

Chapter 13

Dick Randall's West Seattle home was a faux Mediterranean Villa. With light colored stucco walls and red tile roof, it would have been at home in Southern California. On a West Seattle hill side, it looked a little ridiculous to Catrina.

She pulled into the driveway and checked her watch. She was running a little late. No problem. Karen was the client. She would be there waiting.

Catrina pressed the door bell and waited. She immediately heard the yapping of small dogs.

"Chico, Tina, get back." Catrina heard Karen's high-pitched squeaky Minnie Mouse voice through the door.

Karen Randall opened the door.

"Catrina, come in." Karen was decked out in a short navy skirt and white cashmere sweater. She certainly had no problem showing a little leg. She held the two Chihuahuas back with her foot.

"Hi, Karen. Is your brother here?"

"Yes, Danny's waiting for us on the deck."

Karen led Catrina through the living room towards the French doors. The house had that open concept look where the living room, dining room and kitchen were all one big open area. A long island with six bar stools separated the kitchen from the dining room. A large open arched doorway with grape vines stenciled above it led from the living room to the dining room.

Karen walked through the dining room and pulled the door open, standing aside for Catrina to exit first.

It was one of those nice, cool September days. Puffy white clouds filled the horizon with a deep blue sky overhead.

Dan Anderson got up from his Adirondack chair when the women walked through the French doors onto the deck.

“Dan Anderson.” He held out his hand to Catrina.

He was slightly taller than Catrina. With her three inch heels, that would put him a scosche over six feet. He was thin, with a little round pot belly and had sandy colored blond hair. He shared his sister’s blue eyes.

All-in-all not a bad looking man. Karen’s family must have a pretty good gene pool.

He had a cool, firm handshake. “I’m Catrina Flaherty, Mr. Anderson.”

“No, no. Call me Dan. Everyone does.”

“Okay, Dan. Pleased to meet you.”

Catrina looked out at the view. This house must have cost a pretty penny. From the deck, she looked across Alakai Beach to the Sound and Vashon Island beyond. Vistas like this were expensive.

“Dan, I need to ask you a few questions.”

“Go right ahead.” He pulled out a green cast iron chair from around the large, oval cast iron table with a glass top. “Please, sit down.”

Catrina sat and pulled a notepad out of her bag. Anderson and Karen sat at the table opposite her.

“Can I get you anything?” Karen asked.

“No thanks. Dan, you had business dealings with Dick?”

“Yes. I’m an accountant. Anderson Associates.” He pulled his wallet from his hip pocket and produced a business card, which he handed to Catrina. “Dick was one of my clients.”

“Was?”

“It’s pretty obvious, isn’t it? He’s gone.”

“So, how was his business doing?” Catrina asked.

“Hell if I know. You don’t have any secrets from your accountant. We’re kind of like d-d-doctors that way. But I’ll be damned if I can figure out how Dick ran his business.”

“Oh?”

“Well, he had a great cash flow. As a matter of fact, I often wondered where all the money was coming from. I had a hard time believing that a bunch of barista stands could produce that kind of income.”

“How much income?”

“We’re talking in seven figures. But here’s the rub, he was always in debt. Always behind on his payments. I don’t know where the money went.”

Catrina was scribbling furiously on her notepad. “Do you have any ideas? Any wild guesses?”

“Skimming.” Anderson looked out over the Sound and swallowed. “I suspected that he was skimming. You know, not reporting all of his income. It was a cash business. I thought that maybe he only rang up a portion of his sales so he d-d-didn’t have to report them to the IRS. You know, to keep from having to pay taxes.”

Catrina stopped writing and looked in Anderson’s eyes. “If he was skimming. If he was hiding money, how come he was always in debt? How come his house was being repossessed?”

“Damned if I know. He had the money. I don’t know where it went, but I always had a fear in the back of my mind.”

“A fear?”

“Yeah, a nagging doubt. I wondered. Could he be laundering money? You know, like for the mob?”

“Wow!” Katrina looked at Karen. Karen sat without any show of emotion. She must have heard this already. “That’s pretty dangerous stuff.”

“Okay.” Anderson leaned forward in his chair. “I’m going to tell you what I think happened to him.”

“Um-hm.” Catrina nodded.

“I think he was laundering money. I think he was skimming off the mob money and stashing it somewhere. He took several trips to Puerto Rico. I wouldn’t be surprised to find that he stashed it there. You know, to get ready for his big get away. But I think the mob caught up to him. I don’t think he ever had a chance to get away. I think the mob iced him.”

George St. John had a good life. After years of slaving away for one high-tech company after another, he had finally hit the jack pot.

The sons-a-bitches he worked for never appreciated him, never acknowledged his genius. Well, he had shown them. The best revenge is to live well. Who said that? Voltaire? Whoever, George was committed to exacting his revenge.

