

## 17 Dominos

While he continued to run the surveillance DVD on his laptop, his cell phone rang to the tune of "*What a Wonderful World.*"

"Johnson?" It was Ralph Simmons of the Royal Bahamas Police Force.

But before Simmons could continue, Johnson interjected, "Did you know Abigail Spencer was a lesbian?"

"Why should I care?"

"Because maybe she was in the love nest with her girlfriend instead of with Whitte."

There was a pause. "How do you know that?"

"I spoke to the lover," Johnson explained.

"So. Whitte's guilty as hell. She made up the story," concluded Simmons.

"If you had questioned the girls traveling with her you would have found this out."

"You're trying to cover your ass, Johnson. You let the girl get murdered."

Johnson didn't respond. Really, what response could he have offered?

"Look, none of this changes anything. Scotland Yard will say there is enough evidence and that's all I need. I'm picking him up midmorning tomorrow."

"Have you looked at the surveillance video yet?"

"No, but I plan on doing so. Have you?"

Johnson watched three black and white figures entering the main elevator bank:

Abigail, Whitte, and a third man wearing dark khaki pants, a black shirt and navy sports coat. It was 1:26 a.m. The man was stocky, like a linebacker, and his hair was close-cropped—military style, Johnson observed—but Whitte was his primary focus; the man couldn't stand up. The linebacker was almost carrying Whitte, who was a good four inches taller than the linebacker, while the three struggled to enter the elevator and then the door drew closed.

“No,” lied Johnson, “I haven't seen the videos. You told me I couldn't be part of this.”

The images in front of the elevator bank were flying by now until... He stopped and reversed it, slowly. Slowly. There.

“That's true,” Simmons said, “so I don't know why you were talking to the friends.”

“I've got every right to question fellow Texans.” Johnson thought for a moment, and then said, “I think you need to be careful with Whitte; this thing isn't dead in the water, you know?”

It was now at 2:00 a.m. on the video. Johnson continually forwarded and reversed the image slowly until he could be absolutely sure. Three people emerged from the elevator. The last was his island lover, Melody. *What time did she get the call on her cell phone?* 1:15, he remembered, and she left his room immediately, claiming a friend of hers was sick.

“I don't know what *dead in the water* means,” Simmons said in a less serious tone than before. “I want Whitte alive so we can prove our beaches are safe and when we have murders, it's Americans who do them.”

“That’s all you’re worried about?” asked Johnson, distracted by the video.

All three women were carrying various types of luggage. The first woman that emerged was squatty and plump with strawberry blond hair and a pair of glasses perched upon her nose. She had a medium-sized duffel bag slung over her shoulder and carried a metal briefcase in her left hand that might have held a sniper’s rifle or the codes for a nuclear missile launch for all he knew.

“That’s all my boss is worried about and so it’s all I’m worried about. Johnson, I think it’s time for you to go back home. Nassau can get very dangerous to people who overstay their welcome.”

“Are you threatening me?” Johnson laughed, his attention from the video momentarily interrupted, “I thought you said your country was safe.”

The second was a brown-haired girl, medium height, wearing a baseball cap, jeans, a loosely fitting white shirt and sunglasses. *At two in the morning?* She had a knapsack slung over her shoulder and as she emerged from the elevator, she began adjusting her baseball cap with her left hand, just enough so that he couldn’t see her face; she knew where the surveillance camera was.

Simmons chuckled. “Johnson, I don’t have problems with you. I like you and yes, you’re right. There is something very strange with this case but it was conveyed to me that you’re sticking your pecker where it didn’t need to be and so, for your own sake, leave.”

As Melody had exited, she paused and looked both ways, like she was about to cross the street, and then she followed the others. All three women turned to the right, toward the front lobby and the cabstand. She was bringing up the rear in what appeared to

be a fire drill, an undercover retreat designed to protect the infiltrators.

“Simmons, you don’t have to worry about me. I’m a big boy.”

