly into Clayton's office.

Once inside, Babinsky took a quick look around. "Nothing special about this office" he thought as his eyes darted from corner to corner, taking in all that was around him. On the desk was a picture of Dr. Clayton, his daughter, and another woman. "Her mother?" wondered Babinsky as he walked toward the photograph. It was clear the picture had been taken some years earlier. He picked it up and began to examine it when a chill ran through him. He gasped when he saw written just below each figure the names of the people in the photo. There was Brad, there was Kerry, and there was Jeannine. Babinsky stood looking at the woman he now knew was dead, Jeannine Clayton, Kerry's mother. And what was it Dr. Clayton had said about the missing violin? Kerry was as devastated by its loss as she had been at the loss of her mother. For the second time that day Babinsky was flushed with embarrassment and remorse and for the second time that day he knew that Kerry had passed the first test. She really DID love the violin!

He set the picture down, and began scanning the papers on the top of Clayton's desk. Dozens of patient charts, a few stray notes, and an appointment book. Babinsky reached for the appointment book and flipped to the day's date. About mid-way down the page was scrawled "recital, 7 PM, The Grand Gallery" Babinsky now had what he had come for, and he replaced the book and slipped out of the office as quietly and as unseen as when he entered.

"We found it!" Brad Clayton was on the phone with his daughter, "we found it and it's none the worse for wear. It looks like whoever stole it got cold feet and left it on the third floor landing of the fire escape" He did not tell his daughter about the mysterious call that directed him to that landing. At the other end of the line Kerry was beside herself with joy, "Oh Daddy!" she gushed, "I am so relieved, so happy to know my violin is safe. Please say that you'll keep a close eye on it until I can get down there to pick it up!" Clayton was still standing and turned toward his desk, "You know I will, honey, it will be locked up in my office until you get here, and no one will be able to even look at it, much less take it away". The two exchanged a few more words before Dr. Clayton indicated he had to go and hung up the phone. He moved toward his seat, still looking at his desk. Something was strange about it, but he couldn't quite place it. "Probably my imagination" he thought as he dismissed the feeling that something had changed on or around the top of the desk. He didn't even realize what he was doing when he moved the picture he kept on the desk back about 3 inches so that it was easier to see while seated. It never occurred to him that the picture could not have moved itself. He just reached out, picked it up, and moved it back and then moved on to the stack of patient charts spread out before him.

Kerry Clayton could barely contain her excitement as she rushed toward the hospital, her mind alive with thoughts and fears. Had it been harmed in any way? Would it be ready for tonight's recital? Who had taken it? And why did they just dump it in the stair well? She could not answer any of those questions now, but would be able to answer the most important question as soon as she reached the hospital: had the violin been harmed in any way. Her father had said nothing about harm, but what would he know? "He wouldn't be able to tell if it was tampered with or harmed in any small way" thought Kerry, "He wouldn't know anything was wrong with it unless it was broken in half!" Kerry shuddered at the thought of her beloved violin broken into pieces. It was a thought she tried her best to push far from her mind as she turned into the doctor's parking lot at the hospital, and it was a thought she was still fighting as she ran down the hallway to her father's office and tried the door.

Brad Clayton had assured her he would leave the door locked, but she decided to try it just the same. She was not surprised with she found the door unlocked, and the office empty. For the briefest of moments, she feared her violin might have again been taken, but that fear left as soon as she saw the case leaning up against the back wall of the office. She walked directly to it, lifted it onto her father's desk, and opened it. As the lid fell back Kerry was awash in relief, she could tell immediately the instrument was still in one piece. She reached down to pick it up, her hands moving ever so slowly and shaking with anticipation. She lifted the violin slowly from the case and after examining it from all possible angles she placed it to her shoulder and began plucking the strings. What she heard surprised her. The instrument was in perfect tune. It puzzled her because she had intentionally loosened the strings after her last recital a week ago. She never kept the violin stored under extreme tension, and made it a point to tune up only on the morning of a performance. She plucked again. She had not imagined it; the violin was perfectly tuned.

Karl Babinsky was again standing by the bank of phones down the hall from Dr. Clayton's office. He stood and waited for Kerry to emerge from the office, and smiled to himself when she did. She turned in his direction and walked past him without taking even a glance toward him. He could see her mind was occupied with thoughts of her violin as she strolled past, clutching it to her chest. For a fleeting second Babinsky saw something he had seen only twice before in his life. He saw a fire

burning in Kerry's eyes! The sight caused Babinsky to step back as Kerry went by, and caused his heart to beat faster and faster! "That fire!" he thought, "I remember seeing it in my eyes, and in the eyes of a long gone friend decades ago!" Babinsky's hands trembled as he reached for one of the phones and dialed a number. "Information? Could you please give me the number and address for The Grand Gallery?" he asked in a voice that was as shaky as his hands. While he waited for the information, Karl Babinsky knew Kerry had passed his second test, he called it the fire test, and it could only be passed by those with an extreme passion for the violin, a passion so intense that it flared up in the eyes, visible to all who could see. Until today none had ever before passed this test. Tonight, however, would come the most crucial test of all, the one that would determine the fate of Kerry's Violin, and the one that would determine her fate as well, as far as Babinsky was concerned.

It was late in the afternoon when Karl Babinsky slipped out of the hospital unseen. He was dressed in common street clothes, nothing special. He could have been any one of the dozens of homeless people who gathered around the building each day. He was just another nameless and faceless old man. But unlike those he passed, Babinsky knew where he was going, knew his mission, and knew exactly what he had to do to carry it out. When he reached the main street he hailed a cab. The driver looked at him and asked "You got the fare, buddy?" When Babinsky flashed two 20-dollar bills, the driver reached across the vehicle and opened the door. "Hop in" he said, and Babinsky complied. "I need to go to the south district police station" he instructed the driver, "but I'm not in a hurry, so please take your time, and if you don't mind would you please put on a classical music station for me?" The driver grimaced as he switched the station from country and western to the local classical station, "sure, buddy, no problem. Why the cop shop?" he asked, trying to be friendly. Babinsky thought for a second before responding, "My son is assigned to that district and we're going out tonight for a bite to eat, but I'm awfully early" he lied. Babinsky didn't have a son. He didn't have a daughter. In fact, Karl Babinsky was alone in the world. As far as he was concerned he had no one and nothing except his music, which he now soaked up as the cab rolled away from the hospital. It would take about 10 minutes to get to the police station, and Babinsky intended to feast on as much of the music as he could during the short trip. He was especially pleased to hear the station playing a piece featuring the violin as he leaned back in his seat. It was a composition by a Russian master who had long ago disappeared from the world and who was probably dead by now. Babinsky smiled as he took in the beauty of the music and thought to himself "Now THAT is the way a violin should be played!"

The cab pulled up to the front of the police station far too soon as far as Babinsky was concerned, the radio still played the Russian composer. It was one of his longer pieces, and was only now getting to its climax. Babinsky wanted to ask the driver to go around the block so he could hear the finale, but he knew he had things to do, and despite what he'd said to the cabby, he did NOT have plenty of time. He pulled out one of his twenty-dollar bills and handed it to the driver. The fare had only been 7 dollars, but Babinsky told the driver "Keep the change" as he stepped from the car. He was in such a hurry that he didn't hear it when the driver shouted back "Hey! Thanks friend!" and pulled away from the curb.

Babinsky barely glanced at the police station. He certainly had no intention of going there. No, he was heading in a different direction, about two blocks away. A run-down neighborhood filled with abandoned buildings and crack houses. He'd always found it was safer to go to the police station, that way no one could ever suspect his true destination. His imaginary son, the cop, was also handy. He not only turned away suspicion, but also tended to keep nosy cab drivers from asking too many questions. No one wants to upset the father of a police officer, especially not someone who makes a living on the road. Babinsky quickened his pace when he reached the corner and turned right. His real destination was only a five-minute walk away, and he was happy to see it come into view. It was an abandoned office building, two stories tall, that occupied about half the block. All of its window's were boarded up, but the sun still managed to light the interior through the many cracks and breaks in the wood. He walked to the front door, conveniently chained shut and padlocked.

Babinsky had long ago broken that lock and replaced it with one of his own. He knew from experience that this building had been long given up by its owners, who sat waiting for a building boom that never came, hoping to one day make a killing by selling the whole lot. Babinsky reached down and took the lock into his hands. In a matter of seconds he had worked the combination and the chain fell away allowing him to push open the door.

Once inside, a dark hallway that extended the length of the building met Babinsky. Offices were situated on either side, and each of these emptied out into a similar hallway. The building was a kind of maze, and Babinsky marveled at the stupidity of the designer. Each workspace had two doors one in the front, the other directly opposite in the back, and each door faced a different hallway. Each hallway featured a door to the street on one end, and a flight of stairs on the other. This grid pattern was carried over through the entire building. The only way to pass between hallways was by passing through an office, or by using the street entrances. There was no way to move from hallway to hallway at the back of the building. "Sheer stupidity" Babinsky thought again.

These days the only entrance to the building that remained was the one Babinsky had used. All of the others had been sealed shut with sheets of plywood that were now covered with graffiti. Babinsky reached into his pocket and produced a small flashlight; it would come in handy when he reached the darkest portions of the building near the end of the hall. He stepped lightly as he moved away from the front door and directed himself to the seventh office on the right. It was the only office that still had a door, and the door was locked. Only Karl Babinsky had the key, he had installed the door and the lock himself, and now used the key to gain entry. Once inside Babinsky used his flashlight to locate a switch he had installed on the wall. It was wired to a car battery, that was in turn wired to three clear Christmas lights that were strung across the ceiling. They glowed enough to make it possible to see a pile of wood to the left side of the room. Anything to the right was in the dark, but the pile was clearly visible. Babinsky walked over to the wood and as he got closer it became clear that this wasn't just a pile of wood, it was a pile of smashed violins, hundreds of them, all broken into pieces. The pile stood about four feet tall and ran about 7 feet in length. It was of varying width, sometimes two or three violins wide, sometimes six or seven. Babinsky laughed as he looked at the pile and thought to himself "stacked up like cord wood, ready for the fire! Miserable trash! I have done the world a service by ridding it of you!"

It was while standing in this office that Babinsky's loathing of the violin as an instrument of fools was strongest. "These aren't musical instruments" he thought, "these are toys, and even as toys they were once owned by people who were not worthy of the title musician!" For the second time Babinsky assured himself, "I have done a great service by ridding the world of this junk!"

Babinsky again turned on his flashlight. He did not come this day to look at the pile of broken, smashed violins as he had many times in the past. This time his visit was to retrieve something, a suitcase stored on the darkened side of the room, and more money. The money he kept in a strong box near the back of the darkened room. It was concealed under the floor with access gained by prying up several pieces of flooring, which Babinsky accomplished using a small pocketknife he carried. He reached into the darkened space and struggled mightily as he pulled out the box. It had no lock, so once he managed to get it out it was a simple matter to open it and to look inside. What he saw did not impress Babinsky in the least, but it would have impressed any other person in the world. The box measured about two feet deep and three feet square. It was filled with stacks of 100-dollar bills and rolls of highly collectible gold coins. When Babinsky had first placed this box under his office flooring it had contained more than three million dollars in cash and gold. Today it still contained just under that amount. Babinsky laughed when he thought of how he had come across this money, and was amazed by how long it was taking to use it. The treasure had been stored in the box for well over ten years now, but he rarely had to dip into it. He really didn't need what he was taking now, but wanted to be ready for whatever might come up in the days ahead. He reached down and grabbed a roll of twenty-dollar gold coins and a stack of hundred dollar bills. About ten thousand in cash, and about ten thousand in gold coins he figured. He replaced the

wooden floorboards and moved on to the old suitcase. It contained Babinsky's finest clothes, and he wanted to be ready for tonight's recital. With Kerry performing, Babinsky was sure he wanted to look his best, so he set about changing clothes in the darkened room.

"Daddy, can't you PLEASE come to my recital tonight. This could be the most important one I have ever taken part in" The voice was that of Kerry Clayton as she pleaded with her father, "it would mean so much to me to know that you were in the audience" she continued. Brad Clayton was not impressed, after all he had tons of work to do, and that little fiasco with the missing violin had only served to make him dislike the instrument all the more. His face showed scorn as he spoke to his daughter by phone, "I'm sorry Kerry, but I told you yesterday, I just can't make it. I promise, I'll try to make the next one." He knew it wouldn't work, but why not use that old promise again. He was right. It didn't work. "But dad, that's what you told me the last five times I asked you to listen to my performance! Each time you promise you'll try to make the next one, and each time you come up with a reason not to go!" Kerry was clearly angry at this point and didn't wait for a response before hanging up the phone. Brad Clayton sat silently in his office, the phone pressed to one ear, for just a few seconds before he too placed it back on the receiver. "Damned violin!" he said as he turned his attention back to the charts that lay before him.

Back home Kerry was angry. She had tried and tried to get her father interested in her performances and was now at her wit's end. "I guess the time has finally come for me to leave this place" she thought, "I've only stayed this long to help daddy, but he's so tied up in his work that sometimes I don't think he even knows I exist!" As she had done thousands of times in the past, Kerry reached for her violin. It was still perfectly tuned, and she began playing. It was a slow, mournful piece that brought tears to her eyes as she played while thinking of her father, and of her mother who most certainly would be there tonight in spirit. She continued playing for a full hour and stopped only when she happened to notice that it was six o'clock. One hour before the recital! She had much to do to get ready and she carefully placed the violin in its case and began preparing for the night.

With his finest suit, a dark, European style that was about ten years out of date, Karl Babinsky was already prepared for the night. It was six o'clock and he knew it was time to go to the recital. He turned off the tiny lights to his office, closed the door, locked it, and walked back to the building's front entrance which he also closed and chained before walking back to the police station. At the station he again hailed a cab. This time the driver did not question him about the fare. In his finest suit, the driver simply assumed Karl was good for the ride. As he entered the cab Babinsky instructed the driver "To the Grand Gallery on Main, please. And would you please put on a classical station?" The driver turned to him and said, "Sorry, sir, the radio's out" It was not a good sign to Karl, who firmly believed in such things. "Then lets get to the Gallery as quickly as possible" he replied as he sat back in the seat. Neither man said a word during the twenty-minute drive.

Babinsky arrived at the Gallery a full thirty minutes before the recital was scheduled to begin. He was glad he had worn his best suit, as all the other patrons were equally splendid in their dress. He walked to a ticket office and inquired about the best seats available and was not the least bit shocked when told the best seats would cost 150-dollars. He peeled two bills off of his roll and handed them to the woman behind the glass. "This is a charity event, isn't it?" Babinsky asked. When the woman responded in the affirmative Babinsky questioned her again, "Would it be possible for me to make a donation in the name of one of your performers?" The woman told him it would be possible, and said she could arrange it if he wanted. Babinsky responded, "No, no arrangements are necessary" he reached into his coat and pulled out the roll of 20-dollar gold pieces, "please consider this a donation in the name of Kerry Clayton. Its not from me, it's from her father. I understand she's quite good," Babinsky said. At first the woman behind the glass looked stunned, but she quickly recovered and assured Babinsky that Kerry was not only good, but also one of the finest violinists she had ever heard. Babinsky was not impressed by the endorsement and simply said "We shall see, won't we" as he took his ticket while declining the offer of a receipt for his donation. Babinsky then made his way to his seat. It was front row, center and only about 20 feet

from the stage. His proximity to the stage concerned him at first, after all he did not yet want Kerry to see him, but he very much wanted to see her. He considered moving back, but decided she would be so caught up in her performance she would be unable to see anyone in the crowd, much less a small, old man. "Besides" he thought, "If she's inattentive enough to see me, she has failed her final test".

Backstage Kerry was suffering the usual butterfly's she experienced before each performance. She knew exactly what she had to do, and also knew that she would be able to do it, but still her stomach would not rest. "Kerry?" The voice belonged to the manager of the Gallery, "Are you there?" she continued. Kerry turned to face the door of her dressing room and said, "Yes, I'm here Kate, come on in!" Kate Mullins was an older woman, about 67, and had been manager of the Gallery for the past dozen years or so. When she entered the room Kerry could tell she was excited. "Kerry, you'll never believe what just happened!" she said and continued without waiting for a response "Someone just donated a roll of 20-dollar gold pieces to the foundation!" Kerry looked puzzled for a few moments, "Gold pieces?" she asked, "Who donates gold pieces these days?" Kate could hardly contain herself, she was so anxious to respond, "The gentleman who gave them to Mary at the front desk says they were from YOUR FATHER!" Kerry was breathless! Her father? Her father had donated a roll of gold to the foundation? She could not believe it! "How much is the donation worth?" she asked. Kate responded, "Fred, you know my husband, he's an avid coin collector and he's taken a look at them. Says they're worth at least one hundred thousand dollars, probably more. All of the coins are very rare and in superb condition!" Kerry was stunned, "That does not sound like something my father would do" she said, "Are you SURE about this?" Kate replied, "Well, an elderly gentleman, very finely dressed I'm told, handed the roll to Mary and said they were being given in your name by your father. Who do you know who fits that description? I never knew your father was a coin collector!" Kerry stepped in, "He's not. As far as I know the only thing dad collects are patient charts, and he's got thousands of those. I've never known him to collect coins, and I can't imagine he would go out and spend 100-thousand dollars just to donate gold to the foundation. In fact, dad would never, ever donate that kind of money in any form, especially not to this foundation. And besides, I'm positive dad doesn't HAVE that kind of money to donate." Now it was Kate's turn to be puzzled, "Then who?" she asked. Kerry was unable to answer but suggested Kate find the old man and ask him. Kate agreed and left the room almost immediately. Kerry was now more puzzled than ever. "Who would make such a donation, and why in my name?" she wondered. It was now just five minutes before the performance was to begin, so Kerry decided to question her father about it later, and continued to prepare for the evening, checking the tuning on her violin one more time. She was still amazed at how perfectly in tune it was when it was found back at the hospital.

Karl Babinsky nervously looked at his watch. Just five more minutes and the program would begin. He was looking down and did not see Kate Mullins when she slipped from behind the stage curtains accompanied by Mary, the ticket lady. Mary scanned the crowd and pointed toward Babinsky. Kate's gaze followed Mary's finger and settled on Babinsky, who now looked up to see the two women staring in his direction. At first he pretended not to notice, but when Kate began making her way towards him, his mind began to race. "Excuse me, sir" Kate was saying, "I just wanted to personally thank you for the tremendous donation you made to the foundation tonight. That money will go a long way, in fact that was more than we generally get in six months time!" Karl was surprised, a mere 10-thousand dollars? That equaled six months work for this foundation? He couldn't believe it. "Miss?" He asked, "Mullins" was the response, "Kate Mullins, I'm the manager of the Gallery and the president of the foundation" she replied. Babinsky continued, "I can hardly believe that such a simple contribution could make such an impact, after all we're only talking about what, 10-thousand dollars?" Mullins laughed, "Oh, those coins are worth much more than that!" she said, "My husband, he's a collector you know, my husband says that roll is worth as much as 100-thousand dollars, maybe more. You probably didn't know it but most of those coins are very rare!" Babinsky thought about that for a few moments. Yes, it made sense. When he purchased the coins

a decade ago he recalled the dealer telling him they were all very rare and sure to increase in value. He believed at the time that it was just another sales pitch, but apparently the dealer was right. Those rolls of gold that he'd paid ten thousand for ten years ago were now worth ten times as much! Karl's thoughts were interrupted, "We would love to have you backstage as our guest after the program Mr?" There was a distinct question to the tone, and Babinsky had to think fast, "Kramer" he said, "The name is Kramer, Bradley J. Kramer, and thank you for the invitation, but I may not even be able to stay for the entire program, I mainly wanted to hear Miss Clayton perform. I have heard much about her from her father" he lied. "Oh, then you know Dr. Clayton?" Mullins asked, "Why certainly" Babinsky responded. "You know Kerry says there's no way her father would make that kind of donation" Kate informed him. "Well, let's just say the donation comes in his name from me" Babinsky responded, "Dr. Clayton once worked a miracle for my son, and this is my way of thanking him for his work, by making the donation in the name of his daughter" Kate Mullins thought about that for a moment. It made perfect sense; here was a man who felt indebted to the father for saving his son, what better way to repay that debt than to help the daughter of the doctor. Yes, it all made sense. Even saying the donation was from Kerry's father made sense under this scenario and Kate was convinced she had managed to root out the true story. "Well, thank you so much Mr. Kramer" she said, "And if you're still here when the recital is over, please do come back stage and join us!" It was now time for the performance to begin, and Kate Mullins excused herself with another thank you and walked away.

Back stage Kerry was ready for her performance, and her thoughts turned again to the mystery donation. Who could have offered such a sum? And Why? Her thoughts were interrupted by Kate Mullins "I figured it out" she said, "The donation did not come from your father, it came from the father of one of his patients who wanted to use it to thank your dad for helping his son. I just spoke with the man. His name is Bradley Kramer. He's seated in one of the best seats in the house. I'm glad too, if he were seated anywhere else I would have insisted that he move to the very seat he now occupies!" Kerry was strangely relieved to have the mystery solved. Yes, it made sense. Some rich old man filled with gratitude for the work of her father. She'd have to let her father know about this mysterious benefactor. But that would come after the performance and Kerry decided to dedicate this performance to Bradley Kramer, whoever he was. It was time for her to take the stage.

The crowd applauded as Kerry Clayton walked onto stage, the bright lights that bathed her served only to illuminate her beauty. She paused for a moment, violin in hand, and began speaking. "Ladies and gentlemen, I want to share something with you " she started, "I have been playing the violin since I was six years old. Since that time I have always dedicated each and every performance to my dear, departed mother Jeannine, but tonight, for the first time, I want to dedicate my performance to a man I don't even know. He's seated here with us, and from what I understand he would rather not be pointed out so I will spare him that ordeal" Babinsky was relieved to hear that, "But I will tell you his name. He is Bradley Kramer, and tonight he donated 100-thousand dollars to the foundation!" The announcement drew a huge round of applause from the crowd. Kerry continued, "Mr. Kramer, on behalf of the foundation I want to thank you. That money will be put to good use helping children and adults in our community. Please accept my performance tonight as my personal gift to you" Again the crowd exploded as Kerry placed the violin to her shoulder and began playing.

Karl Babinsky was impressed by the comments, but he was left speechless by the performance that followed. Kerry went through some of the most difficult violin concerto's that existed like a concert pianist would go though "chop sticks". Karl was close enough to see her face, to feel her emotions, and from time to time to warm himself on the heat that was generated by the roaring inferno in her eyes. He was brought to tears many times during the performance. His heart all but exploded as she reached impossible highs and lows and flew through transitions that would stop most concert violinists in their tracks. She played with the violin; she was in complete control. "No" thought Karl, "Control is not the word. She is in complete command of the instrument!" He could

not contain his smile and thought he must look like a fool seated there smiling and crying at the same time. It was the most magnificent performance he had ever had the privilege of hearing in all of his 80 years. Perfection did not begin to describe Kerry Clayton's absolute mastery of the material she played. When she completed the performance Karl was totally drained. His brow covered in sweat, his face streaked with tears. Karl Babinsky was the first in the audience to stand and cheer as applause broke out. He was not the last. The entire house shook with the thunderous standing ovation, and through it all Karl could see Kerry Clayton bowing with tears in her eyes. He thought he saw her mouth the words "Thank you, mother" before taking her final bow, and like the angel she was, she almost floated from the stage.