He lounged back on the deck chair on the lanai of his Fort Meyers Beach, Florida, condo and inhaled the day. And it all started out so simply.

Jean had dumped him. Found another guy. The slut was sleeping with this other dude, even when they were living together. He was no fool. He had proof.

He set up a nanny cam in their bedroom. He had hours of footage of her humping the bastard. Some kind of personal trainer. Hard-bodied ass hole.

She told George that she was going to the gym. Always working out. Bull shit. She was working out all right. On top of that jerk.

Well, he showed her. He hadn't spent twenty years designing and building web sites for nothing. It all started out with his desire to get back at her. That's why he named the site revenge.com.

He posted his videos. Let the world see what a cheating whore she really was. But you know what? It was popular. In no time, he had other guys asking how they could post their pictures of their exes.

Nine ninety five. That's all it cost. For less than ten bucks, he'd post pictures and videos from other guys who'd been jilted. The money started rolling in. He had thousands of accounts.

Then the advertising. As the popularity of his site grew, he charged more and more for an ad on his pages. Before long, he was moving from Salt Lake City to sunny Florida.

One thing led to another. If he could make bucks off if his revenge site, think what he could do with pure porn. Mega-bucks. He found pictures and videos of every perversion known to man, then some. He now had ten different porno sites dedicated to specific interests. Everything from kiddie porn to animalism. The bucks kept rolling in.

Of course, working on the fringes of society like this, George had to take precautionary measures. When he first started dabbling with the kiddie porn, his most lucrative site, he knew he had to get out of the US. He moved his web sites to a server farm in Thailand.

The government of Thailand didn't give a fat rat's ass what he did on the Internet. As a matter of fact, the damned fools probably couldn't even spell Internet.

But he was safe. As long as his servers were off-shore, the government couldn't touch him. He was careful not to store any questionable materials on his home computer and when the FBI served a search warrant, they hadn't been able to charge him with anything.

So life was good.

Until this morning.

It started with a single email. A client wrote to complain that the pictures of his ex were gone. What happened to them?

Before George could investigate, another email came in. Same complaint. Then another. In a matter of minutes, they were coming in by the hundreds. What had happened to his site?

He logged on, and, to his horror, he found . . . nothing. No files, no web pages, no nothing. It was all gone. When he entered his URL and hit enter, he just got a video of a wagging finger and a wav file saying “uh uh uh.”

What was happening?

He searched the directories on his servers. All gone. There was only one file. A jpeg file.

How could this happen to him?

He clicked on the jpeg.

An image of Spiderman’s mask filled his screen. Underneath the mask were the words “Don’t mess around with Spidey.”

Orcas Island is the largest of the San Juan Archipelago nestled along the Canadian Border in Northwest Washington, so named because the island’s shape resembles a killer whale leaping out of the water.

Clayton Johnson-White liked Orcas Island. It had that detached, slow-time-down island feel of his home town of Camano Island, but it also had more of a tourist vibe. There was always stuff going on.

And stuff going on cost money. Something that Clayton didn’t have. On Camano, he could have stolen something, then he knew who would fence it for him. Here on Orcas, he didn’t know anyone. He needed another source of cash.

And there it was, the Orcas General Store. It was like an ATM, just waiting for him to make a withdrawal. The place was busy all day. People dropping in for groceries, camping supplies, an ice cream cone or a sandwich. They had to have cash hidden somewhere in that store. A little mom and pop operation like that probably didn't have a big safe, they hid their receipts somewhere when they closed, then took them to the bank the next day.

Clayton was no one's fool. He staked the store out for three days. Each day, they had the same routine. The owner showed up at 8 am. By 9 he unlocked the door and turned the "closed" sign around to "Open." People flowed in and out all day. At 9 pm sharp, the owner turned the sign around again and locked the door. By 9:30, he walked two blocks to his home. He didn't stop by the bank with a night drop on the way. The money must still be in the store.

Clayton thought long and hard about his break in. He ruled out robbing the store during the day. There was too much risk that someone could get hurt. He didn't want to hurt anyone; he just needed a cash infusion. Besides, if he robbed the store during the day, someone would see him.

He wasn't too concerned about being seen, he was so much smarter than these Barney Fife cops they'd never catch him. But if he did end up in court, he didn't want to have any eye witnesses to finger him on the stand.

So he waited. He spent his days in the house outside of West Sound, the island's principal town, watching TV and reading. The computer in the house had Microsoft Flight Simulator and he spent endless hours soaring over the countryside.

After midnight, it was his time to prowl. *The night belongs to me.* He borrowed a bicycle stored in the house's garage and wheeled into town. He parked the bike a block or so from the general store. Picking the lock was child's play. These trusting fools didn't even have an alarm system.

But why should they? Crime was virtually unknown in the San Juans. Everyone knew everyone else. If someone lost something and someone else showed up with it, everyone would know.