Johnson fast-forwarded and two more groups of people whizzed by and then the elevator doors opened and, at 2:45, a couple stepped off and turned to the left. He stopped the video and slowly reversed the image and then forward. Then back. Then forward. The man was the same one who had helped Whitte into the elevator at 1:26. He loosely held the arm of a girl wearing men’s flannel boxers, a tee shirt, and over-sized child’s slippers with a cartoon character’s head adorning the top. He reversed it slowly and then forward... Whoa! He wished he could zoom in but it didn’t really matter because it was her, no doubt about it.

“Ralph? Why was the body moved at 6:30 this morning?”

“Papas, the GM, demanded it be moved so guests wouldn’t see it.”

“It was a fucking crime scene, man!” Johnson was skeptical. “Did you physically examine Abigail Spencer’s body?”

There was a pause and then the line went dead. Johnson thought about calling him back but it didn’t matter. He was going in a completely different direction from where the Bahamian cops were headed and he just didn’t have the time to bother with them.

Entry into Sin City from the air is a tale of man’s assent from nature. First the plane floats over the Grand Canyon—God’s most impressive creation—then over Lake Mead and Hoover Dam—a melding of man’s creation with that of God—and then the glitzy Strip

—one hundred percent man at his most arrogant.

Melody Williams was tired. The hurried evacuation from the field had left them all confused and exhausted. *What went gone wrong?* The wait at the Miami airport for her flight and then the grueling five-hours until the plane began its descent gave her more than enough time to replay the facts, as she knew them. The operation had gone smoothly. It was simple blackmail—get pictures and leave. Sure, the Ranger had gummed it up some but that's why she was there—to run interference. Then Mark Bennetti ordered the fire drill. As were standard operating procedures, none of the three girls spoke about the operation—debrief protocol demanded it—and what apparently had gone wrong.

As the plane dipped into McCarran, dragging with it the sun, she decided to forget everything for the rest of the day and concentrate on clearing her mind. They would all be debriefed in the morning via encrypted videoconference but none of the three knew if that would happen; Melody had never been on an operation that had gone sour before but now she was home and she was in safe harbor.

She retrieved her car from long-term parking and drove to her condominium off West Charleston where she threw her bags down on her bed and immediately went into the bathroom to wash her face. She felt gritty from the travel and sticky from the humidity of the tropics; to suddenly be thrust into the dry oven of the desert left her skin feeling like it would peel away from her skull at any moment. She washed the soap from her face. There were crow's feet around her eyes and even a hint of gray at her temples. Her mother had grayed prematurely but it was easily masked in her blond hair. Melody had dark hair, from her father, and so the gray was more discernable but even with dyes, the lines were still

there. She wouldn't be able to play the role of a young professional or sophisticate artist anymore but maybe that would be a blessing. She had already begun studying economics, politics, and business so she could begin accepting more engaging roles. It wouldn't be as exciting but then again it was still a well-paying job.

She changed into spandex shorts, her climbing shoes, and sports bra. She then drove to Red Rock Canyon where she could get in a moderate climb before it became too dark. Afterward, she'd return home, shower, eat something, watch some mind-numbing shit on TV, and then crash.

She parked at the base of a giant cliff. It was dry and the oxygen seemed to be fleeting as she took in a deep breath trying to re-acclimate her body to the desert. A small, green Toyota Camry drove in behind her and parked beside her Cadillac Escalade. There were plenty of open spaces so her first thought was of alarm. A short Asian man emerged. Sure, she was five-foot ten and most men appeared short to her but this man was definitely a gnat and disarming. He flicked his thick long hair out of his eyes and smiled at her.

"You climb today?" he asked her.

"Yeah, nothing too strenuous, just a short workout. Are you going to climb?" she asked him as if speaking with a five-year-old.

He shook his head and laughed. Responding in broken English he explained that he was just out for the afternoon, taking time away from his tour group. He asked her if there was a trail he could walk and she allowed him to follow her into the canyon. When they turned a bend, she pointed him into the direction of a trailhead that would wind its way around to the back of the cliff she was climbing. It was the easy way up.

“Maybe I see you up there?” he asked.

She laughed, “Yeah, maybe you will.”