Karl Babinsky smiled again. Kerry had passed his final test, the test of sheer talent. She WAS the one. That violin she played would have to go! Karl would take care of her; Karl Babinsky would make sure she did not ever have to play that violin again! He stood and quietly slipped out of the theater, his mind working on a plan as he hailed a cab to return him to the police station and eventually to the hospital.

"What do you mean you have no patients named Kramer" Kerry asked her father, "isn't it possible it was a patient from long ago?" she questioned. "Honey, I wish I could help you, but for the life of me I can't remember ever dealing with someone named Kramer. Isn't it possible the old man just didn't want his real name known? There are all kinds of eccentrics out there, and lord knows I've treated most of them. I'd bet this man was himself a patient of mine and just wanted to thank me. I admit 100-thousand dollars is one hell of a way to offer thanks, but I wouldn't be worried about it. Look at it this way: you know you have a super fan out there somewhere!" Brad Clayton was doing his best to calm his daughter. He had to admit that the whole thing was strange, but he ran into strange circumstances every day in his profession. "It's too bad you didn't get a look at him" Brad continued, "then you might be able to describe him to me. Didn't you say he was seated in the front row?" "Yes, he was dad, but with the light and everything it's impossible for me to see into the audience at all. I just didn't see him, but I kind of felt his presence there. "Felt his presence," thought Brad, "what the hell does that mean?" Seeing that he had reached the end of the discussion he let it pass.

Karl Babinsky, now safely in his hospital room, had come up with a plan that would make it possible for him to once and for all carry out what he believed to be his life's work. He would take care of that old violin Kerry had used so amazingly well, and he would take care of Kerry at the same time! The key to all of it was the violin. "Yes!" thought Karl, "All I need to do is get that old violin again, then everything will fall into place! My plan will be complete! " He grinned as he thought of what he was about to do. The anticipation of completing what had been a very long journey only made it all the more important that he carry out his plan immediately. The fact that he had become convinced the journey would never end only made the moment richer. He could not fail. He must not fail. For the good of all mankind, he believed, he would not fail! Karl slipped quietly into sleep and what once was a world of tormented dreams and visions. This night, however, Karl's dreams were filled with joy and accomplishment and of Kerry.

Early the next morning Kerry was still troubled by the recital the night before. It had gone well. In fact, it had gone very well. She had perhaps put on the greatest performance of her life, but still there was something there that troubled her. If she could just put her finger on the problem, it would probably explain itself, but the trouble was she could not figure out what it was that bothered her about last night. Well, that's not really true, Kerry knew what bothered her. It bothered her 100-thousand different ways. It was the donation from the old stranger. How she wished she had been able to get a look at him! Then maybe, this would all make sense. She lay in bed thinking about the events of the day before. First her beloved violin was recovered, then her father, who promised he would take care of it, had left it unattended in his unlocked office. She was quite naturally relieved to find it still safe, but the fact that it had been tuned to perfection was bothersome. Whoever stole it surely knew how to tune it, which was no easy feat. And if that person knew how to tune it, and

had the time to do so, she thought, surely he or she could have kept it. Why then, was it abandoned in a stairwell? A crashing sound from the back of the house interrupted her thoughts. Kerry jumped out of bed and threw on her robe. Her first thought was the music room and her violin, and she ran as fast as she could to the room. What she saw when she got there was enough to tear her heart out. The big picture window she loved so much was smashed, and where her violin once stood there was emptiness. It had been stolen again! Kerry fell to the floor sobbing.

"Dr. Clayton, emergency phone call on line 15, Dr. Clayton emergency phone call on line 15" the announcement said as Brad walked toward his office. "Emergency?" he wondered, "What could be wrong?" He quickly opened his office door, walked to his desk, and punched up line 15. "Dr. Clayton here, you have a call?" The operator at the other end of the line said "Just one moment Dr. Clayton, I'll put the caller on immediately." Clayton looked around the office, still bothered by the feeling that something was wrong, or had been wrong when he last studied his surroundings. His thoughts were interrupted, "Dr. Clayton? This is Sgt. Powers, er, Mike Powers. I'm with the burglary division of the Hillsdale Police Department, and we need to talk ". The voice was clear, the message ominous and Brad didn't quite know what to say, so he said nothing. "You still there, Dr. Clayton?" the voice at the other end asked, "It's about your daughter, and a burglary at your house." Brad was now worried. His daughter? Kerry? And a burglary? "Yes, Sgt., what is it?" he asked. "It seems someone broke into your home this morning while your daughter was there, don't worry she's fine, but this perp stole a violin she says is very dear to her. Would you know anything about that?" Sgt. Powers asked. "Kerry, is she there? Is she all right?" Clayton pleaded, "Can I speak with her?" "Now, now, Doctor, in good time, don't worry, she's with a police woman right now giving her statement. You know, we have a pretty good idea who it was that broke into your home today, and who it was that took the violin. A guy named Babinsky, Karl Babinsky. We've dealt with him before, a real fruitcake, if you'll excuse the term. I think you should get down here to the station as soon as you can so we can try to clear a few things up." Clayton thought about his schedule, his patient files, his plans for the day and for the first time in years he KNEW that none of that was even close to being as important as his Kerry "I'll be there in 20 minutes Sergeant, tell Kerry I'm on my way!" Clayton didn't wait for an answer, he hung up the phone, grabbed his keys and coat, and was off.

The trip to the main police headquarters seemed to take forever to Brad Clayton. All the while he wanted to be with Kerry, to hold her, to comfort her, to tell her he would never again abandon her, but that would not be possible until he was with her. His foot stepped down harder on the gas and he now doubled the speed limit. "Who would do such a thing to such a wonderful child?" he wondered as he sped toward his meeting with Sgt. Powers, "And what can I possibly do to make this up to Kerry? I have been such a fool! I've ignored her for so very long, and all because of that damned violin!" Clayton was now convinced that the problems his daughter faced were directly the result of his failure to at least try to understand her love for music, and the violin in particular. As he thought about what had happened in the years since Jeannine died he began to realize WHAT it was about the violin that so irritated him. It wasn't the instrument at all! And it wasn't the music it produced, instead it was the fact that it was a constant reminder of his dear Jeannine. Before she died, the violin served as a special bond between Kerry and her mother, a bond that Brad now realized had caused him to be more than a little jealous! It was also a bond that kept Kerry and her mother close, even in death, and Brad had no such tangible link to his beloved wife. "Jealous of my own daughter!" he said aloud, "And I call myself a psychiatrist! Sheesh!" he grumbled as the realization hit him that the violin represented a bond between Kerry and her mother that he could not touch. Not because Kerry didn't love him, but because he never took the time to listen to her as she played the instrument, and even after Jeannine died he refused to listen because of the ghosts that accompanied the music. Brad resolved to change. "I know I can't replace it, but I swear I'll do all I can to help Kerry overcome this loss, and for the first time since Jeannine died we will TOGETHER move forward. I can't believe what a fool I have been!" The doctor continued to beat himself mentally as he sped toward the station. As thoughts sped through his mind he was stunned by the realization that the last time he had actually heard his daughter perform was in the company

of Jeannine, dead now for three years. It had been three full years since he had taken the time to listen to his daughter play, despite her many pleadings for him to come to her many performances. "Three years!" he thought, "How could I have been so selfish? How could I have been so wrong all this time?"

Clayton was saddened at the realization that when Kerry needed him most, he had not been there for her in all of her adult life. He realized why it was that Kerry had become so attached to the violin. Like her mother, it was always there, and always ready when she needed it. Getting it back was now more important than ever. It had also become very important to Brad Clayton to understand what it was that this Karl Babinsky character saw in Kerry, and her violin. Clayton vowed to do just that as his car turned into the police headquarters parking lot.

Karl Babinsky knew exactly what he was doing when he smashed the big window. He had seen the violin sitting there, just asking to be taken, begging for release, and perhaps crying for destruction. But Babinsky had no such plans for this particular instrument. No, it was to become bait in a much larger scheme. A bait, he hoped, that the fish could not resist no matter how careful they might be. He grabbed the instrument and left the home through the same window. As he fled, he heard dear Kerry running down the hall toward the room, and he also heard her fall to the floor sobbing. "Don't worry, Kerry" he thought, "Things are always darkest before the dawn, and I will see to it that your dawn is bright, very bright indeed! He-he!" Babinsky ran as fast as he could and kept running with the violin tucked under his right arm until he was several blocks away, near a major intersection. There he hailed a cab. "Take me to the south district police station, please" he said as he slipped into the cab, "and would you please put on the classical music station while we drive?" The cabbie just nodded and tuned the radio across the dial to the station Babinsky wanted to hear. What Joy! Again, he had managed to catch a taxi while a violin piece was playing! I was a good sign for Babinsky, who really did believe in signs.

"Sgt. Powers, please" Dr. Clayton said as he approached the front desk, "Tell him Dr. Clayton is here if you will." The officer behind the desk said nothing, but pointed toward a chair about five feet away as he picked up the phone. Clayton turned and sat down, still thinking of what he might be able to do to recover the stolen violin for a second time, and how he might be able to confront, and possibly understand, the man who had stolen it and so threatened his daughter. What was that name again? Oh yes, Babinsky, Karl Babinsky. The first time the instrument disappeared it had been easy to find. All Brad had to do was take a call. This time, stolen from his home and while Kerry was in the house, it might not be so easy to recover. In both thefts Brad had been ignorant of the bandit's role and of the man's motives. As these thoughts ran through his mind the officer behind the desk said "Dr. Clayton, Sgt. Powers will see you, go right through this door" he motioned to his right, "It's the second door on your left. Detective division." Clayton got up and headed for his meeting with Sgt. Powers, and, he hoped, a reunion with Kerry.

Karl Babinsky gave the driver a 100-dollar bill for a 15-dollar fare and told him to "keep the change" His generosity was one sure sign of his mood at the time. After the driver thanked him and sped off, Babinsky headed for the abandoned office building, carrying the hot violin under his arm. He hadn't done it in years, but he actually began to whistle as he walked toward the building. "This will be great!" he thought, "At long last I can make everything right again, I can redeem myself! And to think this wretched violin will pay THE key role! I would never have believed that a piece of garbage like this could one day serve me so well, and bring into my hands a woman so deserving of my special attention, a woman who is so much like me!" Babinsky's thoughts sped along... what he would do with Kerry, what he would say to her, how he would handle the whole meeting? Before he realized it, he was standing in front of the old office building. As he released the pad lock he thought "everything must be just right, I still have many things to put in order before I can put my plan into action! Many things to do before I can give young Kerry exactly what she so richly deserves!" He had an almost maniacal grin on his face at this last thought. Had anyone been around

to see it, they would have run away in terror! A crazed man on a crazed mission that could not possibly end in anything but terror and agony. Or was it so? Only time would tell.

"Sgt. Powers, I'm Dr. Clayton. Where is my daughter?" Brad's patience was wearing thin as he greeted the sergeant. "Relax, I told you she's okay, she just stepped out with another officer for a cup of coffee, they'll be back in just a few minutes. Right now we need to talk about your burglar. He managed to get into your house through that big picture window, the one you have in the back, you know?" Brad knew immediately. It was the window Jeannine had insisted be placed in the music room when Kerry first took up the violin. It seemed like a lifetime ago, but it was actually only 14 years ago when Kerry was six, and Jeannine still had 11 years to live. He didn't know that at the time, of course, and he begrudgingly spent the money to have the window installed. It had always been Kerry's favorite place to practice. She'd stand there for hours on end playing the violin while watching the world. Brad always thought she was watching the world go by, leaving her behind, but now he wasn't so sure. Maybe she was playing a tune to keep that world happy.

"You said you had a pretty good idea about the person who carried this out? Some fellow named Babinsky?" Brad directed the question to Powers. "Oh, yes, not much doubt about it" Powers replied, "We think it was a guy we know as the violin bandit. Should be someone YOU know too, Doctor... he's one of your patients. At least He's been committed to your hospital for the past year." Everything began to make sense to Brad. The first theft, right in the hospital, the violin found, thanks to a tip, on the third floor. And the tipster MUST have been the thief! "Who is this guy?" Brad asked. "Babinsky" the sergeant replied, "Karl Babinsky. You should know more about him than we do, doctor. He's been under your roof for a lot longer than he was under ours. Like I said, he's one of your patients." Brad moved to the phone, "Mind if I make a quick call?" he asked. "No problem, make sure you dial 9 to get an outside line" the sergeant responded. Brad wasted no further time and quickly dialed a number. "Julie?" he said to his secretary, "Doctor Clayton here, could you please pull the file on a Karl Babinsky and have a courier bring it to me at central police headquarters immediately?" Brad looked to the Sergeant, "How does he spell Karl?" he asked. "That's Karl with a K, Dr. Clayton, not a C, a K" Brad relayed the information to the woman at the other end of the line and hung up. "We'll know all there is to know about Mr. Babinsky in about 15 minutes sergeant. Now, when can I see my daughter?" At just that moment the door to the office opened and in walked Kerry and another police officer.

"Oh daddy, he's done it again!" Kerry cried when she saw her father. "He's taken my violin! Why would he do this to me? Why?" she asked as she threw herself into his arms. "I don't know honey, but I'll find out, and when I do your violin will be returned. Sgt. Powers here seems to think one of our patients, a Karl Babinsky, stole your violin. He's done this before, apparently, but he's never hurt anyone." As Brad tried to soothe his daughter another officer stepped in holding a sheath of papers "Fax from the county hospital for you Dr. Clayton, it was marked "urgent" " Clayton released his daughter and began looking over the papers just handed to him. "Good 'old Julie" he thought, "Why send a messenger when a fax will get it there faster! I didn't even think about it!" Dr. Clayton read every word on every page, then handed the bunch to Sgt. Powers.

"Yeah, that's the guy, Babinsky, Karl with a K Babinsky. A real nut case! " The words were spoken by Powers. He was pointing to a faxed picture of a very old man. The patient file to which the photo was attached identified Karl Babinsky, no middle name, no known address, no place of birth, and no date of birth though he claimed to be an octogenarian "Geez, the old geezer MUST be pushing 80 by now" Powers continued, " from what we know of him he's really pretty harmless, as I told you we call him the violin bandit. Seems all he ever steals are violins, and the funny thing about it is I don't think he's ever taken one that was worth a grand theft charge. Always petty theft. I can tell you one thing for sure about this guy, he don't know his violins! Takes only trash. Trash that is until today, Dr. Clayton, Until today he's never taken anything worth more than maybe a hundred bucks, tops. And that's not all that's different this time, this is the first time he's ever broken into a home to

make off with a violin. As far as we know all the other thefts have been simple crimes of opportunity, he saw the violins, and took that opportunity to lift them. "

Clayton began speaking "According to this chart, Babinsky has been our patient for the last year and he's never shown any tendency to fight, curse, rant, or rave so he's always been given lots of freedom to roam the hospital, heck, he's even been doing menial jobs around the building, picking up trash, cleaning the waiting rooms, moving laundry those kinds of jobs. He has always been cooperative with the staff. Personally I've never met him, but all these reports seem very positive. But there may be some problems. Take this note, for instance, it says here he shows every sign of what you might call classic senility, but I'll be darned if any doctor has been able to determine the root cause of his mental problems, and there is always a root cause to senility, despite the impression that it's just part of getting older. The doctors who have seen him say he loves violin music, but judging from his record, he hates violins!" Clayton gave the sergeant the rundown on everything he read about Babinsky, and whatever insight he could gather from the reports, which wasn't very much at all. Certainly not enough to explain why this seemingly gentle old man had embarked on a life of crime that now included Kerry.

"Well," Brad turned his attention once again to the sergeant, " I guess I've gotten about all the information I'm going to get here" he could barely contain his dismay. He wasn't sure what he had hoped to find at the police station other than Kerry, but it would have been nice to have walked in and found the violin and the thief both under lock and key! Powers looked at him and moved to defend his department by saying, "Look Dr. Clayton, this guy may be a nut case, but he's a gentle nut case. Like I told you before, he steals only the cheapest violins and has never been known to hurt a fly. Hell, not a single one of his victims ever even saw him! If it weren't for the fact that he's returned several instruments to his victims, who were later able to identify him, we probably wouldn't even know who he is. Until he was first arrested several years ago his record was absolutely clean, even the FBI never heard of the guy. We ran his prints and got back nothing, absolutely nothing! This department has far more serious crimes to deal with than trying to dig into the brain of a psycho who apparently hates the violin. Besides, that's YOUR department, isn't it? Digging into the brain and all." Clayton did not bother to respond to the obvious dig at his profession and instead let it drop by saying, "Thanks for all your help. I'll let you know if I can turn anything on this Babinsky that might explain why he's suddenly graduated from hundred dollar toys to real violins, and most importantly, why he's chosen my daughter as a target". With that Brad turned and started to leave the office but was stopped by Powers who said, "Look Dr. Clayton, if there was ANY reason to believe your daughter was in danger, I'd be the first to tell you. Hell, I'd camp outside your house personally to keep this guy away, but you yourself say your daughter has never seen him, and as far as you know he has never seen your daughter. So the guy spotted her violin one day while she was visiting your office, and decided it would be his next target. It's as simple as that. The only difference is he had to go to your house to get it. He's still following his basic MO. He takes the violin. He doesn't take the person who owns it. And if your security was a little bit better at the hospital, he probably wouldn't even have been able to get out so he could take the violin." Brad just nodded and again said thanks, and taking his beloved Kerry by the hand, he left the office.

Sgt. Powers knew about this latest theft, but he did NOT know about the first. The one that occurred at the hospital. Brad now had no doubt that Babinsky was responsible. But why? The man clearly was deranged and obsessed with violins, and yet his medical reports all showed he was consumed by the music they produce. How could this be? Brad thought long about that one as he drove back to his house, Kerry whimpering by his side. He had already told her everything he had learned from Sergeant Powers. "Dad, do you think we'll ever see it again?" she asked. "Yes, I do. I think we will see your violin again. I can't explain it, but I'm certain this Babinsky character will give it back. I don't know why he keeps stealing it, but I'm confident he will give it back, just like he gave it back the last time." It was now Kerry's turn to speak, "Did I tell you about the condition of the violin the last time it was taken and then recovered?" Brad thought for a moment, "No, I don't think you did"

he responded. "It was perfectly tuned when I got it back" Kerry replied, adding, "It's not easy to tune a violin, and to tune it perfectly takes many years of practice, especially if you don't have another instrument to help you set the proper tuning. When I got the violin back last time it was in absolutely perfect tune." Brad thought about this for a moment, "So? Maybe you tuned it up and forgot about it" he said. "No way" replied Kerry, "I always keep the tension off the strings during the week and tune it only the day of a performance. Once in the morning, and again just before the performance." This new information was puzzling to Brad. Could it be that Babinsky actually had some kind of background in music? It seemed impossible, but if what Kerry said was true, he MUST have knowledge of the violin. Why then, would he hate the instrument so much? Could it be his parents abused him while he was learning to play, and the violin represented his parents in his mind? This was certainly possible... Brad's thoughts were interrupted by the sound of his car phone ringing.

"Hello, Dr. Clayton?" the voice at the other end was familiar, but Brad couldn't quite place it, "Yes, this is Dr. Clayton, who is speaking?" he replied. "This is Karl Babinsky, and I have your daughter's violin. If you ever want to see it again you and your daughter will do exactly as I say, and you won't bring in the police!" Brad's heart began to race, the mad man was holding a violin hostage? What an idiot, he thought. "Listen here Babinsky, I don't care what you do with that violin, you just leave my daughter alone, and if you think you're going to get us to follow your directions you really are crazy!" Brad told the caller. When Kerry heard her father mention Babinsky's name she looked to him and said "Daddy, if that is the man with my violin, please tell him I need to have it back! I NEED that violin!" Babinsky had obviously heard the exchange and didn't give Brad time to relay the message, even if he'd wanted to, "Tell your daughter she is the most wonderful violinist I have ever heard. I mean her no harm, but I MUST see you and her together. I have something for both of you!" he nearly shouted into the phone. "Absolutely not" said Brad, troubled by the phrase 'The most wonderful violinist I have ever heard', "There is NO WAY I'm going to expose my daughter to an obviously deranged person like you Babinsky, the police know you took the violin, and this time it's grand theft AND breaking and entering. Do yourself a favor and turn yourself in and return the violin. The courts might go easy on you!" Brad hoped the man on the other end of the line would listen to reason, but he was not surprised when he did not. "You listen to me Dr. Clayton, Unless you AND your daughter meet me in 20 minutes at the corner of Dearing and Bradford, near the South district police station, you will NEVER be rid of me. Meet me as I want, and I will disappear. I have something I want to give your daughter, and once I do it, I will have no reason to bother you again, but I will not rest until I complete my mission!" Brad knew the threat was real. He wanted to recover the violin, but he did not want to risk Kerry so he asked, "Can I come alone? I am more than willing to talk with you, maybe together we can work this thing out, but I can not bring Kerry" Babinsky responded, "You must bring your daughter, but I will give you this much: she need never step out of the car. If I see you both in the car, and no police, I will simply set the violin down in the street, and you can retrieve it. I do not want to harm your daughter in any way. That has never been my intention." Brad thought for a moment. Could he possibly explain to Kerry why her beloved violin must stay forever lost? No, he couldn't, not when he might have it in his hands, no, make that in HER hands in just 20 minutes? He looked at his daughter and explained the offer. She did not hesitate when she said, "Daddy, accept the offer. I MUST have that violin. I would die if I knew it was gone forever!" Brad knew, for the first time in his life, he really knew that she was not exaggerating about her need for the violin. It had become a part of her, and without it she was heartbroken. It really would be like losing her mother all over again, and he was not about to let her go through that kind of grief if he could prevent it. Brad agreed to Babinsky's offer. "We'll be there in 20 minutes" he told the caller, "But Kerry stays in the car!"

As they drove toward the appointed meeting place Brad and Kerry talked about the procedure that would be followed during the recovery. "Listen to me Kerry. If Babinsky really is there, and if he really has your violin I will leave the car to get it. Under no circumstances are you to step foot out of this car. I don't care what happens, you are NOT to leave this car, do you understand this?" Kerry looked at her father and replied, "I understand, dad. I'll stay in the car, but please, do whatever you

have to do to get my violin!" Brad thought about that for a while. He would do whatever was necessary retrieve the instrument. He had failed his daughter for far too long, and he had no intention of doing so again. He would get that violin even if he had to kill Babinsky to get it!

As they continued driving to the meeting Brad was going through mental gymnastic as he tried to figure out why Babinsky would do the things he did. Why would someone who loves violin music so much also hate the instruments? He wondered. What is it about Babinsky that drives this hate? It must be something from early in his life. Evil parents, a bad experience on stage? Something drove this hatred of the violin! What was it? Hospital and police records gave no indication of a past incident that would explain it, but then again neither of those records was complete. No one really knew anything important about Karl Babinsky. Lost in thought Brad did not at first realize it when he came to the intersection Babinsky had mentioned. The realization came only when he saw an old man standing about a block away, near the door of an abandoned building, waving at him.

"We're here!" he said to Kerry, "Remember, no matter what happens you are to stay in the car. When I get out you lock the doors, keep the engine running, and be ready to take off if anything threatening occurs. I mean anything Kerry, don't wait for me, you get out of here and down to that police station around the corner. They can send all the help we could possibly need." Kerry looked at her father and nodded. Brad looked down the street as he climbed from the car, and there, still about a block away, was the old man. "It must be Babinsky," he thought. His suspicion was confirmed just moments later when Babinsky held a violin case over his head and motioned for Brad to move forward. He did. As he moved closer to Babinsky, the old man laughed and set the case on the ground. He then moved toward the front of the abandoned building and just waited, his back turned to the car, but his eyes following Brad Clayton. Fearing some kind of set up Brad slowed his pace. Sensing this fear Babinsky called out "Don't worry, it's not a bomb or anything... It's your daughter's violin! Get it... give it back to her... and then, if you want to stop me from doing this again, follow me, I have a story to tell, and something to give you!" he shouted. Brad decided to do just that. He didn't care about the violin, but he cared very much about his daughter, so he ran to the case, picked it up, opened it to make sure the instrument was there, and then shut it again and sprinted toward his car.

Kerry could barely contain herself as her father reached the doorway, "Dad, let's go... let's leave this place NOW!" she shouted. "No, Kerry, I have got to make sure that old man leaves us alone. Let me talk with him, but I want YOU to leave the area. Go back home and wait, I'll be along in just a while. " Kerry would have none of this and argued with her father, but it was of no use. He was not going with her, and he would not allow her to stay and wait for him. After looking again at her violin, and assuring herself that it was not broken or ruined in any way, Kerry pulled away in the car, leaving her father behind. He quickly headed down the street to the building where Babinsky still stood. "Listen up Babinsky, I've done everything you wanted, and now it's time for us to talk!" he shouted. Years of dealing with the mentally unstable drove Brad's curiosity. He had many questions for this old man, and he hoped he could make sense of the answers. He was relying on the reports from the police and the hospital that indicated Babinsky was not a danger to anyone. "Heck" he thought, "I might even be able to help him!" Babinsky did not reply to Brad's request for a talk, instead he just stood in the doorway of the abandoned building as if he was waiting for Dr. Clayton to reach him. When Clayton was about 20 feet away Babinsky suddenly turned and entered the building and ran down a long hallway. Clayton could still see him, and watched as he turned into a small, dimly lit office about halfway down the hallway. After a few moments hesitation he decided to follow. As he made his way down the hall, he wondered how long Babinsky had used this building as a station of operations. It was too perfect. Only one entrance, an abandoned building, and some kind of light in one office halfway down the hallway. Yes, Clayton was convinced Babinsky had been here off and on for years. When he turned to enter the office, his suspicions were confirmed. There to his left, directly under a set of three lights throwing off a feeble glow was what appeared at first to be a stack of wood. Closer inspection revealed a stack of broken and smashed violins. Brad

knew who had broken them, but he did not know why. "Nothing in the reports to indicate this streak of violence" he thought to himself, while wondering with more than a little fear about what other violent tendencies the reports might have overlooked concerning Karl Babinsky. This thought was broken when suddenly, from the dark right side of the room Babinsky stepped into the light and began speaking.

"I have a story to tell, Dr. Clayton, a story I have told to none before you. It begins long, long ago. It's about my music, and me. You see it began with the piano. I dabbled with the piano until I was four or five years old," he started, " but it didn't interest me, in fact nothing musical really interested me until I heard a Violin! My very Russian parents were, of course, crushed that their son no longer wanted to play the piano, but for whatever reason they yielded to my childish demands and somehow found me a violin. I took to it immediately and began playing when I was six. By the time I was ten, I was performing with my country's best symphonies. Those performances began 70 years ago. I played for all of my life until about ten years ago when I became fed up with the lack of interest in the truly great music mankind is capable of producing. I had written many pieces, but none was widely accepted. Oh, yes, there were a few devoted lovers of the arts who applauded my work, but the majority of mankind simply ignored me. I was writing and performing for mankind, and I was ignored!" Babinsky's voice was shaking as he continued, "I was so fed up that I decided to quit the human race. I didn't want to kill myself or anything like that, but I was tired of fighting a battle I thought could never be won, and I just disappeared. I was tired of producing for an uncaring world, of making music that no one could equal, and that none would ever appreciate. Like a little boy who takes his toys and leaves a game I decided I would leave and deprive all of mankind of my talent. I collected all of my assets, converted them to gold or cash, and have been living as Karl Babinsky ever since. The entire time I lived as Babinsky I kept searching for your daughter. Oh, I didn't know I was looking for your daughter, but I did know that I had to find someone who, like me, loved the violin and its music above all else, and who could truly appreciate my sacrifices. Last year, I gave up that search and was honestly convinced that no such person existed. That's when I allowed myself to be admitted to your hospital. There, I figured, I would wait for the release of death. In my anger I also began seeking out and destroying all the violins I could find that were played by anyone who was not at least as good as I once was. Then something happened to change that. I heard your daughter play! Until I saw you and your daughter talking about the violin I was convinced that no one in the world cared for this instrument as I once did. I believed that none would ever again be able to make a violin sing the way I once did, the way I believed everyone should. In short, I wanted perfection and was willing to settle for nothing less. Where perfection did not exist, I entered the picture and took the offending instrument. Many of them you see right here stacked up like so much junk. To me, that's exactly what they are. Junk."

Babinsky continued, "I now realize just how wrong I was! Your daughter changed that! Look into her eyes and watch for the fire, and you will see it! The fire that burns in her soul for the violin and the music it can produce is reflected in her eyes. It was that fire that threw off the spark I needed to rekindle my own fire! I knew from the very first time I saw her play that I had found another like me and that I had been wrong, terribly wrong to walk away from my first love, the violin!" Babinsky's tone then changed to one of admonishment, "You Dr. Clayton, well, you are too blind to see what I could see, and too deaf to hear what I hear. She probably doesn't tell you what it means to her to play because she knows you don't approve, but I know that love, that wonder for the beauty and the perfection that is the violin. It clearly burns in her heart and soul just as it once burned in mine." Babinsky gazed into the distance, " The day you told her in the hospital that you could not attend her recital because of business, do you remember? Sure you do! It was just a few days ago! Or have you said this so many times that you forget? Did you know she cried when you told her you were too busy? Of course you don't because you are a blind man. You may be a doctor, but you are a fool! You think you know people, but you don't even know your own daughter!" Babinsky's tone was now scornful. "When you see your daughter do me this favor: ask her if she knows the

name Carl Stravinski? You, of course, do not know it, but she will! I promise! Please tell her that Carl Stravinski wants her to have this!"

With that the old man pulled from under a portion of the stack of dirty and broken violins a very old case. It was covered in dust and looked as if it had been a home to spiders and mice for years. The way he handled the case revealed that it was much more important to him than a rat's nest. He carefully blew years of dust from the cover, then lovingly ran his hand over the top. He began speaking again his voice filled with emotion, "How much did you pay for the instrument your daughter now plays? A thousand, maybe two thousand dollars? HA! You have given Michelangelo a paint-by-the-numbers set! And just as the great Michelangelo would do with such a toy, your daughter has used her violin to make art! Wonderful art! In the hands of any but her that violin would be like a lone voice trying to overcome the sound of a hurricane. But in her hands that, that piece of wood becomes a symphony of music! Her talent and love for the violin turns even the feeblest of instruments into one that is worthy of the Gods! I will leave her alone. In fact you should know by now I have never touched a hair on her head. Until just a few moments ago, she had never even seen me, and even then she saw only at a distance. I never intended to harm her or to scare her in any way, but I knew from the moment I first heard her that I had at long last found someone worthy of this!" He then opened the aged case revealing its contents. Despite the age and outward appearance of the case, the instrument inside was beautiful and obviously well cared for. It was a violin. It took no expert to see that this instrument had not been subjected to the same indignities as the case in which it was borne. It looked new, and as the old man looked down upon it, Brad Clayton could see a fire ignite in his eyes. His hands trembled as he passed one, then the other over its fine wood. "You tell your daughter that Carl Stravinsky wants her to play THIS. Karl Stravinsky wants to take care of her and make it so that she never again has to play that awful instrument you gave her. It is not worthy of her talent, just as you, my good doctor, are not worthy to be her father! You have ignored her, probably for years, and you have turned a deaf ear to what is in my opinion the greatest talent with the violin that I have ever known in my 80 years! Kerry was born to play this instrument. She can not live without the music she and it can produce together. And you are too stupid to see this!" With that he closed the case and handed it to Clayton. "I go now, " he continued, "But let her know I will be listening when she plays, and YOU, look inside yourself for a change instead of looking outside for answers. You will find that what I say is true, and when you make this discovery, you will not be very happy or proud of what you have done over the years but there is still time. Your daughter still loves you, and because of that love you still have time to discover her amazing talent. Don't forget what I say, and don't waste any more time." The old man turned and walked away, leaving Brad in the musty room alone with the instrument.

Even as the old man walked away Clayton was more convinced than ever that he belonged in some kind of home for the mentally ill. Maybe even a home for the criminally insane. "That Babinsky character sure takes the cake" he thought to himself as he turned to leave the room. "What could possibly make him think Kerry would know him? And who is he to presume to know my relationship with my daughter?" he wondered. At the same time, Brad had a much better understanding of the clockwork in Karl Babinsky's head. He claimed to be a great violin player, was this true? If not, then he clearly suffered from delusions of grandeur, If he really was once a great player and a life-long devotee of the violin, then maybe his anger was due to the fact that he COULD NOT play the instrument the way he wished. But didn't Kerry say her violin had been perfectly tuned? Some answers, but more questions. Brad knew this was the way of psychiatry. He looked again at the old case he held in his hand. His first inclination was to leave the case and the instrument with the others piled in that room but decided instead to take it along. "Probably stolen or something like that" he thought, "I guess I should at least give it to the police." After all, hadn't Babinsky stolen Kerry's violin, not once but twice? Surely it was not the first time he'd carried out such a crime. "Yes, " he considered again, "The old man really belongs in an asylum."

When Clayton walked out of the abandoned building and into the sunshine he could see that his daughter, despite his instructions to the contrary, was still waiting in the car across the street. Instead of leaving, as he ordered, she had simply driven around the block and returned. She now sat inside the car waiting. He walked quickly to the vehicle and came face to face with Kerry as she rolled down the window.

"Did that old man do anything to you?" she asked, "I was getting very worried." "No," he replied, "I think the crazy old coot just wanted to talk, and to maybe unburden his conscience. He gave me this." Clayton held up the tattered old case. "What's that?" asked Kerry, "It looks like an old violin case." Clayton just nodded and decided to ask the old man's question. "You ever hear of someone named Carl Stravinsky?" He could see by Kerry's reaction to the name that she had. "Why, yes, of course. Just about everyone in the world knows who Carl Stravinsky is, or was." She replied. "He was considered the greatest violin player of all time, and one of the greatest composers of this age before he disappeared a long time ago. It must have been at least 10 years ago. He was performing in Vienna at the time and simply vanished. I imagine there was a huge manhunt for him back then but no trace was ever found of the Maestro. I remember reading that the police discovered he had pulled all of his assets out of the bank, and it was presumed he had been kidnapped and possibly murdered. I probably have 90 or 100 recordings at home featuring him or his compositions. In fact his work ethic and style have been a kind of role model for me, ever since I got my first violin. Why do you ask?"

Now it was Brad's turn to be surprised. "That old man says his name isn't Babinsky... claims HE is Carl Stravinsky... and he wanted me to give you this." With that Clayton opened the tired, old case revealing its contents for a second time that day. As the lid pulled back he watched his daughter closely. He had to steady himself when for the first time in his life he saw the fire that ignited in her eyes as they fell upon the instrument inside. "Oh my God!" gasped Kerry, "Oh my God!" she said again. "Do you have ANY idea what that IS?" she asked her father. "Of course I do" he replied, "It's a violin. Probably stolen by that crazy old man."

"That's not just a violin dad, and I would bet anything that it was NOT stolen. THAT is a Stradivarius, and those don't just go missing without creating major news!" Now it was Brad's turn to be stunned. "A Strad?" he asked, "are you sure?" "Yes dad, that's a Stradivarius. There is no doubt about it. And THAT is exactly the kind of violin that Stravinsky played!" Kerry thought for a moment, "Dad, is it possible that the old man really IS Carl Stravinsky?" Dr. Clayton thought about that once remote possibility and began to believe that maybe, just maybe Babinsky was who he claimed to be. He thought again of the fire he saw in the old man's eyes as he handled the violin, and the same fire that appeared in Kerry's eyes when she first saw the instrument. "Maybe he is, Kerry. Maybe he is. I just don't know. What I do know is that I have to get this violin to the police. I know you don't think it was stolen, but given the old man's propensity for stealing violins I still think there is every chance in the world that he took this one too." Kerry looked puzzled and said, "But dad, I told you I would KNOW if a Stradivarius had been stolen. I would KNOW it." Brad then remembered what the old man said about Kerry and her love for the instrument and for the first time began to wonder just how well he really knew his daughter. He also wondered how much he DIDN'T know. The thought was not pleasant, especially when he remembered the old man saying he was too blind to see her love for the violin. It made him wonder if in fact he had been too deaf to hear as well.

Because he was deep in thought, Brad did not notice that Kerry had stepped out of the car. "Dad, can I please just hold that instrument?" she asked. Startled, Brad was at a loss for words and simply held the open case toward Kerry. He watched as her hands moved close to the violin, trembling just as old man's hands had trembled as they drew closer to the instrument. Again he looked in her eyes and could see the fire inside was now a raging inferno. He looked again at her hands trembling all the more until they came in contact with the violin. It was as if someone had thrown a switch. As

soon as she touched the wood, her hands stopped trembling, and took on a careful, almost loving nature. Kerry carefully lifted the instrument from the case, cradling it like a newborn baby. She used the most delicate motions as she unseated it from the case and pulled it to her breasts. Tears began to well up in her eyes as she looked down upon the glorious instrument she now held firmly against her body, almost as though she were giving it a hug. Kerry was speechless and the two of them stood in silence for what seemed like an eternity, but was actually only a few seconds.

The silence was shattered by a voice that said, "Do an old man a favor, Kerry, and play it for me..." Kerry and her dad looked up, and there, standing just feet away and dressed once again in his finest suit was Karl Babinsky, or was it Carl Stravinsky? Kerry knew immediately. "Oh my God!" she again exclaimed, "Mr. Stravinsky, I can't believe it's really YOU!" Brad looked startled. "Are you SURE Kerry?" he asked. "Am I sure? Dad, I have studied this man for most of my life. I am as sure that he is Carl Stravinsky as I am that YOU are my father!" she replied, almost indignantly. Kerry then turned to Stravinsky.

"Maestro" she started, "I can not play your violin. I am not worthy of such an instrument. I could not do it justice. I just can't do it!" she stated. Stravinsky moved closer and for a moment Brad thought he was going to take back the violin, but he stopped just short of the two. "My child " he began, "there is no one in the world that is even the equal of that instrument, but there is one... only one... who is its master, and that one is you!" Kerry's face was now covered with a steady stream of tears. "Maestro, do YOU really believe that?" she asked. "Not only do I believe it, I know it to be fact. I have spent many years searching for someone who shared my love for this instrument. Not the Stradivarius, but the VIOLIN itself! I truly believed, until I first heard you talking about it and saw the look in your eyes as you spoke, that I would never find such a person. After hearing how you played that poor excuse for a violin you manipulate so well, I knew that you are more than its equal " The old man continued, "now, if you can, prove me wrong. Play something. If I am wrong about you I will know it, but if I am right then YOU, Kerry, will know it."

Kerry looked first at the old man, then at her father. Brad gave a slight nod and Kerry slowly lifted the Stradivarius to her shoulder. She reached again into the case and drew out a bow. Brad watched and briefly interrupted Kerry saying "Don't you think you should tune it up first?" Kerry looked at her father and laughed "When one is asked to play by Carl Stravinsky one need not do any tuning. I could not possibly do a better job tuning this violin than the master has already done. He would not ask me to play if the violin were not already in tune" Brad looked over to Stravinsky and saw by the smile on his face that Kerry was right. The old man had planned this all along! He knew exactly what he was doing, and even more importantly, he knew exactly what Brad and Kerry would be doing right now, even before they themselves knew. Brad thought to himself, "This is not a crazy old coot!" those thoughts were interrupted by the first sounds from the Strad.

What she played, he didn't know, but Brad DID know that for the first time in his life he was HEARING what his daughter did with a violin. The music that streamed from the instrument under her command was angelic! He began to realize that Stravinsky was right. He HAD been blind to her love of the instrument and deaf to her talent. As the realization hit him it was Brad's turn to cry. He listened and watched through the tears. Kerry played as she had never played before. Only then did Brad realize that maybe it wasn't Kerry's playing, but his listening that had changed. Brad looked to Stravinsky. The old man stood still listening intently. Brad could see the fire in his eyes was like that of a raging furnace, his eyes were as alive with passion as Kerry's had been just a few minutes earlier. He turned to look into his daughter's eyes, but they were closed. The eyelids were unable to hold back the tears that flowed as she continued playing.

Kerry didn't open her eyes until she completed the piece she played for the great Carl Stravinsky. When she did open them Brad knew his daughter's soul had been transformed. Her outward appearance was unchanged, but she now radiated an energy he had never seen or felt before. Or had he? Brad wondered about that too. Maybe he was seeing, hearing, and feeling for the first time

what Stravinsky had seen, heard, and felt long before. Maybe the old man really did know Kerry's true nature better than he did.

Again Brad's thoughts were interrupted. "I am sorry Maestro. I did the best I can." It was Kerry talking, "I think my pace was just a little slow in the middle, too fast at the end." Stravinsky looked at her and smiled, "Your INTERPRETATION of the piece, my dear, was absolutely perfect. Don't ever again let another tell you how to interpret a piece. The way you played was exactly and I mean exactly the way I would have approached that particular piece. You were perfect!" The smile on Kerry's face was all Brad needed to see to know that she too realized what she had done.

"And now, Maestro" Brad heard the words, but there was something strange about them. He suddenly realized it wasn't Kerry talking, it was Stravinsky! "If I may be so bold, would you allow me the honor of playing with you?" Kerry looked shocked! "Oh please Mr. Stravinsky, don't call me Maestro! I'm not even worthy of carrying your violin!" she protested. Stravinsky smiled and said, "You mean YOUR violin, Maestro. The love you have for this instrument I once had, but I threw it away out of spite. I thought I knew what was best for the world. Thought I could get back at the world by disappearing and stopping the music. This is something I know you will never do. Sixty years ago I stood as you now stand before a master of the violin. Like you I cried as I played this very instrument for him, and like you I was transformed forever by the experience. Now, as he did with me when I was but 20 years old, I proclaim you the Maestro, and offer you this instrument so that you can carry on the symphony I managed to silence for ten years. " Stravinsky continued, "No, Kerry, it is not you who is unworthy, it is I." He paused a few moments as he wiped the tears from his eyes, "And this is not all that I offer" he continued, "Inside that old building there is a box, and inside that box are several millions of dollars in cash and gold. I want you to have them, Kerry, because I know you will spend the money wisely and use it to undo the damage I have done over the past ten years. It's not much, but it is a start. I realize now, thanks to you, just how wrong I have been!"

Kerry looked to her father with eyes that were pleading for understanding, then turned to Stravinsky, "If the Maestro wants it this way, then so be it. I WILL do as you ask with your money, but I will do it in your name, and I will also carry the music, and one day, I will see to it that the music continues to live long after I am gone. It is a sacred mission, and it is one I will never forget, I promise!" she said.

Stravinsky turned to Brad and said, "You see? I told you she was just like me. Her love for the violin has nothing to do with its maker. It's a Stradivarius. So what? That is not important. If YOU pick it up and play it, the music will have no life. Without the artists guidance even a Stradivarius is just so much wood glued together a long, long time ago. BUT with your daughter's touch, ANY violin becomes a tool of providence producing sounds to soothe the wounds of mankind. " Stravinsky then looked again toward Kerry, "And now, Maestro, may I play with you?" he asked again. Kerry stood quiet for a moment, obviously awe-struck by the request. "It would be my honor to be accompanied by you, Mr. Stravinsky" she finally replied.

With that Kerry turned toward the car again, reaching inside to retrieve the violin that had been the focus of Carl Stravinsky for the past several days. She turned to hand the old man the Stradivarius but he stepped back and said, "No, Maestro, I am not worthy of that instrument. Allow me, please, to play the other one." This time Kerry did not protest and thrust her former violin toward the great Carl Stravinsky saying to him, "Please accept this as my gift to you. It means very much to me. It was a gift from my dear mother, and I know that she is watching us now. I also know that she knew this day would come and would want you to have it. I have known this since the day she died. "

Stravinsky looked into Kerry's eyes and said, "It is a gift I will treasure for what time I have left. I see all too clearly now that I was wrong in thinking of this instrument as garbage. I was so wrong about so many things! I tell you this: I could feel your mothers love pouring from this violin even when I looked at it for the first time in my room at your father's hospital. I did not want to acknowledge it

then, but I must do so now because that love continues to flow from this instrument." As Stravinsky reached to take the violin, Carl noticed that again the old master's hands were trembling, if anything they trembled more now than they did when he handled the Stradivarius, but amazingly, the tremors stopped as soon as he touched the wood. His eyes were ablaze but filled with tears as he moved the instrument to his shoulder and gazed in Kerry's direction. "Should we do the same piece? And this time for your mother?" he asked. Kerry responded not with words, but with action. She began playing the piece she had just played for the two of them. This time, with Stravinsky joining in, the music took on a life of its own. The two instruments danced together, never fighting, never trying to overcome, but always together. Brad knew without doubt that what he was hearing was the most beautiful music he had ever experienced in his life. He stood in amazement of his daughter and in shame of the fact that until now he never realized the depth of her talent or of her love for the instrument. The two musicians continued their tuneful waltz for a full fifteen minutes before the music stopped just as suddenly as it began. When it ended Brad began to clap and was surprised when Stravinsky joined him. Kerry stood watching both with a tear-stained face and a smile that reminded Brad of the look she had the day Kerry's mother had given a six-year-old girl her first violin. Brad now knew beyond doubt that Kerry WAS worthy of the Stradivarius. As Stravinsky had foretold, she was NOT its equal: She was its master.