The little man, dressed in shorts and a touristy tee shirt, disappeared behind a rock as she instantly forgot about him and looked up to the fifty-foot cliff she would scale.

What made Red Rock Canyon and the surrounding canyons alluring to visitors is the alien landscape. Much like Death Valley, a visitor can look in any direction and feel the loneliness of Mars. The rock formations are so varied that jagged, sharp and dangerous cliffs hang next to smooth, well-worn rock formations the size of three-story office buildings. With the multi-colors of red, gray, and brown, the formations appear to be the product of giant children in a wet sandbox. The particular cliff in front of her—inside Icebox Canyon—had both extremes and when she needed a break, she could traverse the cliff face to reach smooth rock where she could rest or continue the climb in relative ease until she was ready to move back to the sharp rock cliff. She traversed several times before coming close to the top, deciding to finish the climb among the jagged edges. With about eight feet above her to the ridge, a few loose rocks sprinkled down from above. Grit infiltrated her eyes and she struggled to keep her grip and fight the urge to wipe away the dirt.

She squinted and the Asian’s head was perched above with a smile.

“Ha, I make it before you,” he said with a grin.

“Hey, guy. That’s not cool. You got shit in my eyes. Back off.”

The man stood and moved closer to the rim of the cliff. Melody Williams could see he was clutching a football-sized rock. *Oh, God*, she thought. It was her last thought as the

man dropped the rock on her.

“Hey, catch,” he said smiling.

He watched as her body bounced off protruding formations before a free fall the final twenty feet. It was easier than expected; he hadn't had to stage a mock break-in/robbery gone bad, though he still had to retrieve the black box from her apartment.

After what seemed like five minutes though in reality five hours, the phone next to Whitte's bed rang and he jumped straight up. It was dark outside and he took a second to remember whom he was, where he was, and let his eyes adjust to the darkness.

“Hello,” he said firmly.

“Mr. Whitte?” It was Inara.

“Yep.”

“If you look in the closet there are some clothes I want you to change into. In the closet you will also discover that we have retrieved your knapsack from your hotel room with your personal effects. It is now ten-thirty. At eleven, I want you to call down for room service.”

Whitte had already found his knapsack. “Am I supposed to order anything in particular?”

“No, just some food. Whatever you would like to eat. When the room service attendant arrives, he will give you a key. Eat your meal for it might be the last for a while. Wait thirty minutes after you have eaten and then walk to the end of the hall where the



vending machines are. In that room will be a service door. Unlock it with the key and walk down two flights until you arrive at a door on the left. Use the key again and go into the laundry room. There, you will be met by my associates.”

“How will I know I can trust whomever is down there?”

“You can’t possibly know who to trust, Mr. Whitte, so why are you worrying about that now?”

The line went dead.

In the closet was a pair of loose fitting cotton pants, a matching white shirt, a Panama-style hat, and a pair of loafers. He changed into the clothing, feeling a bit like a Latin gigolo.

Out in the bay, just in front of the property, a cruise ship was turning in the basin, preparing to go to sea. Whitte opened the balcony door and smelled the warm sea air. *How the hell did I get into this shit?*

At eleven o’clock he called room service and ordered a cheeseburger, vanilla malt, and fries. Thirty minutes later, room service knocked. The bellboy was young, maybe eighteen, and bore no expression as he silently set the tray on the small dining table next to the balcony. Whitte signed the ticket, giving the kid a one hundred percent tip courtesy of Inara, and closed the door. He removed the serving cover and there, on top of the cheeseburger, was a key. He quickly ate the burger and fries and downed the malt.

When another thirty minutes had expired, he grabbed his knapsack, and opened the door and looked both ways down the hall. Not a soul. He walked to the vending machines, unlocked the door and climbed down the steep staircase. As each step pulled him further

down, a fog began to settle over his mind and limbs. Even though it was dimly lit, he thought he should have been able to see better than he was. He stopped and rubbed his eyes and then he felt faint. He grabbed the railing and allowed it to guide him down to the next floor and then to the door on the left. He unlocked the door and inside was a large rectangular room with a bank of washers on the left and dryers on the right. The bellboy and a rather powerful looking man who stood beside a large laundry bin met him.