Wrong Number - © Ken Herrera

Chapter One

Detective Lt. James O'Malley had seen these marks before, and the familiarity with the signs did not make him feel any easier.

"Damn!" he thought, "That bastard has done it again, what's that now? Seven murders in the past year!"

O'Malley was looking over the reports from the crime scene he'd just visited. The victim, a 37-year old male, Alfred Dominguez. Nothing extraordinary, a lifelong resident of Chicago's South side, worked as a carpenter, no family, "thank God" thought O'Malley, and no connection to the previous six murders. No one knew yet, the identity of the killer in the case, but the signs were all the same and there was no reason to doubt that Dominguez was the seventh victim of a killer the media was now calling "The Telephone Killer."

The killer was the most extraordinary part of this case. As far as detectives could tell the very first victim of the mad man was found dead almost exactly one year ago today. At first officers thought it was a burglary gone bad, but there were too many signs pointing to something far more sinister, something dark and evil. In each of the 7 cases the victim had been murdered on a Wednesday, in fact in all of the cases the crime was carried out on the SECOND Wednesday of the month. There had been only five months out of the past 12 in which a murder was NOT committed, which really bothered O'Malley. But there had also been one 4-month spell in which there was a murder a month, which bothered him even more.

O'Malley continued to pour over the reports and the crime scene photos. He'd done this far too often during the past year and always came away with the same results: a throbbing headache and not an inch closer to the killer. His concentration was broken for a moment when another cop walked into the room.

"Hey, Lieutenant!"

The voice was that of Officer Pete Viviano, a short stumpy man in his mid-50's who walked with the slightest limp. It was a limp he earned the hard way, in a shoot-out with a group of gang members during a drug bust a few years earlier. The wound was enough to assure he'd be flying a desk until retirement, just a few years down the line. Viviano was a good cop, no one would dare question that. His name was almost mythical in the ranks of senior patrol officers, he knew the streets of Chicago like very few others and when it came to procedure and details relating to radio patrol work he had no equal. None of that mattered much to the officers in suits found in the ranks of Police Detectives which was ironic to Viviano because all of them had started out on the streets with cops like him. Hell, he'd trained most of the people he now called "Sir".

While it was true that his days on the streets were behind him, it was also true that Pete Viviano never hesitated to offer his opinion on any case, no matter how small, or in this case, no matter how large. It didn't seem to matter to Viviano that no one really WANTED his opinion and he was fully aware that few in this division paid much attention to him at all.

"Looks like our boy has struck again" Viviano continued, "This guy must lead a charmed life or something. I hear this time around he iced the guy only about 10 minutes after a bunch of his friends left the apartment."

O'Malley looked up from his reports, irritated at the interruption. "C'mon Pete, you know we don't REALLY know anything about this guy. Hell, for all I know one of those construction-working friends of the victim is our killer. As for luck, I wish some of it would roll our way for a change. This guy seems to be able to kill at will. We can't figure out why he does it, or how he chooses his victims. I've never seen anything like it!" After making that statement O'Malley thought to himself, "and I hope I never see anything like it again." The case had given the Detective many sleepless nights and from the looks of things there would be many more such nights in his future. He often felt like he was pounding his head into a wall, hoping to make a few dents, only to come away with a splitting headache.

Viviano interrupted O'Malley's thoughts with his own assessment, "I still think that number thing is the key to this guy. Maybe he works at the Phone Company, maybe he's pissed off at Ma Bell? It could be anything, but those numbers gotta be the key!"

Viviano was a good cop, but many of the detectives did not think much about his intellect. Most would tell you that about the only numbers he was familiar with were the ones they pick in the lottery. Viviano seemed to be addicted to what used to be known as the numbers racket before the state legalized the lottery some years ago. His habit was often turned against the cop, that and his small stature, especially at times like now when you wanted him to leave.

"Pete, do me a favor and leave the detective work to me" O'Malley said, "We've chased down that phone number angle on every one of these cases and always come up with a dead end".

O'Malley thought briefly about one aspect of the grim M-O used by this particular killer: he always carved the victims phone number on the body, and there were indications in at least 3 of the 7 killings that the carving was done while the victim was still alive. "You go back to your numbers Pete, get on your little chair at your little desk and study them, and let me work with mine. Right now the number that worries me most is the number eight, as in preventing this creep from killing someone else!"

O'Malley had lied. There were other numbers, very large numbers he'd be working with soon. He would have to cross-reference every person who knew the latest victim with every person who knew every other victim. It would take days to do all the checking even with every member of the task force working this case breaking things down. Even before he started, O'Malley knew what the

result would be. There would be absolutely no connection between victim number seven and the other victims.

Viviano took the not so subtle hint and turned, but not before saying, "You guys just wait, those lotto numbers you're always bitching about are gonna pay off for me big time one day, heck just last week I took in 140 bucks on the Big Game!"

O'Malley had heard that story about a hundred times and replied, "Big fucking deal... you won 140 bucks, but you've probably put a thousand into that stupid numbers game in the last six months alone. Where is the profit?"

Viviano didn't answer but simply grunted as he hobbled out of the room. O'Malley knew he wouldn't see Viviano again for a couple of days at least. It was almost always that way when anyone bitched about his lotto habit, or kidded him about his height. Viviano took a lot of flak from just about every detective in the department because of his seemed addiction to the numbers game, but everyone knew not to push him too hard on the subject. After all he WAS a brother officer, and a pretty good cop.

Lousy gambler, but a good cop.

Chapter Two

"WBBM News time 4:50 and our top story this hour: Chicago police believe a south side murder is the seventh carried out by the "telephone killer" The body of 47-year old Alfred Dominguez was found in his South Side apartment this morning, the victim of two gunshot wounds to the head. Police Captain Otis Jessup confirms that Dominguez was found with his phone number carved into his body, as were the six other victims of the serial killer. Police are at a loss to come up with the killer and say they can still find no connection between the victims, five men and two women..."

The newscaster's voice trailed into the background as Stanley Berlanti sank deeper into thought. Berlanti was a very troubled man. He wondered when this killing would end, and when his beloved wife Melissa might return. She had promised him she'd be back, but that was months ago and still she had not returned to their home near Chicago's fabled Wrigley Field. Stanley, or Stan as he was known to friends and co-workers, was deeply troubled by both developments. When was the last time he'd seen Melissa? It had actually been almost two years ago, but still, hope burned in his heart that she would return to him one day. Maybe even today!

Berlanti wondered whether she really meant it when she promised to come back to him. "When was that?" he wondered, "Oh yes, it was about a month after she went away. I remember it so well! She definitely promised to come back." Berlanti's mind was filled with thoughts of the beautiful and kind Melissa as he drove north on Lake Shore Drive. He was just passing Navy Pier when his attention was drawn back to the radio and coverage of the latest "Telephone Killer" victim.

"Alfred Dominguez was described by his neighbors as a very quiet man, one who rarely entertained friends, but one who apparently had no shortage of friends. In fact just hours before he was murdered, police say he hosted a small party for some of his fellow workers from Agrew Construction, where he worked as a master carpenter. Investigators hope some of those who attended that party might be able to shed some light on what has become one of the darkest mysteries in Chicago history: the identity of the Telephone Killer."

Berlanti enjoyed listening to the city's only all-news station, but what he was hearing was very troubling and he wondered aloud whether the murders might actually prevent his love Melissa from returning to his side where she belonged. As he thought again about his bride, tears began to roll

down his face causing him to almost miss his turn off of the drive and towards his home in Wrigleyville.

Chapter Three

“Yep, no doubt about it, it’s our man” the voice was that of Dr. Eric Kaplan, the Chief Medical Examiner for Cook County, “look here...” he nodded toward detective Francis Sorentino, “you can see the wounds to the head were made by a .22 caliber weapon, and the phone number was cut into the victim using this knife” Kaplan held up a common steak knife, “just like the other six cases, this knife came from the victim’s own kitchen. This guy’s a real piece of work, using knives from the victim’s own home to leave his message.”

Frank Sorentino was always a bit uneasy when he was in the autopsy room, despite his 15 years on the force and 10 years in homicide.

“Yeah, doc, I didn’t really think there was any doubt about the killer, but it never hurts to make sure some copy-cat isn’t out knocking off the good people of Chicago!” Sorentino turned away from the autopsy table and pulled down his surgical mask, “still think our man is a southpaw?” he asked as he walked away from the gruesome scene.

“Oh, yes, I don’t believe there is any question about that” came the answer from Kaplan, “You can clearly tell by the slant in these numbers carved across the victim’s chest.”

Sorentino considered that for a moment, “Strange how he uses the chest as a writing pad in his male victims, but uses the head in his female victims. Do you think there is anything to that? I mean, here is a guy that thinks nothing of putting two slugs into someone’s head, but he never exposes the chest of the women he’s killed.”

Kaplan thought about that for a moment, “I don’t really know why he’s chosen to act this way, perhaps that’s something better left to a psychiatrist. The two shots to the head would normally leave no place for his little artwork, but he’s using that damned .22, and short range shells to boot so the bullets tend to stay inside the head. They roll around a bit in the skull, but they rarely come out the other side. It really scrambles the brain but leaves the skull pretty much intact.” As he spoke Kaplan handed Sorentino two small slugs, both taken from the victim’s head. Both would be taken to the crime lab to give the ultimate confirmation that this was in fact the work of the Telephone Killer. One of the many constants with this killer was the gun he used to kill. It was always the same .22caliber weapon, which would be confirmed by comparing the barrel markings etched into the bullets.

Seven victims..... so far.... Two of them women. All shot twice in the head, all killed in their homes, all carved up with a knife from their own kitchen, but the phone numbers were always found on the chests of the male victims and on the foreheads of the two female victims. Sorentino studied the two slugs as he let the facts tumble through his mind and contemplated the next move in this investigation. He looked again at the Medical Examiner, “ I’ll get these down to the lab right away and then I’m going to take this report down to Lt. O’Malley and see if we can’t come up with something new on this jerk. I want to know everything you can tell me about the victim, what he had for lunch, was he a heavy drinker, was he in good physical condition, anything you can possibly tell me from his body. You never know when even the smallest detail might produce a break. There has GOT to be some kind of connection between the seven people this guy’s killed so far. If we can just find that we’re half-way home to rounding this punk bastard up.” With that Sorentino walked out of the examination room, not even waiting for a response. He knew Kaplan would, as always, be very thorough in his final report, but for now the preliminary details would do. Those details were certainly more than enough to confirm what everyone knew to be the truth: Alfred Dominguez was

the seventh victim of the mad man Chicago had come to know as the "Telephone Killer". The two slugs would absolutely cement the connection. As he drove away from the Coroners office Sorentino couldn't help but wonder, for perhaps the millionth time, why the killer always carved the victims phone number into the body. "What's up with that?" he thought to himself, "If we could just fit that piece of the puzzle into something, I know we'd be close to the killer!" Sorentino, like his boss Jim O'Malley had thought long and hard about those damned phone numbers but neither man could come up with any logical explanation. Of course neither detective expected they would find a logical answer because there was never anything logical about murder. Especially when it came to what appeared to be random killings carried out by the same person. About the only break they had in this case came from victim number one, a lawyer from the city's Streeterville area, Jacob Maryland. He had apparently struggled with his killer long enough to dislodge tiny bits of evidence from the killer's own body. It was enough for experts to get some solid DNA readings. There was no doubt the killer was a man, and when they brought in a suspect that DNA evidence would send him to death row but first they had to find the man who matched the DNA.

At this point in the investigation Sorentino had memorized every detail about the victims and he mentally sounded a roll call of the dead. "Jacob Maryland, lawyer, Steven Christmas, oh yes, that had been a highly publicized killing, Christmas was a popular radio personality in Chicago" thought Sorentino, "Hell his phone number was carved across his chest too, even a fucking unlisted number!" Sorentino's thoughts rolled on, "Dr. Susan Barger, the first female victim. A West Side pediatrician active in the community. By all accounts a real saint who donated more time to helping the city's poor children than she spent in her own practice." She was found dead in her home with the same grizzly calling card, her phone number, scrawled across her forehead. Sorentino's thoughts continued, " Then there was Paul Sancastle, a broker with the Chicago Board of Trade, found dead in his North Shore home. One of the most elaborate alarm systems ever seen and it wasn't enough to save his life. After the Sancastle murder it was Leticia Washington's time to die." She was a professional dancer and sometimes actress and was found dead in her apartment near New Comiskey on the South side. Two months later the body of Franklin Parks was found in his home. Sorentino thought about that killing, "the Parks case was really bizarre, the guy was found in the foyer of his home with his Department of Streets and Sanitation truck still idling in the front drive! The guy MUST have known his killer, or at least had reason to let him into his house just as he drove up in the driveway!" The Parks murder bothered everyone because it sure looked like the man drove into his driveway, got out of his city-owned car to talk with someone, and then was either forced, or walked without fear into his home with the person that killed him. Whatever the case, he didn't bother to take even a few seconds turn the car off. Detectives had gone over that car with a fine toothed comb and there was no indication anywhere that the killer ever touched it. Even the keys had only Parks' fingerprints on them. Sorentino's mental litany of death ended only when he pulled into the lot of police headquarters downtown. As he emerged from his car he was greeted by Lt. O'Malley.

"Hey Frank, any breaks from the M.E.?" the question was asked, but O'Malley already knew the answer.

Detective Lt. James "Jim" O'Malley was an 18-year veteran of the Chicago Police Department. He'd started out in patrol like every other cop, but moved quickly up the ladder. His first Detective's Star came when he was kicked into robbery, where his ability to analyze and make sense of even the tiniest details helped him rise to the top of the division and to the rank of sergeant in just five years. From there he was called up to homicide and earned a Lieutenant's Star. That was 10 years ago and he was now the best-known and most successful homicide detective on the force. He never rose past Lieutenant only because he refused repeated requests to take the exams needed to rise past that rank. He knew he was serving the city and its people in the best way possible right where he sat, and scoffed at any suggestion otherwise. As a lieutenant, O'Malley headed up what's known in Chicago as the violent crimes unit of area one, with his headquarters normally situated at 51st

and Wentworth. Because he also headed up the special task force named to find the Telephone Killer O'Malley found himself living at the main police headquarters these days.

Some would argue that O'Malley had it in his blood. He came from a long line of Chicago's finest. His father was a cop, his grandfather was a cop, and his great-grandfather was a cop. In fact the O'Malley line of stars stretched back to before the Great Fire of Chicago in 1871. O'Malley's fellow officers often joked that it was probably an O'Malley who traced the source of the fire to Mrs. O'Leary's cow! All kidding aside, his family did own an illustrious history of service to the people of the Windy City. His grandfather was involved in looking into some of the most notorious crimes of the 1920's and had personally taken Al Capone into custody on at least three different occasions. He was also one of the lead investigators in the infamous "St. Valentine's Day Massacre" and had at one time been slated for death by Capone himself. O'Malley took great pride in telling others that his grandfather had outlasted "Scarface" by a full 23 years.

O'Malley's father had risen to the rank of Captain in the department and would have been appointed Police Superintendent had a sniper's bullet not cut his career short at the young age of 45. O'Malley always looked with pride on his father's retired star each time he walked into police headquarters. His dad gave everything he had to the City of Chicago, and the son was not about to stain that memory. Everyone agreed that police work was in O'Malley's blood, and few would question whether there was a finer officer to be found anywhere on the force.

"You know the drill" it was Sorentino's turn to speak, "Kaplan says there's no doubt our boy has chalked up number seven, but that's about all he can say for sure." O'Malley was not surprised. After a year of investigation he'd gotten used to the letdowns associated with the case of the telephone killer. "God, I hate that name" O'Malley thought to himself, "It really sucks, and makes it sound like this ass hole is out there killing a bunch of telephones. He's killing people. All kinds of people!" He let the thought pass before speaking again to his fellow detective and friend.

"Listen Frank, I think we can come up with a new angle on this phone number business. I want to show you something, let's go up to the crime lab so you can unload those slugs you brought over."

Sorentino looked puzzled for a moment before replying, "Sure Jim, let's head up there right now. Any light you can shed on this case would be great!" Sorentino, like everyone else, knew that O'Malley had a knack for seeing more in even the most obscure pieces of evidence than just about any cop you could imagine. "Except maybe Sherlock Holmes," thought Sorentino, "And we could sure use a Holmes on this case!"

Chapter Four

"Okay, O'Malley, I've heard the same song and dance from you for the past seven months, now tell me something I don't know about this scum". The command came from Captain Otis Jessup, who headed up the homicide division and who was in overall charge of the Telephone Killer investigation. "I'm hanging my ass out for you every Goddamned month on this fucking case O'Malley and all you can tell me is the same shit you had when that fucking lawyer Maryland was killed. I NEED something else! The media is breathing down the department's neck on this one! Give me something to run with for a change instead of that same old shit about lack of evidence and multiple possibilities!" O'Malley could tell the boss was pissed. Royally pissed this time. Captain Jessup was usually a calm man. He was a 23-year veteran of the department, and as an African-American he'd come up the hard way. When he first joined the department blacks were looked on as tokens, every one. But he had proven himself probably more than any cop in the history of the city. Jessup was a groundbreaker in a city where racial divisions were not supposed to exist. A city that America's black population sought out in the 50's and 60's, a city where race

wasn't supposed to mean a thing. But it did, and no one in Chicago knew that better than Captain Otis Jessup. "Now give me something I can go to the press with, O'Malley, something they haven't heard ten times already!"

O'Malley had been surprised when he and Sorentino walked into the crime lab to be greeted by the Captain. It was just like Jessup to know what his men were going to do next, even when the men themselves hadn't a clue. O'Malley knew this confrontation was brewing, but he was still unprepared for the timing of the face off.

"Okay, Captain, let me walk you through the same numbers I was about to share with detective Sorentino" O'Malley said. "I think I have a new angle on these phone numbers, the ones we keep finding on the stiffs. Think back to the second victim, Steven Christmas, the DJ" O'Malley paused for any response from the Captain or Sorentino. Getting none he continued, "This guy, Christmas, had an unlisted number, right?" O'Malley didn't wait for an answer but continued with just a beat between thoughts. "A big time radio personality like Christmas would have a phone, but not a listed number."

Jessup interrupted him at this point, "O'Malley, we all KNOW Christmas had an unlisted number, what are you driving at? There is nothing new here...."

O'Malley smiled as he continued, "That's exactly my point Captain, the guy had an unlisted number and yet it was carved into his chest, just like all the other victims. I'm thinking, How did the killer KNOW that number? I did a double check today and the number was no where to be found in the Christmas home."

Jessup spoke up next, "Duh, did you ever think maybe the killer read the number off one of the phones in the house? I mean c'mon I KNOW you are better than that!"

O'Malley jumped in at this point, "Of course that's what we all thought at the time of the investigation, but I've done some more checking and guess what? Christmas did not print his phone number anywhere in his house. Not a single phone had the number printed on it, and we checked all six of them. I mean this guy was anal about his phone number! There is no way the killer could have gotten that phone number from one of the phones in that house."

It was Sorentino's turn to speak, "But couldn't someone at the radio station have given that number away? I mean it's not too hard to fool people into giving out a phone number, even when they're told to keep them confidential."

O'Malley responded, "That was my first thought too, Frank, but it turns out that could not have happened in this case. The only number the station had for Christmas was his cell phone. As I said, this guy was anal about his home phone and gave the number out only to a very tight circle of friends and family. I've done the legwork and as far as I can tell fewer than 15 people knew that number, and yet there it was carved big time into the chest of the victim."

Jessup interrupted, "And what does this tell you?" he asked.

"It tells me that whoever killed Christmas had some way of getting a phone number that was a closely guarded secret. The question now is how did he get it?"

Sorentino was ready for the response from the Captain, "I'd say it was obvious. The killer got the number from Christmas before he killed him. If someone's holding a 22 to my head I'm going to spill the beans pronto, I can tell you that for sure!"

O'Malley smiled before he jumped back in, "But the fact is Christmas was one of the victims who was carved up BEFORE he was killed. I went over the autopsy report again today. And what is the likelihood that someone, especially someone who guards his privacy this much, is going to give out a number as it is being carved into his chest? And let's not forget the fact that Christmas guarded

his phone number like you and I would guard the PIN number on our bankcard. Even under duress, I believe, He would not give it out. Since there was no way for the killer to know the real number my bet is that Christmas would have given out a bogus number, especially to the man who's getting ready to kill him as the number is scrawled across his chest. No, I'm convinced our man KNEW that number before he ever cornered Christmas in his home." The evidence was weak at best, and O'Malley knew that, but it was a new angle, one he and his team of investigators had not yet explored. He only hoped that the Captain and his partner would not see just how flimsy his theory was.

"That's not much" came the review from Jessup, "You'll need a lot more to convince me, but just for laughs let's say you are right and the killer knew the number before he killed Christmas. What does that prove?" O'Malley felt a wave of relief. Captain Jessup had at least partially accepted the story, though he was not ready yet to sign on to it in public.

"What is proves, " O'Malley said, "Is that we might be barking up the wrong tree with this phone number thing. Could this guy work for the Phone Company, or even a police agency that could get the number in seconds? I mean, how else could he possibly know the number, unless he made it up at the spur of the moment and just happened to be right. We all know that is not likely at all, especially in this case."

It was again Sorentino's turn to speak up, "Then what you are suggesting is that we go to the phone company and start looking for a possible connection between Christmas and all the other victims? You don't really think someone at the Phone Company could have been involved, do you?"

O'Malley knew his theory might not stand even the simplest test but he pushed on, "No, actually we need to focus on the fact that it was a private number. Not many people, even at the phone company, can get a private number, so we need to check for possible connections with anyone that had access to those numbers, and that includes law enforcement from all areas. I can't believe a cop from any department could be involved in these murders, but this phone number thing really bothers me, especially in the Christmas case." O'Malley could tell by the looks in the eyes of Jessup and Sorentino that he had sparked interest in his theory.

"Then let's run down those possibilities as soon as we can!" said Jessup, "And you keep me informed on a daily basis, understand?" the comment was directed to O'Malley.

"Oh, you know I will Captain, you know I will..." O'Malley still felt very uncomfortable with his theory but at least it was a new avenue to pursue, and that was something he hadn't had in quite some time. Chances are it would lead to another dead end, but at least it was fresh ground.

Jessup spoke again, "O'Malley, the Mayor's office is going nuts over this new murder so you're going to have to brief Chief Detective Carter today, but I don't want you to even HINT that the killer could be a LEO (law enforcement officer) promise me that, will you?"

O'Malley thought about that, "Chief Detective Carter, eh? ' He said as he attempted to hide the look of angst that must have swept across his face at the sound of the name.