“This is Mr. Whitte,” the boy announced to the man standing next to him.

The man wheeled the bin closer to Whitte who was now beginning to sway.

“You drugged me,” Whitte slurred.

“It is for your own protection,” the man replied.

“And thank you for the large tip, Mr. Whitte,” said the bellboy with a grin.

Then, it was lights out for Jack Whitte.

Audrey Peterson rubbed her eyes in the darkness that was broken only by a computer screen. She uploaded the encrypted photos to the Office’s server and now she realized she was tired, hungry and still disturbed by what had happened in The Bahamas. She was only tech support and never saw the stepdaughter but when she retrieved the coded message from the Office just before she uploaded the pictures she had a momentary hesitation. *Was this right?* She had never been on an assignment where people were actually killed.

The girl was a sacrifice. Regrettable, she decided, but necessary in the war on terror.

The pictures that Audrey had taken would be damning once released to the media. There were pictures of the prick being kissed by the girl in the bar. A telescopic shot of the two in compromising positions on the sand bar. Then the *coup de gras*: Whitte grinding his crotch into the girl's thigh on the dance floor. His face would be all over the world by the next night. It would be sensational: *Texas millionaire playboy kills Governor's stepdaughter!* And once the Office released her pictures, probably sometime next week, the shit would definitely hit the fan. And she couldn't wait. She had no idea who Jack Whitte was. He was a target and she nothing more than a trained sniper though her weapon was a digital camera.

Eleven of her co-workers had been at Ground Zero, including Nikolai her fiancé. She was supposed to have been number twelve but 9-11 came when she was in Vermont, helping her mother after back surgery. Her heart tore predictably; she screamed and threw herself to the carpet and curled up in a ball when she saw her dreams die in the Twin Towers. New York was a transitory reality where she was going to college and working but now, more than a decade later, it was her town, her nesting ground to protect and defend. She became a part of the legions of citizen soldiers who swore to make every single one of those bastards pay for what they had done.

She knew she really didn't work for the U.S. Department of Commerce—like those people knew anything about fighting. The Office of International Cooperation was a front for some other agency, she knew that, but again, she wasn't stupid enough to ask questions. The less she knew the better. She had been hired out of NYU because of her technical proficiencies and the hole in her heart. She was told it would be entry level, of sorts, into the real world of spy-dom: the CIA. It didn't bother her that the CIA wasn't

supposed to be working domestically. Why would it?

But now Audrey was faced with something more pressing—stomach-groaning hunger. She considered ordering a pizza but what she craved was beef. She wanted a good old-fashioned greasy cheeseburger with equally greasy fries and the only place she could get that was Tony's Deli just down the street. *Damn*, she thought as she looked at her watch; he stopped delivering after eleven. She reconsidered pizza but no, a burger was definitely what was called for, especially since she hadn't had one since she was moved into her assignment. Sure, she was watching her weight—not always successfully—but damn it she should be celebrating. Another son of a bitch taken down! She slipped on a pair of flip-flops and descended the three flights of stairs and emerged into an alley. She took the shortcut behind the trash Dumpster and down the damp, smelly back street.

Tony was a skinny runt of a man, probably not much older than her father. He looked like he never bathed and only shaved occasionally. It didn't matter; his burgers and fries were the best she'd ever had and after a ten-minute wait, she was heading back to her apartment.

She never saw him just before she joined Nikolia. He had stood in the shadows and when she walked around the Dumpster he planted a silenced round in the back of her head; a .22 so as not to cause much mess. He caught her before she lifelessly hit the ground and then pushed his fingers into her pocket and found her keys. He easily lifted her into the Dumpster and then took two full garbage bags he had fished out earlier and placed them over her body. He had heard no sounds as he crouched back into the shadows. There had been no witnesses. He walked up the three flights to her apartment where he found the

connection to the cable and removed the black box with no difficulty. Then he took the shell off her computer and removed the hard disk, replacing it with one he had brought with him and with that, he slipped back into the shadows, his job complete.