Chapter Five

Chief of Detectives Marsha Carter was effectively the police department's liaison with the mayor's office, though her orders generally came right from the Superintendent's office. When she got involved in any case it was a sure sign that the politicians were about ready to pounce on someone in the department and it didn't matter whether they were guilty or innocent. Whenever a head had to roll it was a sure bet that Carter would wield the ax. O'Malley and Sorentino knew that the mere

fact that she had called for a meeting was bad news. It meant the Mayor was tired of taking the heat over this whole mess and was ready to start spreading some of the misery around.

"You know, Jim, maybe Carter just wants to feel us out on the investigation. Maybe the mayor really isn't as hot and bothered as you think..." Sorentino's voice trailed off.

"No Frank, I think we're in for some deep political do-do on this one. Christ, it's been a year now and we're really no closer to solving this case today than we were when that North Shore lawyer bought the farm. Hell even my theory on the phone number from the radio guy is lame and we both know it, but I had to have something to tell the captain, and to perhaps convince myself that we were making progress. No, we're in for a political hail storm from Carter."

O'Malley thought about Chief Detective Carter. She was a beautiful woman with a mind, and that was a dangerous combination as far as he was concerned. More than a little chauvinistic O'Malley was always ill at ease when he was around women in the department who were his equals, and there was no doubting the abilities of Carter.

Chief Detective Marsha Carter had been with the department for 21 years, and though she was now 43 years old anyone who saw her would place her age closer to 33. She knew how to use those looks to her advantage, and was never hesitant to do just that to make a case. She had risen rapidly through the ranks with stops in robbery, burglary, and homicide before reaching the rank of Chief of Detectives and moving into the political arena. She was perfectly suited for her job, and few could look her in the eyes and lie. She had a knack for knowing bullshit when she heard it, and she'd let you know in no uncertain terms that it wouldn't hold.

O'Malley spoke again, "I've seen Chief Detective Carter bring the fucking Superintendent to his knees when circumstances called for it Frank. She's not to be underestimated. When we talk with her we've got to lay everything out exactly as we know it or we'll come under a firestorm that'll make the Great Fire look like a five year old's birthday cake!"

Sorentino thought about that for a moment before responding, "Hard to believe a woman as beautiful as Carter can carry a club that could wipe both of us out" he said.

"Believe it, Frank, or get whacked. Carter will not play games, shit, she's got to report to the fucking MAYOR on this and you can bet she's not about to take any kind of bullshit to his honor!" O'Malley knew this was true even though on paper at least Carter's immediate boss was the Superintendent. O'Malley was very worried as he and Sorentino walked down the hallway toward Carter's office at police headquarters.

"Hey guys!" It was Pete Viviano again.

"Give us a break Pete, we're heading to a meeting with Chief Detective Carter" was the reply from Sorentino.

"C'mon guys, just a minute of your time, that's all" said Viviano, "I've got a theory for you on this telephone killer that you might want to consider. You know that no one in this department knows numbers better than I do. " It was a rare admission from Viviano about his lottery habit so O'Malley decided to give him a listen.

"Go ahead Pete, but keep it brief, okay?"

"Here's the way I figure it" said Viviano, "Whoever is pulling off these killings must be obsessed with numbers, right? I mean why else carve a phone number into the victim. I think NUMBERS are the key to this whole thing. "

O'Malley responded, "And why is that, Pete?"

“Well, it’s obvious, isn’t it? The guy is using numbers to get his rocks off. The killing’s just half the thrill to him. I think the real thrill comes from carving those fucking phone numbers into the victims! Take a look at that lady doctor he killed last year. He didn’t touch her in any way sexually, but he carved that damned phone number into her head sure as shit. I think that’s what motivates this guy. He probably kills his victims just to keep ‘em quiet while he does his dirty work. Give this guy a marks-a-lot and he’d probably use that to write those numbers, but he apparently gets his jolly’s by having complete control over the victim’s body! What do ya think?”

O’Malley thought about the theory for all of two seconds before responding, “I think you need to head down to the corner store and pick yourself some new numbers Pete. The theory, while interesting, stinks. Why would a numbers junkie use only the phone number of the victim. Why not the address, or the victim’s license number or even his social security number. I mean if he gets off on carving numbers into people why doesn’t he use some really long numbers, like the distance between the earth and the sun? It just doesn’t make sense” O’Malley paused for a moment and considered, “Hell nothing about this case makes any sense” he thought to himself. “and besides” O’Malley continued, “Why is it this guy always strikes on the second Wednesday of the month? Why does he always use a .22 caliber weapon to kill the victim? And how is it that in every case he manages to get the victim at home and ALONE?” That last bit really bothered O’Malley. Of the seven murders so far only two of the victim’s lived alone, Dr. Barger and Alfred Dominguez. It was true the dancer, Leticia Washington often was home alone, but even she had a live-in boyfriend though he seemed to live out more than in. In every other case the victims lived with family members, a wife, children, hell in the case of Jacob Maryland he lived with his wife, two kids, and his mother in law and yet the killer caught him home alone.

Viviano interrupted the thoughts “Hell, I didn’t say I was going to break the case for you, I just wanted you to start thinking about a numbers junkie. Maybe a math freak, or shit, even a fucking lotto player, someone, anyone, who’s into numbers or has a reason to be into numbers. I don’t know from phone numbers, house numbers, or license numbers, but I DO know numbers and I think this guy is getting off with the number carving thing, that’s all.”

O’Malley smiled and turned to Sorentino, “So, we’ve got a numbers junkie on our hands who also likes Wednesday’s, .22 caliber weapons, and telephone numbers. Shit, Pete here has solved the fucking case, now we can go tell Chief Detective Carter the killer is someone who works for the phone company, is a member of the NRA, and has Wednesday’s off!” Sorentino laughed, but Viviano did not see the humor.

“Okay, it was just a thought Lieutenant, It just seems so obvious to me that this guy is into those damned phone numbers!” O’Malley could tell by the tone in Viviano’s voice that he was not pleased to be the butt of anyone’s joke.

“Sorry Pete. While I acknowledge you as the numbers expert in this district, I must say you come up a little SHORT in the investigations department” he directed the comment toward the smaller officer. The double knock was not lost on Viviano, in one statement O’Malley had again poked at him for his love of the lottery AND for his short stature.

Officer Pete Viviano had had enough and turned away but as he walked away he said, “You guys just won’t listen to reason... I’m telling you those phone numbers gotta mean something!” O’Malley felt sorry for the little officer and would have stopped him and apologized were it not for the fact that he had a meeting to attend with someone far more fearsome to him, Chief of Detectives Marsha Carter.

“Okay guys, give it to me straight and hold the shit. I’ve got the Mayor all over my ass on this one and he’s not going to be satisfied until we catch this bastard that’s terrorizing every neighborhood in this city on the second Wednesday of each month. Do you guys realize what’s happening out there? The media is all over this story now. Shit, we can’t send an officer to investigate a report of jaywalking on the second Wednesday of any month without drawing a crowd of reporters. Those twerps are rolling on every call they hear on what has become media circus day in the city of Chicago! And when it’s a murder investigation on the second Wednesday you’d think the goddamned President was in town!” Chief Detective Carter’s voice told O’Malley and Sorentino all they needed to know. The mayor was pissed and that meant the Superintendent was pissed, so she was pissed. Right now both officers feared the wrath of Carter far more than they worried about the folks down at City Hall.

Chapter Six

“You know I’m coming back, Stan, I’m closer than ever to coming back!” The voice was that of Melissa Berlanti, “Just keep working on your little problem and as soon as you finish, I’ll be back. First you must take care of your problem, but when that’s done I will be in your arms again and this time I’m coming home to stay!”

Stan Berlanti smiled as he heard the words, even though he was asleep at the time. Stan was never exactly level headed, in fact this 40-something man who worked as a clerk in one of the many luxury stores along Chicago’s fabled “Magnificent Mile” had been known to do the most unusual things. Just last summer he’d created quite a stir when he decided one of the display mannequins looked too much like Melissa, and was showing too much skin. A display that was supposed to show off the latest swim wear suddenly became a display of rain wear, complete with a full length London Fog rain coat. His manager had let the incident slide, after all it was just a few months after Melissa had left his life and everyone understood this strange man was going through an extremely tough time.

Melissa continued “I’ve done my best to help you with your problem, and I will always be right with you to give you everything you need to bring me back! So sleep, sleep my dear Stanley and wait for my return. I WILL be coming back if you keep your promise to me!” Stanley Berlanti grunted at those words, still sound asleep, because he knew what they meant. He had not yet accomplished his task, there was more work to be done, and though he hated the idea of work, it all seemed so worthwhile if it meant a reunion with his beloved Melissa. For now he would do as she asked just as he’d always done, and he would sleep. He would sleep and wait for word from Melissa on what he must do next to pave the way for her return. ‘Oh yes, “ he dreamed, “The work is hard but it is also worth the effort because it will bring my dear Melissa back to me” Stanley slept the sleep of the troubled mind.

Chapter Seven

It was in a small office on the 7th floor of Chicago Police Headquarters at 13th and State streets that Detectives James O’Malley and Francis Sorentino were being grilled about their investigation into the Telephone Killer. Chief of Detectives Marsha Carter had opened up on them like a fourth of July fireworks show and was now ready for the grand finale and both men knew they’d have to produce some solid answers for her to take back to the Superintendent and to the Mayor.

Being the senior officer on the investigation O'Malley spoke first, "Chief Detective, we know this case has the whole city in a tizzy, and believe me there is no one who wants to track this guy down more than I, but serial killers are always the hardest to find. Look at the John Wayne Gacy case as one example, the guy was killing young boys for YEARS before we even knew he existed!" O'Malley knew the comparison wasn't fair because the Telephone Killer did not try to conceal his victims as Gacy did. There was no under the floorboards burial ground in this case as there was with Gacy, instead the bodies of the Telephone Killer's victims were left in their own homes. Despite these facts, O'Malley continued with his somewhat crooked line of reasoning, hoping Carter wouldn't see through the diversionary tactic. "And Gacy's not the only example, the list of serial killers who operated for years before being caught is long and..."

Carter interrupted him, "If I wanted a history lesson I would have checked a book out of the library. I don't care about those other cases, the fact that it took police years to solve them does not diminish the fact that you, as the lead investigator in this case, have failed to produce even a tiny ray of hope that this department, this city, is making progress toward finding the killer. I didn't come here to have my attention diverted, and believe me, neither the Superintendent nor the Mayor is going to fall for that tact either so give me the facts of THIS case instead of giving me a history lesson!"

O'Malley was caught and he knew it. It was a good try, and one he figured wouldn't work, but the facts of the case were few and far between and they might anger the Chief of Detectives, and the Mayor, even more than his ill-timed attempt to divert attention. O'Malley clenched his jaw before beginning.

"In each investigation, as you know, we start at the body and work our way out" O'Malley had decided to lay all of his cards on the table as he continued with Carter, "we check every square inch of the victim, check for anything and everything and only after that examination is complete do we begin to move to the area immediately surrounding the body. By immediately surrounding I mean literally inches, and the circle continues to expand until every square inch of the crime scene has been examined." O'Malley was outlining basic police procedures used in every investigation, he had decided to start at the very bottom and work his way out of this mess in much the same way he covered a crime scene. He continued, "In all seven cases the uniforms did an excellent job of preserving the crime scene. This was especially true in the first murder where we were able to actually obtain DNA evidence that should help convict the killer... Once we find him. That evidence came in the form of skin scraped from under the fingernails of the victim, Jacob Maryland. It appears Maryland was the ONLY victim to realize what was happening to him because in the other six cases there is no sign of a struggle."

Carter interrupted O'Malley at this point, "But I thought there were at least three cases where the killers calling card, the phone number thing, was carved into living victims?"

O'Malley responded, "There's no doubt that three of the victims were still alive, but the M-E says life is life and he can't tell us for sure whether those three were alive and conscious or simply alive with two bullets in their brains as they waited to die. There is no test that can tell us just HOW alive they were, so it's possible that in all of the cases the victims were at least out cold before the numbers were scrawled into their bodies."

Carter responded, "I see, go on O'Malley"

O'Malley did just that. "Whatever happened in the first case did not happen in the following six cases. Our killer either learned from his mistake with Maryland, or he became extremely lucky. I'm leaning toward the first option. He learned how to avoid confrontation with his targets." O'Malley turned toward Sorentino at this point and said, "Frank here is the only detective who has been present at all 7 murder scenes. Remember, I wasn't named to head the task force until the third killing so I think I'll let him explain the procedures we've followed to this point, and the information we've been able to gather."

Sorentino thought to himself, "Gee thanks, Jim, nothing like leaving me on the spot...."

Chapter Eight

Stanley Berlanti woke with a start from what had been a fitful sleep. He rolled over and switched on the radio as he checked the time. It was now half past ten at night. He'd slept for almost six hours by his quick calculation, and yet he still felt as tired as he was when he first fell into his bed. Though Berlanti worked the usual 9 to 5 hours that everyone else did, he found it impossible to really sleep at night and he tended to use his days off, like today, to catch up. Normally he was able to sleep in peace, but today he'd had more of those dreams that bothered him so much. Dreams in which his beloved Melissa would come to him with instructions that were often times complex and hard to follow. As he lay in bed he listened again to his regular news station.

"Police admit they are no closer today to solving the mystery of the Telephone Killer than they were last year when the first murder was recorded" the announcer was still speaking but Berlanti was no longer listening, instead he was lost in thought. "I KNOW the cops are all wrong on this case. There aren't just seven victims, there are eight. Why can't they see what I see?" he wondered. It was rare when Berlanti would admit the truth about Melissa to himself, but hearing stories about the Telephone Killer forced him to face reality. It was a reality that did NOT include his beloved Melissa. He knew in the darkest recesses of his soul that she wanted to come back, but he also knew that she would never return.

In fact everyone else in the world except Stan knew the truth. Melissa Berlanti would NOT be coming back. Melissa Berlanti, you see, had been brutally murdered almost two years ago. Stanley remembered the day well. It was a Wednesday, and a gunman wielding a .22 caliber pistol had shot her twice in the head. She had no numbers carved into her body but Stanley was still convinced that numbers played a role in her death. Stanley KNEW that she was actually the first victim of the Telephone Killer. "So why can't the police figure this out?" he wondered, "Why can't they see that even without the phone number Melissa was the FIRST of the victims?"

Melissa Berlanti was a lovely woman and everyone who knew her was shocked and stunned by news of her murder. She was 27 at the time and a perfect picture of the perfect wife. She'd been murdered one night after stopping into a downtown store to pick up a few items. Unknown to her, Melissa walked into the middle of a robbery and as she approached the counter she was shot and killed by the bandit who was still on the loose to this day. It wasn't often that Stanley let his thoughts return to that mournful day, but every time he did he was thrown into a fit of mental rage. "Two shots to the head, a .22 caliber bullet, hell, she was the FIRST victim of the Telephone Killer!" he could not escape the thought that his beloved wife had been taken from him so easily and so completely. The detectives who handled the investigation told Berlanti that his wife did not have to die. Had even one person in the store raised a finger to help her, she would probably still be alive. But the people in the store were more worried about the gun wielded by the bad man than they were about Melissa's fate! Still, Berlanti couldn't get past the thought that only one person had to sound a warning and Melissa would have frozen where she stood as she entered the store, far from the man who would send her into eternity. But no one issued the warning. No one stood up for Melissa when she needed it most, and she died as a result. It was an injustice Stan could not understand. Instead of facing reality Stan preferred to believe Melissa when she came to him in his dreams and promised that she would return if only he would follow her instructions. She'd never told him to call the police, but he still felt they should know that the Telephone Killer was responsible for 8 murders, not the seven they talked about on the radio. The thought of pointing detectives down that road was overpowering and Stan decided he would do just that. He switched on the light, turned off the radio and climbed out of bed.

Chapter Nine

Detective Sorentino was about to pick up where his boss, O'Malley had left him dangling when the intercom in Chief of Detectives Marsha Carter's office interrupted him. "I'm sorry to interrupt you Chief Carter, but there is an urgent phone call for Lieutenant O'Malley here that concerns the Telephone Killer investigation" That was all O'Malley had to hear before turning toward the door, he stopped just before walking out and addressed his comment to the Chief of Detectives, "Can we pick this up some other time? I haven't gotten too many calls on this case that are marked urgent and I'd sure like to see what's up" Carter looked first at Sorentino and then toward O'Malley, "Okay, and take him with you" she said, pointing toward Sorentino, "I think you guys were about to hose me with a long description of routine police procedure on homicide cases anyway. But don't think you're off the hook. Not by a long shot. I want to see both of you back in this office tomorrow afternoon, let's say 4 o'clock?" Carter had a questioning voice but both detectives knew it was not a question, it was an order. "We'll be here!" came the response from O'Malley as he exited the door with Sorentino on his heels.

Once outside the office Sorentino was the first to speak "Great work Lieutenant!" he said, "I particularly loved the way you left me holding the fucking bag with that lady!" O'Malley nodded in response and then added, "That's why I'm a lieutenant and you... well, you are a detective. Call it the advantage of rank. I'm sorry I left you hanging out like that but frankly I didn't know what else to do. The fact is you ARE the only detective who's been to every one of the murder scenes when the bodies were still warm. No one could better describe those scenes and the investigations on those scenes better than you." He didn't like it but Sorentino had to admit that O'Malley had a point. "Well, Jim, let's go find out about this urgent phone call" was all he could say in response.

"Lt. O'Malley speaking, how can I help you" the tone of O'Malley's voice was even and there was no hint of either excitement or nervousness. Despite what he'd told Chief of Detectives Carter he had handled hundreds if not thousands of calls on the Telephone Killer case. O'Malley was sure Carter knew he was lying when he told her the calls marked urgent were few and far between and he was thankful that she could see both men needed time to collect their thoughts before continuing their session with her. Besides, the call also gave Carter an excuse that SHE could push up the line all the way to the Mayor's office. After all who is going to say she should NOT have let O'Malley handle "an urgent call" concerning this case? The excuse was perfect for everyone involved. As these thoughts flashed through his mind O'Malley developed a new respect for Carter. He knew that she pulled back to give a break to fellow officers, and that was the kind of attitude that kept the department together. "I owe you one, lady" he thought.

"Lt. O'Malley? Yes, uh, this is a concerned citizen and I think you need to look more closely into a murder that happened two years ago at the convenience store at the corner of Ontario and McClurg court. " The voice at the other end of the phone was strained, O'Malley could tell that much right away as he asked, "What does this have to do with the Telephone Killer case? I was told you had urgent information about that case" O'Malley questioned. "I think the person who killed that poor lady is responsible for all of the Telephone Killer murders. Look into it and you'll see." With that the caller at the other end hung up the phone. O'Malley looked across the room to the secretary who had called him out of his meeting, "Did you get a back up number for this call?" he asked. "Sure did!" was the response. All calls going into police headquarters were monitored and checked with a caller-id system. The secretary quickly read off the number on her display "555-1765 was the originating phone number" she stated. O'Malley picked up the phone again and dialed zero. "Hello, this is Lieutenant O'Malley, can you give me the location of the phone with the number 555-1765?" He only had to wait about 30 seconds before he got his rather surprising response, " That's a public phone located in a convenience store at the corner of Ontario and McClurg court." For some reason the information seemed crucial to O'Malley and he hung up without saying thank you or good bye.

O'Malley turned to Sorentino, "Frank, I need you to go up to records and pull everything you can find on a murder at the corner of Ontario and McClurg court. I don't know when it happened, hell I don't even know if it really happened at all but if it did my caller says it was about two years ago. Bring me everything you can find on the case, if you find anything. Understand?" Sorentino understood all too well. He was being sent on what may well prove to be a wild goose chase, but that was something you got used to when you worked homicide so he only nodded in response. O'Malley spoke again, "I'm going to head down to that location and look around, call me on the radio when you have the information I need." O'Malley looked at his watch, "Jesus, it's close to midnight!" he exclaimed and turned toward Sorentino, "We've been at it since early this morning. I tell you what, after you find that material, call me to let me know if it exists, and then knock off for the night." It was the best news Sorentino had heard all day and he said as much to O'Malley, "Thanks Lieutenant, I could sure use the rest!" O'Malley looked back at him and said, "Don't thank me yet Frank, I need you back in here by 8 tomorrow morning, so if you're lucky you'll get about six hours shut-eye." Sorentino looked back at his boss without saying a word. When you were on a heater like the Telephone Killer case, you got used to sleep deprivation. "I'll see you tomorrow morning, then Jim, and I'll let you know if those records exist." The two men then parted company.

Stanley Berlanti hung up the phone and looked around the store. "If only I had been here for her two years ago!" he thought to himself, "I know I would have stopped that animal from killing my sweet Melissa!" Berlanti visited this store often, and always felt a sense of remorse at the fact that he was NOT here two years ago. He looked down to the floor in front of the register, the floor where his beloved Melissa died.

No one in the store knew about his connection with the woman killed here two years before, but everyone welcomed Stan because he had become a "good customer" and made it a point to spend money each and every time he visited the store. To Stan it was a kind of religious experience and helped him to stay close to his lost love, so it was no big deal to drop 20, 30, or even 50 dollars each time he stopped by. Today was no different as Stan walked through the store picking items that he would later give to the many street people that chose this area to beg. He wouldn't spend much today because he wanted to be outside of the store when the detectives arrived, as he knew they would. Stan grabbed three six packs of beer and walked to the counter. It always made him feel closer to Melissa when he stood in the exact spot where she died, but he could tell no one about his connection to the woman killed in this very store. He paid for his purchase and walked out of the building, ignoring the cheerful salutations from the clerk behind the counter.

Lt. O'Malley was just pulling up to the store when his radio barked. "401 control" O'Malley picked up the radio mic, "Control this is 401" he said. "Contact your office by land line, information is waiting." "That's clear control, 401 out." With that simple transmission O'Malley knew there was information waiting for him from Sorentino. He climbed out of his car and walked into the store, heading for the very phone that was used earlier in the evening to direct his attention to this particular location. Before dialing police headquarters he checked the number on the pay phone and sure enough there it was: 555-1765, this was the phone where the call originated. O'Malley dropped a quarter into the phone and dialed headquarters.

"Chicago Police, can I help you?" the answer came after just one ring, impressing O'Malley, "Yes, this is Detective Lt. Francis O'Malley, I need to speak with Detective Sorentino, I believe he's at Chief Detective Carter's extension" O'Malley relayed the directions to the cop at the other end of the line and in a matter of seconds he was talking with Sorentino. "Jim, it turns out there WAS a murder at that store 22 months ago, not quite two years, but close enough. A woman was killed there during a robbery. The bad guy in this case got away with a whopping 15 dollars! Detective Mike Clancy was the lead dick on the case. I would have called him already but it's after Midnight and I figured it can wait." O'Malley had heard enough, "Good work Frank, now go home, go to bed

and be in my office at 8 tomorrow morning. I'll take care of contacting Clancy, okay?" Sorrentino, now red-eyed from the lack of sleep was all too happy to respond, "Okay lieutenant, I'll see you tomorrow!" O'Malley hung up the phone. "So, there was a murder here..." he thought to himself, "I wonder if it really MIGHT have been the work of our boy?" O'Malley knew that only time, and a review of the records from the killing, would tell but for some reason he felt good about what had been a very long day. He took a quick walk around the store, bought a cup of coffee, and turned toward the door. "I'll pick all of this up tomorrow morning" he thought, "For now I'd better take my own advice and get some shut-eye." With that O'Malley left the store.

There is a clear procedure followed by the Chicago Police Department and other departments across the country when a homicide occurs. The first officers on the scene are almost always uniformed patrol officers. It is their job to secure the crime scene and to gather any potential witnesses. When a murder has occurred two detectives are assigned to the case and both generally arrive some time after the medical examiner arrives on scene. It doesn't matter that they arrive later than the M-E because until the examiner makes a formal declaration of death they can not touch the body. Typically the medical examiner will take pictures of the deceased before handing the scene over to the detectives. Then and only then will the detectives begin their investigation. One officer will carefully go over the body inch by inch while the other detective takes notes on everything that is being done being careful to record everything that is found, no matter how insignificant it might seem. While this is going on the job of making a positive ID on the victim continues. An official ID requires that a living person, preferably a relative, identify the body. This is why the ME takes the Polaroid pictures of the victim. Unfortunately someone has to present that less than flattering picture of the victim to a relative to get confirmation that the dead person is, in fact, who it is believed to be.

Throughout this procedure lots of paperwork is generated and nothing from the scene is thrown away so that any investigator at any time will be able to review this case and cross-check it with similar cases. This careful planning and execution of all homicide investigations makes it possible for police to spot the work of serial killers and to track down killers even years after the crime was committed. It also makes it possible for detectives to review every tiny detail of a case any time they want, even if many years have passed since the original crime. Reviewing every detail: That is exactly what Detective Lieutenant James O'Malley planned to do.

Chapter Ten

"Violent crimes, Lt. Mulvaney speaking, how can I help you?" Lieutenant Jim Mulvaney picked up the phone on the first ring and recognized the voice at the other end, "Jim, this James O'Malley I need to set up a meet this morning with one of your dicks, his name is Clancy, Mike Clancy, can you have him meet me at area one HQ at nine o'clock?" Mulvaney could detect the weariness in his old friend's voice, and just a touch of impatience. "Sure, what's it all about?" came the question. "I want to go over an old case of his, about two years old, a robbery-murder. Let him know I have the files in my hands so I don't need anything but him to complete the package" came the response. Mulvaney knew that O'Malley had been placed in charge of the Telephone Killer task force so he asked him one more question. "Does this have anything to do with the case you're working right now?" O'Malley responded, "I'm not sure yet, but it might and that's why I need to talk with Clancy. The package says he was the lead detective in this case so I'd like to pick his brain a bit." Mulvaney heard that touch of impatience growing so he wrapped up the call, "No problem Lieutenant, I'll have him down there at nine." "Thanks" said O'Malley and hung up the phone.

"Anything new, boss?" the question came from Frank Sorrentino as he walked into O'Malley's office. The Lieutenant looked at his watch with a frown and replied "Either my watch is fast, or you are slow, which is it?" Sorrentino could see the boss was in no mood for jokes, "Sorry Jim, there is a

huge accident on the Ryan and I got stuck in the jam. " O'Malley responded "Well, I guess I can't complain too much about a 30 minute delay, 8:30 is as good as 8 after a day like yesterday. Come on over here and sit down, I've been going over the file on that robbery-murder on McClurg court a couple of years ago and there ARE some interesting parallels between that killing and the Telephone Killer case!" Sorentino was surprised, he really didn't think last night's phone tip would turn into anything so it was with a great deal of interest that he pulled up a chair.

"The lead dick on this case will be joining us in about half an hour" O'Malley said adding, "Unless, of course he's also taking the Dan Ryan this morning..." The last statement was made with a smile on his face and Sorentino knew the boss had forgiven him for showing up late. "I've already asked ballistics to shoot me a comparison of the bullet grooves in this case with those of the bullets used to kill the 7 victims in the Telephone Murder case. I'm still waiting for a return and will be very interested in what they find down in the lab. " O'Malley spread the contents of a brown folder on the table before him. "The victim was Melissa Berlanti, nothing outstanding about her, she worked in one of the luxury stores along the Mag mile along with her husband, Stanley. She had apparently stopped into the store to pick up a few things and walked into the gun sights of the killer. Two shots to the head later and Mrs. Berlanti became a statistic. Two detectives worked the scene, as usual, and neither noted anything unusual about the case. If it weren't for the fact that she was killed with a .22 caliber weapon I probably wouldn't take a second look at this case, but coupled with the phone call last night..." O'Malley's voice trailed off as he considered the next move. "At any rate" he said, bringing his attention back to the present, "The bad guy in this case is still at large though this report says the detectives who worked it are pretty sure they know their man. His name is Floyd Johnson, a two time loser who's already done time for armed robbery and attempt murder. Last known address was on the South side, it says here he lived in an apartment on Stony Island." O'Malley shoved the papers over to Sorentino. "She was the beautiful woman, wasn't she?" Sorentino asked, and continued without waiting for a response, "It says here her husband was especially troubled by the facts of the case. Both detectives were convinced that anyone in the store at the time could have prevented the murder by just speaking up. Instead everyone kept quiet and let Mrs. Berlanti walk right up to the gunman, who reacted by shooting her in the head. Twice in the head. That's very strange. No one thought to tell her to stop and to stay at the door, they all just let her walk right to the grave." O'Malley broke in, "I would have been pissed too, given the facts of the case. Mr. Berlanti must have been doubly wounded by this murder. First he loses his wife, and then he finds out she died because of a bunch of chicken-shit shoppers too afraid to open their mouths. I want to know a lot more about Mr. Berlanti. A LOT more. " The two detectives continued reading the reports, stopping only long enough to grab a couple of cups of coffee. Last night's long hours had left both men feeling drained.

It was at precisely 9 o'clock that there was a knock on O'Malley's door. "Yes, come on in" O'Malley said. Detective Mike Clancy stepped into the room. "You wanted to talk with me Lieutenant?" He asked, "I'm Mike Clancy." O'Malley and Sorentino both turned toward the door to see the visitor. "C'mon in Clancy, pull up a chair. We need to talk with you about the Berlanti murder. You may not remember it. It happened a couple of years ago at the Quick Mart on McClurg Court" Clancy glanced at both detectives and entered the room. "Yep, I remember the case. I'm also pretty sure I can tell you who the triggerman was, but I'll be damned if I can tell you where he is today. If you find him, let me know because he has a date with the executioner. There is no doubt in my mind that a turd by the name of Floyd Johnson killed that woman." O'Malley pointed toward an empty chair as he addressed the new arrival. "Sit here Clancy, and let's talk about this. I've already asked ballistics to run a comparison for me on the bullets used in this murder. Do you think this guy, Johnson, could possibly be the Telephone Killer?"

As he sat down Clancy began to respond. "Not in a million years lieutenant. Everything I read about your case tells me the gunman is meticulous and careful. Shit, Johnson left fingerprints all over that store. Only an idiot wouldn't have picked up on his I-D in a matter of days. Hell we even have great

pictures of the guy walking into the store from the security system, you can see them right there” He pointed to a stack of photos that had been part of the case file, “This guy was sloppy with a capital “S”, the guy you’re after is neat and clean and I don’t need to tell you he never leaves a trace of his presence, except of course the dead body and the phone number thing. Johnson does just about everything to show his presence except sign a fucking greeting card. I’m sure that if he thought it would help him feed his habit he’d do that too!” Sorentino jumped in at this point, “Habit? What habit?” “You need to pull up Johnson’s sheet.” Clancy directed his comment to O’Malley, the senior officer in the room, “It’s longer than some rolls of toilet paper I’ve seen. At the very top of the file you’ll see that he’s been a junk nut for years. The guy can’t live without a daily dose of happiness, and in his case happiness is heroin. I’d estimate his habit at 3-to-5-hundred dollars a day. That’s a lot of horse, and it takes a lot of jack to feed that monkey.” O’Malley considered that for a moment. “Why is this guy still on the streets?” he asked. “Believe me, sir, I’d love nothing better than to bring this turd in on murder charges but he seems to have disappeared from the face of the earth. I mean we can’t find a sign of this guy anywhere, it’s like he simply vanished. “ This sparked O’Malley’s interest more than he cared to show, “Tell me about it, Detective” he ordered.

“Not much to tell, really. We were ready to pick him up on a murder charge less than a week after the convenience store job, but when we got to his apartment he was gone. Funny thing about that is the fact that he apparently left in a hurry and left behind all of his worldly goods. Not that he had much to leave, but what he had was still in the apartment. We staked the place out for more than a month and he never came back. The stake didn’t end until his junk was tossed onto the street by an eviction team. No, this guy simply vanished. We’ve talked to all of his known associates and they all agree: he disappeared just one day before we moved in to make the arrest, it was almost as if he knew we were about to make the bust. “ O’Malley spoke up, “I’m sure you issued the routine APB?” Clancy responded, “We had an APB out on this guy even before the murder, he was suspected in a long string of armed robberies and assaults even before he killed that woman. After we found his apartment empty the APB went national. Every LEO in the country is looking for this guy, and by now we should have thrown him in jail. Either he’s suddenly gotten very smart, or he is very dead, which is always a possibility when you’re looking for a junk nut. Personally, I think the guy crawled up in a hole to shoot up one day and died. Whatever happened, we can’t find him.”

“Okay, you know who pulled the trigger, but you can’t find him. Now tell me about the victim’s husband, what was the name? Oh yes, Stanley Berlanti.” Again the question was an order, not a request. Clancy shuffled through the papers on O’Malley’s desk and pulled out a few items before speaking. “Stanley Berlanti. I remember him well because he was absolutely devastated by the murder of his wife. I think I made a big mistake when I first talked with him and told him how senseless the killing was. I mean, it would have been so easy to spook Johnson. He is one of those types who run at the sound of a cat’s meow and if someone, anyone had spoken up before he pulled the trigger I’m sure Melissa Berlanti would still be alive today. One word of warning to her to stop at the door and this would have been a simple armed robbery. You know how it is, Lieutenant, folks who would normally do anything to help a woman in need tend to freeze when they see a gun. I remember that when I told Berlanti this he became very angry not at the killer but at everyone around the killer. It was a bad time for him and he eventually calmed down so I tried to keep him in the loop as much as possible during the investigation. Let me tell you, it was not easy telling him that the prime suspect had disappeared. “ O’Malley asked, “How did he react to that news?” Clancy responded, “Well, pretty much the way you’d expect. He cursed and shouted quite a bit. Accused the department as a whole of letting the killer slip away, said we were useless scum-suckers as I remember. You’ve heard it before, I’m sure, so you know the drill. He was not a happy camper.”

“What do you know about Mr. Berlanti, I mean what do you really know about him?” this time the question came from Sorentino who had been listening intently throughout the presentation. Clancy continued, “Well, as we would do in every murder case, even in this kind of case, we ran him through the system. The guy is clean as a whistle. He worked, and I believe still works, at the same store

where he met the victim before they were married. He did have one minor brush with the law, but no charges were ever filed. Several months after the murder he became convinced that a store mannequin looked too much like his wife and dressed it in clothing that was less revealing. The cops were called only because a concerned citizen watched him through the display window and thought he was a burglar. Other than that this guy's a Joe average. Nothing stands out. No wants, no warrants, that kind of thing. Just your average Chicagoan. Certainly no reason to suspect him of any involvement in the case, heck the guy was on the job when the little lady was killed." This seemed to satisfy O'Malley for now. "I'd like you to run down to the lab for me, Clancy, and bring back that report from ballistics." O'Malley was sure the report would be complete by now, O'Malley turned to Sorentino, "Frank, I want you to take this list of witnesses from the Berlanti murder and cross check it with everyone, and I mean everyone connected to the Telephone Killer investigation. If you find a match of any kind I want to know ASAP, understand?" Sorentino took the folder from O'Malley, "You got it, boss. I'm on the case right now!" He turned and left the room, leaving O'Malley and Clancy alone. "Look Clancy, I'm going to pull you in on the task force looking into the Telephone Killer, do you have anything pressing right now? " Clancy was quick to respond, "No Lieutenant, I'm as free as a bird!" O'Malley looked him in the eye and said, " from now on Mike, call me Jim."

Chapter Eleven

Berlanti was more nervous than usual as he drove to work that morning. Traffic along Michigan Avenue was a mess, he'd learned from the all news station that a big tie-up along the Dan Ryan Expressway had everyone taking to the side streets this morning, a fact that was obvious from the jam that he was trying to negotiate. He wondered again whether he should have made that call last night. "It WAS the right thing to do" he told himself, "After all, it's important that the police know that scum who killed Melissa is the same person responsible for the Telephone Killings!" He'd said this to himself literally hundreds of times during the night but still he worried that he should have kept Melissa's name out of the whole mess. Berlanti's attention was drawn to the radio and his all news station. "WBBM has learned that police are pursuing a new lead in the investigation into a string of seven murders carried out by the so-called Telephone Killer. Sources at the police station tell News radio 780 that there may have been an 8th victim of the killer who was shot and killed nearly a year before the other seven murders took place. Police officials are saying nothing officially about this new development, but there is also word that investigators for the first time have the name of a possible suspect in the case. We'll have the latest developments for you as they become available..." Berlanti smiled, finally the police were starting to look into the murder of his dear wife, Melissa! In a flash he knew that he had done the right thing by alerting Detective O'Malley to the murder. Finally Melissa would get the attention she so richly deserved. Berlanti could envision the way the newspapers, television, and radio would focus on his wife's murder. "She WAS the first" he assured himself, " and finally the world will know!" The rest of the trip through traffic to the job was a joy. It was the first time since Melissa's death that Berlanti enjoyed his morning commute. He almost expected to see his beloved wife waiting for him in the parking garage as he pulled through the crossing gates and was a little disappointed when she failed to appear. "One day, my love, one day soon!" he said to himself. "I know I'm getting closer to you by the day!"

Chapter Twelve

"I can't believe this has gone unnoticed until now!" The voice was that of Mike Clancy, "There is no doubt about it, Jim, the gun used to kill Melissa Berlanti was the same gun used in all seven of the Telephone Murders. I guess we can start saying all eight of the murders!" Jim O'Malley was stunned. He had never expected this turn of events. While he was intrigued by the few similarities

in the killings, the report he'd gotten from Clancy earlier in the day convinced him there would be no real connection between the cases. Instead ballistics had confirmed that the weapon used in the Telephone Killings had first been used in a nickel-and-dime convenience store robbery that ended in death for a young woman. No, this was the last thing he expected to hear.

"Okay, Mike here's what we do next. I want that APB on Floyd Johnson reissued, and this time I want his picture plastered all over this town. Hell, I want his picture plastered all over this country! We are going to find this dope head and we are going to put him through the wringer until we know every thing there is to know about him. Until we find him I want every, and I mean EVERY detective on this case to start interviewing everyone who knew him. I want someone to talk to everyone who even came close to Johnson, hell, I want to hear from people who smelled his farts! THAT'S how deep I want to dig into this character!" Clancy was stunned by the anger in O'Malley's voice, "And I want you to get Detective Sorentino into my office right now! The three of us are going to start all over again on this case. You handle the details while I brief the Chief of Detectives"

O'Malley did not look forward to his next call. He was scheduled to meet again with Chief of Detectives Marsha Carter later this afternoon, but this new development meant he had to talk to her NOW. She would be unbelievably pissed if he failed to report this development to her immediately. He picked up his phone, "Maureen," he was speaking to his secretary, "Get Chief Detective Carter on the line. Tell her it's urgent and it's marked "Telephone Killer" if she gives you any shit about 'calling later'. " O'Malley hung up the phone and waited for the buzz that would tell him the connection was complete. As he waited his mind began to churn through the most recent revelations. "Have I been looking so deep that I missed the obvious?" he asked himself, "I never imagined this murder-robbery would prove to be such a break in the case. How could I have missed it, and how could the crime lab have missed the obvious link between the cases?" He was still wondering about these things when the buzzer sounded. He picked up his phone and began to speak.

Chief Detective Carter? O'Malley here. I think there is a development in the case that you, the Superintendent, and the Mayor all need to know about. I'm not sure we have our man yet, but we DO have a name and some pictures to pass around just in case." Chief Detective Carter had at first been annoyed when the call came in from O'Malley. She was ready to dismiss it entirely until his secretary told her it was urgent and related to the Telephone Killer investigation. She was ready now with a series of questions. "Does this have anything to do with the call you got in my office last night?" she asked. "Yes, it does. " was the answer. Now it was Carter's turn to be surprised. The only reason she let O'Malley and Sorentino slip out of her office last night was that she wanted to give them more time to prepare for a REAL grilling that she planned for this afternoon. She never really believed the "urgent" call to O'Malley was anything other than a diversion. "I guess we're all wrong at times " she said aloud, not realizing it. "Pardon me?" said O'Malley. "Oh, nothing lieutenant. Go on, tell me what you have" urged Carter as she pulled out a notebook and prepared to take down the new information.

"Nearly two years ago a woman by the name of Melissa Berlanti was shot and killed during a convenience store heist. She happened into the store during the robbery and was shot twice in the head by the bandit. She died on the scene. There has never been an arrest in the case, but we know who it was that pulled the trigger. His name is Floyd Johnson, a dope addict with a rap sheet that runs for days. " O'Malley paused to gather his thoughts. "Until last night there was never any connection made between the Berlanti murder and our current investigation, but it turns out that Mrs. Berlanti was in fact killed by the same gun that has been used in all seven of the Telephone murders. " Carter stepped in at this point, "Where in the hell is this Johnson? And why has he been allowed to roam the streets for the past two years? Jesus Christ, how am I going to explain THIS to the mayor!" she exclaimed. O'Malley continued, "I've spoken with the chief detective on the Berlanti case and he tells me the department has been searching for Johnson ever since the crime. It seems

he simply vanished from sight leaving all of his belongings behind. I mean this guy flew the coop without so much as a toothbrush!"

Carter was adamant, "I want the file, the FULL file on this case in my office pronto, I want pictures of the suspect, and I want action right now. Do you hear me Jim, right now. I want you to bring that stuff over to me immediately and I want this guy's face on every television newscast tonight and in every newspaper tomorrow. How soon can you be here?" she asked. "I'm on my way. Give me about 15 minutes." Was the reply from O'Malley. "Fine, I'll be on the phone with the Superintendent and with Public Affairs. I want to put together a release on this information, even if it proves to be nothing. It's the biggest break we've gotten on this case to date, and the Mayor wants the public to know that the department is hot on the trail of this mad-man!" With that Carter put down the phone, without even waiting for a response. Her next call was to the Police Superintendent, William Jones. "Carter here, give me the chief, and this is extremely urgent" she said to the officer who answered the phone. In a matter of seconds Superintendent William Jones was on the line. "What do you have, Marsha?" he asked, "Maybe the break we've been waiting for in the Telephone Killer case. I think its time to conference the mayor into this discussion. We've got some ground to cover."

Chapter Thirteen

"WBBM news time 2:50 and our top story this hour: Chicago police are working on a dramatic new development in the search for the "Telephone Killer." Investigators are now searching for a man identified by our sources as Floyd Johnson. For now he is wanted only in connection with the murder of a woman, Melissa Berlanti of Chicago, nearly two years ago during a convenience store robbery, but sources indicate the weapon used in that killing was the same as the one used in the seven murders attributed to the Telephone Killer. "

Stan Berlanti smiled, at long last police were treating the man who killed his wife as a major player in the investigation into the Telephone Killer. He thought, again, about Floyd Johnson. He'd first become aware of Johnson from a detective's file that was left unprotected for a few moments just days after Melissa's murder. The file wasn't open very long, but it was long enough for Berlanti to see clearly that Johnson was the prime suspect. He had even managed to see the last known address of the suspect before the detective closed the file. He saw, and he remembered. He KNEW that Floyd Johnson was responsible for the Telephone Murders and was happy to hear that the rest of the police department was finally on his side. Stanley Berlanti was now mighty proud of what he'd done last night when he tipped off the police and wondered why he hadn't done it months ago.

Lt. O'Malley was deeply troubled by the latest turn of events. Something just didn't seem right in all of this. "How could someone who was a cheap, hyped up killer one day become one of the most clever serial killers the next?" he wondered. It just didn't add up. There was something here that he couldn't quite get his hands on. Quietly he cursed himself for not asking the clerk in the store about anyone he'd seen use the phone the night the tip came in. He was tired at the time and was certain he was on another in what had been a long list of wild goose chases in this case, but that did not excuse his sloppiness. He'd neglected a simple, routine, investigative technique. Find out who phoned in the tip. It would have been, SHOULD have been so easy! O'Malley had let that little detail slip completely from his mind. "Damn, " he thought to himself, "I was there less than 20 minutes after the call came in. Surely the clerk would have remembered seeing someone use that phone. If only I had asked about it!" Now, of course, it was too late. There was no chance the clerk would remember. Hopefully Sorrentino and Clancy could help him fill in the rough spots when they returned to his office in the next few minutes. He had expected them to be there by now, and was growing more impatient by the second. O'Malley had already taken everything he had on the Berlanti killing over to Chief Detective Carter, but he still had the lead detective on the case at his disposal and he planned to make full use of that advantage, as soon as Clancy returned.

Almost as if he'd heard his name being called there came a knock on the door. "C'mon in" shouted O'Malley. Detective Mike Clancy peeked around the door and said, "Is it safe to come in Lieutenant?" He almost hoped the answer would be a simple "no" but knew he would not be that lucky on this day. "Yeah, Mike, come on in. Where's Sorrentino?" came the expected response from O'Malley. "Oh, he'll be here in a few minutes, said he wanted to tie up some loose ends. I think they involve an extra cheese pizza he's having as a late breakfast." O'Malley looked at Clancy and began to speak, "That's fine, Mike, I actually want to start with YOU anyway. I want you to think back on your notes on the Berlanti killing, they should be relatively fresh in your mind since we went over the whole file earlier today. Is there anything you can tell me about the witness statements? I don't mean, "She walked in, he shot her dead" I'm looking for something more subtle, something we missed this morning. For instance, did anyone describe the gun the killer used?" Clancy was onto that question in a second, "Oh sure, we have about 12 descriptions of the murder weapon. All of them different. It was either a chrome plated .357 magnum, or a .44 Desert Eagle, or a small, short-nosed .22 caliber. Take your pick. Of course the lab work tells us it was, in fact, a .22 that killed Mrs. Berlanti. Even that small caliber, when fired twice into the head, is quite deadly. I don't have to tell YOU that, you have 7 stiffs already to prove just how deadly a small caliber weapon can be. " O'Malley thought about those seven victims for a few seconds and continued, "But what did the witnesses tell you about how the gunman acted? How did he shoot the woman, for instance?" Now it was Clancy's turn to think for a few moments. "Everyone seemed to agree that he turned toward his left from the counter as the victim approached, grabbed her with one hand, pulling her to the ground, and then fired twice into her head at point-blank range." O'Malley sat up in his seat, "Grabbed her as he turned to the LEFT? " he asked with emphasis on the word 'left'. "Yes, that's what they ALL said. He was holding a gun on the clerk, Berlanti walked in and I guess spooked him because no one in the store called to her to stop and she just walked right up behind the bad guy. I figure she had no idea there was a robbery in progress. Anyway as she approached the counter, he turned and grabbed her by the hair and pulled her to the ground. " O'Malley followed on that quickly, "Then he MUST have used his LEFT hand to pull her down, right? It was the free hand when you turn to the left if the gun is in your RIGHT hand." "Yeah" came the response from Clancy, "We always figured he was holding the weapon in the right hand, what about it?" O'Malley's words came fast, "His response to being surprised by Berlanti came instantly and he reached out with the only hand he had free at the time...his left hand. That's why he turned to his left, instead of to his right, when she walked into the store. I was just there last night and I KNOW the layout. He must have been standing to the right of the center of the counter, turned left, and grabbed Berlanti's hair, is that right?" Clancy responded, "I couldn't have painted it any better than that, and I see what you're driving at, the killer must have been RIGHT handed, since he handled the gun with the right hand instead of the left, am I correct?" O'Malley knew that Clancy was correct. The person who killed Melissa Berlanti was right handed. The Telephone Killer was left-handed. Seven autopsies had proven that beyond any doubt. "You are quite correct," said O'Malley, "And unless the medical examiner has been wrong for the past year, the man who killed Melissa Berlanti is NOT the Telephone Killer. That person is LEFT handed not right-handed. " Clancy spoke again, "But Lieutenant, there are many people out there who use BOTH hands with nearly equal ease. Isn't it POSSIBLE that Johnson was one of those people? I mean I know left handed people who bowl right-handed, but throw left-handed and bat right-handed. They tend to use both hands equally. It doesn't take much coordination to hold a gun, no matter which hand you use. " Clancy's argument made sense and O'Malley, while excited by the revelation that the Berlanti killer was most likely right handed, understood he'd need more to prove whether that same person might be the Telephone Killer. "To your knowledge, was there any evidence collected in Johnson's apartment that might help us make a DNA match?" asked O'Malley. Clancy thought about that a few moments before responding, "I think there probably is. I remember during the search of his place we found quite a bit of clothing and a box containing bath items. Things like a toothbrush, combs, and dental floss. I'm pretty sure we can pull some of his DNA off of something we retrieved from that address, hell, if nothing else we have a shit-load of his hair on one of the brushes we took "

O'Malley had a theory, and it was one he didn't really enjoy thinking about. As much as he'd like to say that Floyd Johnson was the Telephone Killer he could not do so until HE was absolutely positive. The left handed vs. right-handed question was the first indication to him that he was still dealing with two separate killers. The DNA evidence from the first Telephone murder scene could give him a definitive answer. He picked up his phone and dialed the crime lab. "Lt. O'Malley here, let me talk with whoever is in charge right now." O'Malley waited a few minutes before a technician picked up at the other end. "Yeah, O'Malley here, listen I want you to pull the evidence folders and bags from a two year old case and see if you can't find some kind of DNA evidence on the items you find.." He began, and continued by rattling off the case number and other specifics to help the technician locate the right evidence locker. In all the call took about 5 minutes, during which time Clancy racked his brain hoping for some other tiny shred of evidence to come to the surface.

Detective Frank Sorentino entered the room looking tired. He had spent the past couple of hours trying to cross-check every witness to the Berlanti murder with every person connected to the Telephone Killer case. O'Malley watched as he walked into the room, "Anything to report, Frank?" was the question. "Not yet, boss, but I have three of our boys working right now to check on every possible connection between the witnesses, there are eleven of them in all. I did a preliminary check and can tell you that on the surface there is absolutely no connection between the witnesses and the serial killer. These people are all just common folk, three of them work at the CBS building across the street, the rest live in the immediate area. Most of them were in the store because of the big lotto jackpot that night, a 48-million dollar prize, and except for the CBS people, who were buying lunch, the others were apparently there to buy tickets to the Big Game." Sorentino knew that wasn't completely accurate, there were one or two who were there to buy a few items for the refrigerator first, and the lotto ticket second, but what the heck. Why confuse everyone with the facts? The fact stood: for the most part the ONLY reason that the store was so full at the time of the murder was the big lottery drawing held that night. The store's manager had confirmed that fact many times saying he was always crowded on the nights of a big lotto drawing.

O'Malley looked at both men, "Have a seat, gentlemen, we have some work to do" O'Malley pointed toward the empty seats in front of his desk. Just as he was about to speak there was a knock at his door.

"C'mon in" said O'Malley. "Lieutenant, I was wondering if I might have just a moment with you. I think you're barking up the wrong tree on this convenience store killer." It was the ever-present Pete Viviano, the desk pilot who could not keep his nose out of everyone else's business. O'Malley wondered how much longer it would be before the guy retired. "Okay Pete, what do you have THIS time?" came the question, not from O'Malley but from Sorentino. "I think that someone is trying to divert your attention, guys, this run-of-the-mill convenience store killing can't have anything to do with your serial killer. There were no numbers involved, right?" Viviano said and continued, "In ALL of the Telephone Killer cases there have been numbers involved. I think someone is handing you a red herring, which tells me wherever you were in your investigation you were getting too close." Viviano smiled after that last statement. "Then you probably DON'T know " said O'Malley, "That the gun used in the Berlanti murder is the same weapon used by the Telephone Killer, right?" He could tell by the look on Viviano's face that he DID NOT know that fact. "Don't you listen to the radio, Pete?" came the question from Sorentino, "It's all over the place, the gun used to kill Melissa Berlanti was the same one used by the Telephone Killer!" his impatience with the little officer was evident in the tone of his voice. "No, I didn't know that " admitted Viviano, "But it doesn't change my mind about the numbers. If you walk away from those phone numbers you are doing exactly what the real killer wants you to do" was his reply. O'Malley cut him off, "Okay Pete, your protest is noted. We HAVEN'T forgotten the numbers, but right now we have some leads that might actually lead us to the killer. Look, I appreciate your following this case, and I really do appreciate your attempts to help us, but as I told you before leave the investigating to us and go back to your desk. I KNOW you think the numbers are key, and I admit that I agree with you, but maybe this course in the

investigation will answer all of our questions. “ O’Malley remembered how he’d hurt the officer during their last confrontation and wanted to avoid a repeat so he didn’t mention anything about being little, or about the lotto for that matter. Viviano had said what he came to say and left with a final bit of advice, “Follow the numbers, guys, and you’ll find your killer. The numbers are the key, not some hyped up junkie blowing away a woman during a fucking robbery!” With that he left the room.

O’Malley looked to the two detectives seated in front of him. “Is there anyone here who doesn’t think the phone numbers are a key to this case?” he asked. Both detectives sat silent. “Fine, then we agree. But right now we have what appears to be a hot lead. But let me tell you both I do NOT believe Johnson is our killer, but I can’t get past the feeling that the Berlanti murder ties in somehow with our Telephone Killer. I have quite a few questions, first among them is how did our man get the gun that was clearly used by Johnson to kill Mrs. Berlanti? “ He looked to both men for an answer. Mike Clancy spoke first, “Johnson was a hype, right? I told you before his habit ran three to five hundred dollars a day. Isn’t it possible he SOLD the gun to someone else for a quick fix? “ O’Malley was ready for that question, “It is possible, but I would think of that as a last-ditch effort on his part. It would be like a machinist selling all his tools for a pack of smokes. He’d get a quick fix on his nicotine addiction, but he would no longer have the tools he needed to make a living. For Johnson making a living meant feeding the monkey on his back, and his tool was the gun. I don’t see him selling or trading it to get a quick fix. “ Sorentino jumped in, “Then there are only two alternatives: the gun was stolen from Johnson, or it was pried from his cold, dead fingers, as the gun nuts like to say.” “My thoughts, exactly!” said O’Malley. I think that gun fell into the hands of the real killer AFTER Johnson bought the farm. I believe Johnson is probably dead, either from an overdose or through some other means we don’t yet know, but I think the guy is dead. Our killer got the gun after Johnson died. “ It was Clancy’s turn to ask a question, “ I agree that Johnson is dead, shit we’ve been searching for him for two years now and everyone who ever knew him says he simply vanished one day. That, to me anyway, means he didn’t drop off the face of the earth, but dropped dead. I’m still working on this question: did our killer get the gun from Johnson’s body, or did someone else find it and sell it to the killer down the line somewhere? After all, there was nearly a full year between the disappearance of Johnson and the first Telephone case. A lot can happen to a gun in a year. “ It was a good question, and showed why Clancy’s boss thought so highly of his abilities as an investigator. It was also a question no one could answer at this point.

Chapter Fourteen

“You shouldn’t have told them, Stanley, the information won’t help at all, and it might keep me from coming back.” Stanley Berlanti was taking his usual afternoon nap after getting off for the day. As always, his sleep was troubled as he dreamed of his beloved Melissa. “It was a mistake Stanley... it was a mistake.... It was a mistake” Melissa’s voice trailed off as Berlanti awaked from his troubled slumber. He looked at the clock, it was seven thirty in the evening, and he’d only been asleep for about two hours. “Why was it a mistake?” he wondered. “Wasn’t it important for the police to realize that Floyd Johnson was responsible for the Telephone Killings?” Berlanti thought back to the last time he had seen Floyd Johnson. Yes, he had actually seen the man who killed his beloved wife. The homicide detective handling the case was far too generous with his information on the investigation and Stanley had gotten a good look at the case folder when the detective wasn’t watching him. He’d gotten a good look at the name of the suspect, and the address where he lived.

Berlanti knew Johnson was addicted to heroin and would do just about anything for a fix, so it was a simple matter for Stanley to go to the man’s apartment, promise him a huge supply of horse, and lure him to a more discreet location. That is exactly what Stanley did. He and Johnson had left the apartment and driven to a forest preserve on the south side of Cook County. Johnson had been

easy to fool. All the man cared about was his next fix, and Berlanti took full advantage of that overpowering desire. When they pulled into the preserve he'd told Johnson that he was meeting with a supplier who needed a dealer. Johnson was to be the dealer, and in exchange he would get all of his fixes for free from now on. It was an offer the addict could not refuse. The two men climbed out of the car and walked deep into the preserve.

Berlanti smiled as he remembered the final moments on earth of Floyd Johnson. He'd come up behind him, grabbed him around the neck and plunged a 12 inch kitchen knife into his kidneys. Johnson struggled for a only few moments between plunges, covering Berlanti with his blood. The blood seemed to fuel Berlanti's rage as he stabbed Johnson again, and again, and again, pulling the man to the ground and rolling him onto his back while he continued to stab. It seemed like an eternity of bliss to Berlanti, but the whole killing probably only took about 2 minutes. By his own count he had stabbed Johnson 145 times, and when he finally stopped there were no signs of life in the man who had killed his Melissa. Berlanti stood, looked at the body, and spat upon the lifeless form. "That will teach you, you fucking bastard. Now go burn in hell where you belong!" he shouted. Berlanti went over the victim's clothing, pulling out his wallet and a syringe kit. When he found the .22 caliber pistol tucked in the crotch area of Johnson's pants Berlanti began to cry. He knew it was the weapon that had been used to kill his dear Melissa. He held it lovingly and wiped blood from it before tucking it into his own pants. Berlanti finished removing all forms of I-D from the body and then proceeded to dig a shallow grave under a near-by tree. He used the knife he'd brought along with him to loosen the soil as he dug. After about 20 minutes of digging Berlanti was satisfied with the depth of the new grave and rolled Johnson's corpse into it before covering the whole thing with soil and leaves. Berlanti then carefully wiped his fingerprints from the knife and tossed it into a shallow pond about 100 yards from the murder scene. Taking one last look around, Berlanti turned and headed for his car.

When he reached his car Berlanti removed his clothing and stuffed it into a plastic bag he'd brought along, then opened his trunk and removed a second set of clothing, which he put on in a matter of a few minutes. He carried the blood-stained clothes to a near-by Bar-B-Que pit, doused them with lighter fluid, and watched as they burned down to ashes. He carefully removed all of the papers from Johnson's wallet, including what little money the man had, and added it to the fire. As it burned he tossed in the Syringe kit for one final flash of flames. With a last look down the pathway he'd followed Berlanti spat again and said, "NOW my Melissa can rest in peace, you bastard!" He carefully took the .22 caliber pistol from the seat of the car, where he'd placed it while undressing, and stashed it in the glove box. He climbed into the car and simply drove away. He never again returned to the area though visions of the killing were always fresh in his mind.

It wasn't long after Berlanti killed the man who murdered wife that his beloved Melissa returned to him in his dreams. The first dream came about two weeks after the killing. "Stanley.... Stanley." the voice implored. Though sound asleep Stan Berlanti responded, "Is that you, Melissa? I miss you so much! Please come back to me!" "I will, Stanley, I will come back to you! But first you must make right what has been wrong!" Berlanti remembered that first contact well. In it Melissa had expressed relief that her killer was at long last brought to justice, but there was more that Stanley must do before she could return. Berlanti was given the message over the ensuing months and knew exactly what he must do to bring his dear, sweet Melissa back to his side. He did not enjoy the work, but the reward would make it all worthwhile.

Chapter Fifteen

Jim O'Malley was getting anxious about this whole case. Something didn't feel right, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Was he covering all the bases? Had he left some detail out? He wondered how many times in the past year he had slipped up. He thought again of how he slipped up just last night

when he failed to ask the store clerk about anyone using the pay phone. He still couldn't forgive himself for that oversight. If it had been Sorentino or Clancy or any of the team working this case he would have given them hell for making such a stupid mistake. And he wouldn't buy the argument he was trying to make in his own mind that he was tired, and it had been a long day. The longest day, he knew, would come the next time he was called out to a Telephone Killer murder scene. THEN he would really beat on himself for the letdown. He was also sure that Chief of Detectives Carter would chew him a new ass if she ever found out about the oversight, which he knew she would.

O'Malley wanted to make sure he hadn't missed anything else, so he grabbed the file from the Dominguez murder, the last known victim of the Telephone Killer. He opened the file and carefully began to read each word. Read is really not the best way to describe what O'Malley was doing. He was actually studying every word, every sentence, and every paragraph. Taking them all in and slowly digesting their full meaning, hoping something would jump out.

"Back at it, eh Lieutenant?" The voice was unmistakable. It was Pete Viviano. Again. This time O'Malley didn't care about hurting feelings and angrily shut the folder and looked directly at the small officer. "Pete, I'm going to give you about 3 seconds to clear out of this room or so help me you'll be working overnight security at Comiskey!" He shook his fist with such anger that the pen he was holding flew out of his hand, through the air, and directly at Viviano. It struck him squarely in the chest and fell to the floor. Viviano, stunned by the outburst, said "I'm sorry Lieutenant, I thought you could use a few friendly words" as he bent over to pick up the pen. He walked toward O'Malley's desk and placed it atop the folder. His eyes took in the notes scribbled on the folder and a smile came over his face. "Oh yeah, I see it now!" he exclaimed. "All these years you guys been riding me about playing the lottery and I see you've done a bit of playing yourself, eh?" O'Malley couldn't understand what he meant, nor could he understand the big shit-eating grin on Viviano's face, especially after he'd just dressed him down. "What in the hell are you talking about, Pete?" he asked.

"The lottery, you know, the lottery the pick three and pick four. Don't tell me you never played the game, you got last week's pick three and pick four numbers right there!" he pointed toward the crime scene file, "See?"

O'Malley followed his gaze and looked at the file. There, written on the outside, was the phone number that had been scrawled across the chest of Alfred Dominguez. On one line were the first three numbers, and below that the last four. He looked back at Viviano and said, "You're full of shit Pete that's the phone number of the last victim of the Telephone Killer!"

Viviano wasn't moved and stood his ground, "I don't know about phone numbers, but I do know that those are last week's pick three and pick four numbers. I'm sure of it! I cashed in on the pick three just today and it was a nice pay-out! Those numbers are reversed, but those ARE the winning numbers! I only recognized them because I am looking at them upside down and read them in the winning order. Those are the numbers that were pulled."

O'Malley felt something snap in his brain and his voice trembled as he carefully asked Viviano, "When were those number drawn, Pete?" He knew the answer before Viviano could get it out.

"Why, let's see...those were the numbers from last Wednesday. No, make that a week ago last Wednesday." O'Malley fell into his chair.

"What you're saying is those numbers represent in reverse order the pick 3 and pick four from the first Wednesday of this month, right?" He didn't wait for an answer before he continued, "Pete, can you get me the winning pick three and pick four numbers for the first Wednesday of every month for the past year?"

Viviano looked puzzled for a moment and replied, "Sure, I can get 'em in a couple of minutes. They post them all on the Internet. "

O'Malley looked at him and said, "You may not realize it Pete, but your numbers just came in. I think you may have just hit the jackpot!"

Viviano didn't understand but he smiled as if he did. "Sure, boss, whatever you say. When do you want those numbers?"

O'Malley replied, "Yesterday, if not sooner! Go get them right now!"

Viviano could sense the urgency and feel the excitement in the room so he turned and walked toward the door. "You'll have the printout on your desk in less than five minutes!" With that he headed out the door.

Jim O'Malley was trembling as he picked up the folder on his desk. "Fucking LOTTERY numbers... not a phone number at all! They are fucking LOTTERY numbers! And from the first Wednesday of the month. Exactly one week before the killing! " O'Malley could barely contain his excitement as he waited for the confirmation that would come when Viviano walked back through his door way. He and the entire task force had been chasing down the phone number angle for a year. No wonder they never hit paydirt on that angle! O'Malley felt like a kid who was nearing the end of a one thousand-piece jigsaw puzzle. He was beginning to see the end game, it was right at his fingertips and he knew that this case was about to be blown wide open. If what he believed proved true there would never be another Telephone Killer murder. "Check that" he thought, "Lotto Killer, not Telephone Killer!" He smiled at the prospect of bringing this long investigation to an end with an arrest.

O'Malley hoped to put the cuffs on the killer long before the second Wednesday of next month, but he knew that, failing that, he would be waiting for him at the home of his next victim. He didn't know where that home was just yet, but he WOULD know exactly where to be after the pick three and pick four drawings of the first Wednesday of next month. He had him! But he could not let this information leak out.

"I got them right here, Lieutenant. All of the Pick three and Pick four numbers for the first Wednesday drawing of the past 12 months!" Viviano was proud to finally feel like he was actually helping someone around the station for a change and he beamed like a little boy who'd just been given a new bike. It was good to be back in the saddle.

O'Malley pointed toward the chair directly opposite his at his desk. "Sit there Pete, I want you to be in on this. In just a few minutes I'll know for certain whether you have just solved the biggest murder mystery to hit Chicago in decades!" Viviano still didn't understand but was pleased with the praise and sat down.

O'Malley grabbed a stack of folders from a shelf behind his desk and started going over them, comparing the phone numbers on the outside of each folder with the winning lottery numbers. In every case they were reversed, but matched perfectly. There was Steven Christmas, the radio DJ with the unlisted number. Those same numbers, in reverse order, had been the pick three and pick four numbers the week before he was killed. Here was a month with no murders, and no wonder, the pick three and pick four from the first Wednesday did not make a sensible number, they were 001 and 4320. There was no 100 exchange in Chicago, or anywhere else for that matter and no phone number in the city began with a zero. There was the number of Leticia Washington, the number of Franklin Parks, The number of Dr. Susan Barger, and on and on. Every one of them were the reverse of the previous week's pick three and pick four lotto game!

O'Malley looked up at Viviano, "Pete, I will never again kid you about your lotto habit, in fact, I may just join you! " O'Malley quickly explained to Viviano what he had made it possible for the detective

to uncover. "Pete, I want you to get on the horn and get Sorentino and Clancy back here right away. Tell them I said to drop what they're doing and to get back into my office right away!"

Again Viviano felt a wave of pride rush over him, "You got it, Lieutenant, I'll get on that right away!" As Viviano walked out of the door O'Malley couldn't help but notice the little cop looked ten feet tall and seemed to have miraculously lost his limp.

Chapter Sixteen

"Tell the chief detective that I don't care if she's talking to the President. I MUST talk to her right now!" O'Malley all but shouted the order to Chief Detective Carter's secretary. He'd just been told she was in conference with the Superintendent and the mayor and could not be disturbed. O'Malley decided to add a few more words for effect, "I want her on this line right now or I can assure you that you will be cleaning toilets in the lock-up this afternoon!" The message was loud and clear and in a few moments Chief of Detectives Marsha Carter was on the line.

"What's the big idea O'Malley? I've got the Mayor and the Chief in my office right now, we're going over that break we had today, the Johnson character. This had better be pretty damned important. My secretary says you threatened her job, and that's going too far in my book under any circumstances!" Carter was obviously angry at the interruption and at the threat to her assistant.

O'Malley tried to keep his voice even as he replied, "Carter" he said, and he NEVER called her by just her last name so the effect was immediate on the Chief of Detectives, "This case just broke wide open. As in this case is all but solved. I don't know who the killer is just yet, but I can tell you exactly when and where he will hit next!"

Carter was shocked, "What about Johnson? You find him?"

"No" replied O'Malley, "and when we do he will probably be dead. I think he's been dead for more than a year now. But forget about him, let me tell you what happened just a while ago in my office..." O'Malley proceeded to lay out the whole story for Carter. When he reached the end of the tale there was silence at the other end of the line for a few moments and the Chief of Detectives took it all in.

"Oh My GOD!" she exclaimed, "You're right, Jim, you've broken the case! Hang on, I want to get the Mayor and the Chief in here with me!"

Carter put O'Malley on the speakerphone and he could hear her calling to the two big shots who were obviously in a room next to her office. He also heard them both come in, and clearly heard the Mayor say "What the hell is going on Marsha? I want to know more about this Johnson scum and how you plan to get him!" Carter interrupted his honor's train of thought with "Forget about everything I just told you, we have broken the case!" With that Carter went into a full explanation of what O'Malley had told her and pointed to the phone, "Lt. James O'Malley is still on the other end of the line. Does anyone have any questions for him?" Police Supt. William "Bill" Jones was the first to speak. "Jim, good work! I'd sure like to get this guy in custody without having to wait until next month. Do you think that is possible?" O'Malley thought about that for only a second, "I think it is, Chief. I think we may be days away from an arrest now that we've put this piece of the puzzle into place. It gives us a whole new way to attack the case. Yes, Chief, Mr. Mayor, I think we WILL have this guy in custody before that time." The Mayor spoke next, "I'm holding you to that prediction, Lieutenant. They tell me you don't make such predictions easily so I'm confident you know what you're doing." With that Carter broke in, "Jim, we're going to let you get back to chasing down the bad guy. We've got some major planning to do here. And listen Jim, you call back with ANYTHING at ANY time. I'll let my assistant know to pass you through without hesitation. I'll also tell her if she

doesn't she really WILL be cleaning the toilets at the City Lock-Up this afternoon!" The last part was said with a clear smile in her voice and O'Malley knew he'd been forgiven.

Detective's Sorentino and Clancy had quietly come into the room as O'Malley began to explain the break in the case to Carter. As a result, they learned of the newest development at the same time as Carter and both had questions for the boss when he cradled the phone. Clancy went first, "So, it wasn't a phone number after all?" he asked, "I guess that means the people killed by this freak had the bad fortune of having the number in their phone number come up in the lottery, a kind of lottery of death, is that what you're thinking?"

O'Malley responded, "That's exactly what I'm thinking. Our killer took a look at the lottery numbers from the first Wednesday of the month and reversed them for some reason. When they spelled out a correct phone number he killed the person on the other end. I still can't figure out how he managed to get them alone each time, but that will come, once we catch the guy. And we WILL catch the guy. Just to make sure nothing goes wrong I'm ordering a stake-out on any home or apartment where the reverse of the Wednesday pick three and pick four numbers spell out a phone number until we get the guy."

Without missing a beat Mike Clancy continued, "You know Jim, Melissa Berlanti was killed on the first Wednesday of the month. And remember why that store was so crowded? A big jackpot in the lottery that night. And one other thing, the victim had stopped by the store to take a chance on the lottery. "

O'Malley looked surprised, but only for a moment, "How do you know about the lotto thing?" he asked.

"Because the victim's husband told me she had called him at home before she left work and told him she was going for that 48-million dollar jackpot. The lotto is the reason Melissa Berlanti stopped by that store. You might even say the lotto is the reason she is dead right now. Any other night and she would have gone right home from work."

Sorentino jumped in at this point, "I think we better see what we can do about rounding up Mr. Berlanti."

O'Malley agreed and cut his meeting short. "I'm going to call a judge I know, and I'm going to get a search warrant for the Berlanti home, you still have his address, I presume Clancy?" Clancy nodded affirmative and O'Malley continued, "Good! You and Sorentino take a couple of uniforms with you and go have a talk with Mr. Berlanti, and while you're there, go through his home with a magnifying glass. Let me know what you find. I don't fully understand it, but Berlanti has just become my number one suspect in this case. " O'Malley could tell by the looks on the faces of Sorentino and Clancy that they fully agreed with his suspicions.

"You'll have that warrant delivered BEFORE we enter the home, right?" came the question from Sorentino.

"You bet, Frank, I don't want you to so much as knock on the door before you get that warrant. We're not going to lose this case because we trampled on someone's rights" O'Malley turned toward his Rolodex to pull out a number. It was the number of the judge he'd just mentioned, one who was sure to give him the search warrant he needed. "Grab the uniforms and head out, this won't take long" he assured the two men.

Chapter Seventeen

Stan Berlanti awoke with a start. Melissa had come to him again in a dream and this time she warned him to get away as fast as he could. She told him again that it was a mistake to tell the

police about her murder and warned that he should move immediately or she would not be able to come back. "After all, my dear love," she had said, "I can not come back until you take care of ALL of those people who killed me. ALL of those people in the store when I was shot. None of them helped me, and ALL are guilty of my murder." Berlanti thought back to the first time Melissa had directed him to one of the supposedly 'innocent' witnesses to her murder. She was very clever about it! She had told him, through his dreams that she would give him the phone numbers of each of the killers in the pick three and pick four numbers on the first Wednesday of each month. The anniversary of her death. If he really wanted her back, if he really wanted to reverse what had happened to her he would start by reversing the numbers and using them to track those people down to kill them. It was very simple. When they were all dead, she assured him, she would be able to return and they would live happily ever after! Stan hated the killing, but he would not stop, COULD not stop until his beloved Melissa returned, as he knew she would. Melissa had assured him that she would track down the witnesses, find their numbers, and pass them on to him. When a number came up that didn't work it simply meant that Melissa was still on the trail. Berlanti knew from experience that she would find them all! After all, hadn't she already found seven of them?

But what of this latest dream? Berlanti thought, "Melissa says I should leave right away! She has never been wrong so I must be in danger!" He looked around the room trying to decide what he should take. "I think what I need now is a nice walk along the lake to think things through. THEN I'll know what to do." Berlanti got out of bed, dressed in his usual work clothes, and headed out the door being careful to lock it behind him. By the time he reached his car Detectives Clancy and Sorentino were less than a mile away with two squad cars and four uniformed officers in tow. By the time Berlanti reached Lakeshore drive the team of officers was outside his home. By the time Berlanti parked the car and started his walk along the lakefront the police team was inside his home.

"Will you take a look at this!" Clancy exclaimed, "It looks like some kind of shrine!" Sorentino walked into the bedroom area of the Wrigleyville home and immediately saw what Clancy was talking about. There, on the far wall of the room, was a small altar. Above it was a poster-sized image of Melissa Berlanti. Off to the sides of the poster were dozens of smaller pictures of the two Berlanti's in various poses. Here was a wedding picture, there was a picture of the two walking along the lake, and over there was a picture of Melissa holding what looked like a dozen roses. Outlining all of the pictures were the huge newspaper stories dealing with each of the seven murders attributed to the Telephone Killer. At the very top of it all was a tiny clipping from the paper reporting on the murder of Melissa Berlanti.

The detective's let their eyes fall to the makeshift altar where a small wooden box was displayed. Both men spotted it at the same time. "What do you think's inside" asked Sorentino. "One way to find out" said Clancy as he reached to open the box. As the lid fell back the sight of a snub-nosed pistol greeted both men. It looked like a .22 caliber and had been meticulously cleaned. Neither man touched the weapon, but Clancy turned to Sorentino and said, "I'm not a betting man, but I've got a thousand dollars says this is our murder weapon!" Sorentino responded, "I'm not a betting man either, but if I could find someone to take that action I'd double your bet!" Both detectives knew this was the kind of discovery Jim O'Malley would want to know about.

"Jim, you need to get down here with a crime lab team" The call was made by Sorentino. "I think we have our killer, but he's not home right now. He did, however, leave us a little toy. I think we have the murder weapon. "

Berlanti had made his decision. He would leave his home, but not the Chicago area, instead he would simply find a small apartment in the suburbs and continue watching the lotto numbers until Melissa returned, then both of them would leave the city, and the state for good. He reflected on the work he'd already done to make it possible for his beloved wife to come back. The first act of revenge had been the most difficult because he did not expect a fight. It had been easy to track the man down. All he had to do was call the phone number Melissa had given him. He claimed to be

a deliveryman who'd been given the wrong address. Berlanti reflected on the conversation. "Hello, my name is Todd Stevens" he lied, "I'm with American Parcel service and we have a delivery for your home, but somehow have the wrong address." Berlanti simply made up an address at this point and the woman at the other end of the line responded, "Oh no, that's definitely wrong, this is the Maryland residence and we live at." she continued by giving him not only the address, but also directions on how to reach the home. It had been child's play. Berlanti then asked if Mr. Maryland was home to which the woman replied, "No, he's still at the office. Is the package for him?" He replied that it was and promised to deliver it shortly adding that Mr. Maryland himself would have to sign for it. "You'd better not come today, then" was her response, "I don't expect him home until late tonight, he's working on a major court case right now." It always amazed Berlanti how much information people were willing to share without even knowing to whom they were speaking. He took a chance and asked, "Well, I think I can get it to him tomorrow, Wednesday, do you think that will work?" "Tomorrow would be fine, he'll be home all morning long" was the response. Berlanti always hoped to find a man at the other end of the numbers Melissa gave him, but knew there would have to be one or two women who were involved in her murder. Whenever he reached a home in which a man and a woman lived he knew instinctively that it was the man who would pay for Melissa's death. He thanked Mrs. Maryland for her time and hung up the phone. Using the information she had given him he drove to her address and watched the house to see where it was and to learn who lived there. By watching he learned that Jacob Maryland lived with his wife and two children. An elderly woman also lived in the home, perhaps a mother or a mother in law? It would be easy to make sure the children were away when Maryland met his fate, but making sure the two women were out of the house might be a trickier proposition. As it turned out in the case of Jacob Maryland the task proved simple. The next day, the second Wednesday of the month, he was outside of the Maryland home early and watched as the two women loaded the children into a car presumably to take them to school. As soon as they pulled out of the drive, he made his move. It had all be too simple, he thought as he walked to the front of the home and pressed the bell. "The rest" he said to himself, "Is history!" An evil grin was drawn across Stanley Berlanti's face as he thought of how he'd managed to overpower Jacob Maryland once he talked his way into his home, and how Maryland had very nearly gotten the upper hand and had managed to scratch his face pretty bad, but the .22 caliber weapon Berlanti pulled from his pants ended the struggle, and two shots to the head ended Maryland's life. It had taken all of two minutes to carry out the murder, and it was then that Berlanti got the idea of leaving behind some kind of connection to the murder of his wife. He thought immediately of the lotto numbers and walked into the victim's kitchen. There he found a knife and proceeded to carve the numbers into the man's chest. It wasn't until the stories started hitting the papers that he realized the reversed lottery numbers were being misinterpreted as phone numbers, but by that point it didn't matter. Melissa had told him she approved of this calling card as a way of telling the world these evil people had played a role in her murder. Of course he could never rip open a woman's blouse, but still it was important to leave those numbers so he would instead carve them into the forehead. Berlanti's twisted mind found nothing wrong with killing the women, but he didn't want police or anyone else to think he was a rapist or a sex fiend!

All of the other murders had gone much easier, and Berlanti had even started using the Internet to track his victims. He learned how to use reverse phone directories to locate homes, and how to use different search engines to learn about the potential victim. He would spend hours at the Harold Washington Library downtown tracking his victims via the Internet and generally had a well-rehearsed plan of action when he first met them face to face. He hated the killing, but had to admit that each job was easier than the one before. "Besides," he always told himself, "there will be an end to the killing, just as soon a Melissa returns." Berlanti looked at his watch and decided to return to his home one last time to collect the things he would need to carry on his important work.

Chapter Eighteen

“Viviano, get in here I need some help!” It was Jim O’Malley speaking, “I want you to know just how much I appreciate your little tip this afternoon on the Telephone Killer case, and I think I’ve come up with a way to show my appreciation.” Viviano was now doubly surprised. First he’d been shocked to hear the Lt. say he wanted help, and now to hear the guy say he wanted to reward him, this was too much! “Listen Lt., if it’s all the same to you, I just as soon stay at my desk as try to do the kind of work you dicks do day in and day out” was Viviano’s reply.

“No, Pete, I’m not about to make you a detective, shit, you’ve shown me plenty of times that it’s just not your bag. I just spoke with the watch commander, and you know we’ve put out a dragnet around Berlanti’s place. I want you back in a patrol car for this one.”

Viviano looked stunned, “Me? On Patrol again?” he asked.

“Let’s just call it a temporary reassignment for now, but the commander says he’s got no problem putting you in a two man unit for this search. What do you think? Are you up to it?”

“Up to it? Hell O’Malley, I’ve been ready to climb back in a cruiser since the day I got outta the hospital! It’s the brass won’t let me back on the street!” Viviano replied. “When, where do I go? Who’s my partner? What do ya want me to do??” The questions came pouring from Viviano. O’Malley responded “You’re teaming up with a guy named Price, he’s waiting for you right now, in the parking lot. He’ll fill you in on the search area and the other details you need. “

Viviano started toward the door, “I’m on it already, O’Malley, I know exactly what we’re doing. Price, eh? Would that be George Price from area one?” Viviano was halfway out the door when O’Malley answered “Yep, that’s the one, how do you know?” The last part of the statement was lost on Viviano as he exited the office and headed for the stairs. He knew George Price because he was a fellow officer. Pete Viviano knew a lot about police and about police work that he didn’t get credit for. He knew the names of almost every active officer on the street. He knew when they started on the job, and he knew where they were assigned. Viviano was lost at a desk, but out on the streets, where it really counted as far as he was concerned, he knew the score.

“Price?” Viviano asked as he approached the squad car in the parking lot, “Pete Viviano, I guess we’re teaming up for this one!” Viviano found it hard to contain the excitement in his voice. Officer George Price looked him over and responded.

“Pete Viviano, mind if I don’t bow down?” he said with sarcasm in his voice. Price was not at all pleased with this assignment. He’d gotten used to riding alone and did not want some lame has-been tailing along. He’d heard all the stories about Viviano and knew how he was all but idolized by some of the older street cops, but he wasn’t about to roll over, not even to a cop everyone said was a legend on the streets of the Windy City.

Viviano could read the disrespect all over his new partner’s face, “Look, Price we can do this one of two ways. The easy way or the hard way. I’m here to help you, but you gotta want that help. Let’s say we start by you getting out of that seat, I’m doing the driving!”

Price did not like this turn of events at all. “Hey, this is my car, I signed it out, and I’m driving” he protested. Viviano responded, “I got orders from the watch commander here to join this manhunt, and I also have about 10 years seniority on you. Now move over!”

Price could not argue with the point. Viviano was the senior officer, and he had been ordered to take up the assignment. Price grudgingly shifted to the passenger side of the cruiser.

“That’s much better” Viviano said as he slid behind the wheel. “We’re heading toward the lake, and then, you and I are going to do a little foot patrol.” The statement was very matter-of-fact. It wasn’t

quite an order, but Price knew from the tone in Viviano's voice that it was also a point that he would not be able to argue. "Why?" was all he could think to say.

"Half the department is covering the area around Berlanti's house right now, if he's in his car he's as good as gotten already. How many guys you think are out walking the streets looking for this jerk? Maybe five, six at most? If Berlanti hasn't been collared yet, it's because he's on foot. If he's on foot, then WE go on foot. We head to the lake because it's the most likely area for him to be walking at this time of day. We know he has his car with him, it wasn't anywhere to be found around his home. He's taken it somewhere else, and for my money we're going to find him somewhere around the North Avenue Beach. It's the closest major lakefront area to Wrigleyville, and happens to have a pretty nice park for walking and thinking. I'm pretty sure this guy's been doing a lot of thinking lately, so that's where we start our search."

Price was impressed. Everything Viviano said made sense, in fact it was almost too obvious and Price was a bit disappointed that he didn't see it much sooner. He was rapidly developing a new respect for Viviano's abilities as a street cop and was beginning to believe those stories the older cops told in the locker room. His thoughts were interrupted.

"You've been out here for 12 years Price, you should know how these guys think by now" Viviano cast his eyes toward his new partner, "what is it, eight department commendations, including one for heroism? Your personnel file must be two inches thick by now with all the good work you've on these streets." Again Price was impressed. How could Viviano know so much about him? As far as Price could remember, the two had never met.

"How do you know so much about me?" came the question. Viviano grinned, "It's my job to know about you and every other man and woman out here. You think I enjoy being cooped up in that office? You don't know how good it is to be back on the streets. THIS is where the real police work is done, my friend. I make it a point to know everything I can about every officer out here. I always have, and I suppose I always will." They drove past another squad car, "Look there" Viviano said, "That's shop number 2396, Malone and Carpenter are assigned to that one. Shit, they're up here from area four! That tells you how many squads are looking for this Berlanti character!"

Price was again surprised by his new partner's grasp of departmental affairs. "How do you know 2396 is assigned to Malone and Carpenter?" he asked.

"It's like I told you before, Price, I make it my job to know these things about my fellow officers. Take Malone, for example, 16 years on the job and a super athlete. I'll bet he's the one behind the wheel. The guy has 14 commendations in his file. Carpenter's been on the streets for only 7 years, but he comes from a long line of cops. A good man. His wife is also a cop and works homicide in area four, it must be hell on the marriage!" Viviano smiled as he continued north on Lake Shore Drive toward North Avenue Beach. "What say we stop the chit-chat and go catch us a killer?" he asked.

Price nodded in the affirmative as the squad turned into the North Avenue Beach parking lot. "Yeah, partner, let's go get that bastard!"

Chapter Nineteen

"We have officers stationed around Wrigleyville with descriptions of the suspect and of the suspect's car. As soon as he enters this area, we'll have him." The voice was that of Captain Otis Jessup, the head of homicide. He was speaking to Chief of Detectives Marsha Carter as the two stood in the bedroom of the Berlanti home. The crime lab boys had already been through the room and the suspect weapon was now undergoing tests to determine whether it was, in fact, the murder weapon. No one really had any doubt, but there is a big difference in court between a strong suspicion and

absolute proof. Carter began to speak, "Otis, I want this guy. Alive, if at all possible, but I want this guy. The Superintendent is on the way over and the mayor is waiting for my call as soon as we take Berlanti into custody one way or the other. There have already been a few leaks to the media, but nothing we can't contain, but I'm afraid this is all going to blow up in just a few hours. We won't be able to hold the story much longer. I just spoke with Dave Roe over at WBBM and he knows everything, but has agreed to hold the story until I tell him Berlanti is in custody."

Captain Jessup knew the name. Roe usually worked as one of the afternoon drive anchors at the all news station, but had come up through the ranks as a reporter and worked the police beat for several years before moving into the anchor desk. Apparently one of his sources had leaked some pretty vital information.

"Thank God he's got the balls to hold something this big," said Jessup, "Otherwise Berlanti might be tipped to the trap we've put in place. Hell, every radio in this house is tuned to Roe's station!"

Lieutenant James O'Malley entered the conversation at this point, "Captain? Chief? We just got word from one of the boys on the street. Berlanti is in custody!" The two top cops looked surprised, "How? Where?" they said in unison. "Over at North Avenue Beach, a couple of our boys spotted him walking around. And guess what? It was Pete Viviano that made the collar!"

Jessup knew who Viviano was, but Carter did not. "Who sent Pete back onto the streets? I thought he was confined to a desk for the duration?"

"I did" replied O'Malley. "I knew we were closing in and I figured it was the least I could do for the cop who busted this thing wide open. All it took was a word to the watch commander and I was able to match Viviano up with an able bodied partner. I never dreamed he'd make the actual collar, but I'm sure glad it turned out that way! We both know what a bumble head Pete is at headquarters, but from what I hear Viviano is everything on the street that he isn't in the house." His partner told the commander this was Viviano's collar from the word go. "It was almost as if he KNEW exactly where our suspect would be!" O'Malley was impressed, and it was evident by the tone of his voice that he'd developed a tremendous respect for the little cop he once thought of as a nuisance. "I guess Viviano is in for another commendation. You two might not know this, but he already has 40 in his file. I know because I checked his records before I asked that he be put back on the street for this search. And to think I once thought that officer Viviano was a loser! The guy just might be the best cop this city has!"

Carter's cell phone rang at that point, interrupting the conversation. She answered it, spoke for a few moments, and then put it away. "It's a grand slam boys. That was the lab. The gun is definitely the murder weapon. We only have a few details to iron out, but we have more than enough to put a lid on this case! I'm going to call the Mayor first, and then give Roe a call at the radio station to let him know he can run with the story." With that Carter dismissed herself and walked away from the two detectives. Jessup spoke first, "You know, Jim, this has been one hell of a ride, and to think it all came down to lottery numbers! I still find that hard to believe! Looking back it seems so obvious now but I guess it's true, sometimes you can't see the forest for the trees." O'Malley looked around the room, "I'd like to think we would have caught on a lot sooner if the numbers hadn't been reversed. I wonder why he did that? Maybe Berlanti wanted us to interpret them as phone numbers to keep us off the trail. If he did, it sure worked because it threw everyone off track for a year." The Chief of Detectives already mentioned the loose ends, "One of the ends I want to tie up is the fate of Floyd Johnson. I think we're going to find that Mr. Berlanti is responsible for eight murders, not just seven. But there is time to sort all of that out later, for now I want to have the task force stand down." Jessup nodded, "You do that, lieutenant, and tell them I said 'well done'."

Epilogue: 5 Years later

“Soon my love, very, very soon now” Berlanti smiled as he listened again to the voice of his beloved Melissa. “I promised you we would be together again, and the day is at hand!” Berlanti awoke for his brief nap with a start, and a smile. It had been five, almost six years since he’d been tracked down by the cops. He was not the least bit sorry or ashamed because he knew the grand plan was still on, even with him behind bars and soon to die.

Despite the best efforts of his court-appointed attorneys Berlanti had been sentenced to death by lethal injection for the cold-blooded murders of eight people. He had even confessed to Detective Mike Clancy about the first of the murders, the stabbing death of the man who took his Melissa away from him. Berlanti was more than happy to lead Clancy and a team of officers to the very spot where he’d buried Floyd Johnson’s body, and drew some grim amusement from the fact that the entire body was never recovered. Animals in the forest preserve had dug up the corpse and dragged parts of it across the area. The police had managed to find about 75 per cent of the skeletal remains, more than enough for a positive identification. Berlanti explained that he had been told the only way to reverse what had happened to his beloved Melissa was to kill everyone responsible. It was Melissa who told him how to do it and how to reverse those lottery numbers to learn where the culprits lived. Melissa had never been wrong, so he did what he had to do to get her back!

Berlanti had ordered that no appeals be made to his sentence, and had to fight in court to force his attorneys to drop their plans to appeal his conviction based on his mental state. The fight had taken five years and now he was literally minutes away from death. He sat up in his cell and listened for the sound of the executioners’ foot steps. With each step his excitement grew as he was more than ready to die, he actually looked forward to it. At long last he finally understood every detail of Melissa’s plan to bring them back together! Once again she was proven right! When he’d refused to order a last meal his captors naturally thought it was due to fear, but they were so wrong! Berlanti was too excited to eat, for he knew that his long wait was about to end. He and Melissa were soon to be reunited!

The doors opened to his cell, and Berlanti looked up to see a small contingent of guards ready to escort him to the death chamber.

“About time you guys showed up” he said, “I thought for a minute you would be late, or some lame civil libertarian had managed to wrangle me a stay of execution!” The officers sent to escort the prisoner just looked at each other in disbelief.

Berlanti rose and allowed the men to place him in handcuffs and ankle chains and then anxiously shuffled down the hall to the execution room. The anticipation continued to grow and his heart began to pound faster, faster, harder, harder with each step. He hardly listened as the death warrant was read to him, and climbed onto the execution gurney before being asked. His arm was tied down and an IV was inserted into his veins. He looked around the room and could see a small group of people watching from behind a glass wall. He knew these were the families of some of his victims and he spoke out to them.

“I am sorry for your loss, but I had to avenge my loss. You now must suffer the way I have suffered. My suffering is about to end, and maybe my passing will help to ease your suffering!”

He said nothing more as the first of three drugs he would be given began to send him into a deep sleep. In the distance and just before the great darkness descended on him Stanley Berlanti could hear the words he’d waited for....

“I’m here, Stanley. Come to me...”