But they hadn't reckoned with the Fly Away Bandit. That's what the newspapers were calling him, after he left the picture on the wall at the Camano Island house. He kinda liked it. It made him sound infamous. The Fly Away Bandit. He could have done a lot worse.

He pulled the small mag light from his hip pocket and began to search the store. There was nothing in the cash register. Nothing in the drawers. Where would the owner have stashed the cash? He pulled items from the shelves and looked behind them. No good. Where oh where?

He absent mindedly grabbed a hand full of peanuts from the oak barrel in the center of the room. *Huh?* A peanut barrel? Naw, that would be too easy.

He reached down into the peanuts. He moved his arm around until his hand touched something smooth. Definitely not a peanut. He pulled out the blue zipper bank bag. SCORE!

The bag was slightly heavy. He could feel the coins shifting around. He unzipped the bag and, there is a God, he found over two hundred dollars of folding money. He had hit a home run. He stuffed the money in his jeans pocket.

The hard part of the job done, he proceeded to go shopping. He grabbed a six-pack and a couple of frozen pizzas. Some apples and a couple of bags of chips were about all he could carry in his back pack.

He had what he needed, but he wasn't quite done yet. He pulled the box of colored chalk from his jacket pocket and began his artwork. This time, his Dr. Seussian bird was on the floor, the only empty space large enough to draw on. He finished his art project with the caption, "Catch me if you can."

The next evening, he made the six o'clock news. Burglary was so unusual in the Islands that the big city TV stations were covering it. The Fly Away Bandit had struck again.

"We will not tolerate this kind of lawlessness in San Juan County," the pudgy sheriff was saying on TV. "I want the citizens to know that this will be our top priority. We will find Mr. Johnson-White and bring him to justice."

Like hell. Catch me if you can.

Clayton turned on his police scanner. It was alive with calls. Every deputy in the islands was called in to search every empty vacation home on Orcas.

Holly crap! You'd think he'd murdered a family and hung them up in the town square. What did he do to deserve this? He'd never had this kind of reaction back home on Camano.

Okay, how to make his Great Escape? And where to go?

When the deputy sheriff pulled into the driveway, Clayton had already vacated the premises. He watched as the deputy checked the doors and shone his flashlight through the windows. Nothing seemed out of place. He couldn't see the Fly Away bird on the bedroom wall. The owners would find it when they came back in the summer. He also left them a little note thanking them for their hospitality.

The airstrip on Orcas Island was just that. An uncontrolled runway with a few planes tied down at one end. There were a few hangars, but Clayton didn't need worry about them. What he needed was sitting in the open, inviting him to take it.

He unfastened the tie downs on the Cessna 172 Skyhawk. The door wasn't locked. He pulled the flight manual out of his backpack and walked through the pre-flight inspection. Hinges on the ailerons okay. Check. Free rudder and elevator movement. Check. Open the cowling, check the oil. Check for loose wires or broken engine mounts. Everything check.

He tossed his pack into the back seat and climbed into the pilot seat. He adjusted the seat. The regular pilot must be pretty short. He'd read about crashes caused by not latching the seat down. He wasn't going to make that mistake.

He took one last glance at the flight manual, took a deep breath and sat it on the co-pilot's seat. He bent under the instrument panel and found the wires leading to the ignition switch. He cut them with a small pair of electrician's pliers and stripped the ends. Then he twisted the two wires together.

The engine turned over. The starter ground for an instant, then the engine fired. He pulled the wires apart.

The propeller quickly disappeared, to become a spinning disk that he could see through.

Clayton glanced at the oil pressure and temperature gauges. They were both in the green.

He gulped a breath. *It's now or never.* He released the parking brake. The four-seat plane began to roll forward.

Just like Flight Simulator. He put a little pressure on the left rudder pedal and the plane turned to the left and onto the runway. He straightened out and slowly crept to the end of the runway, then turned the plane around.

He picked up the flight manual and checked it again. Run Up.

He stood on the brakes and advanced the throttle lever to full speed. The engine howled. He turned off the left magneto. The engine didn't miss a beat. He turned the left magneto back on and turned off the right. The engine still howled. He turned the magneto back on and pulled the throttle back to idle. He looked at his manual.

Turning the steering yoke, he looked first to his left, then his right, to make sure the ailerons responded to his commands. He pushed the yoke in and pulled it out while he looked over his shoulder to insure that the elevators were working. He pushed on the rudder pedals to verify the rudder worked.

All set.

This is it.

He advanced the throttle and took his feet off of the brakes. The blue and white high winged airplane began to roll. It picked up speed. He found it easy to keep the plane on track with light touches to the rudder pedals. Speed picked up. He kept a close eye on the airspeed indicator.

At about fifty-five knots he eased back lightly on the yoke. The nose wheel came up. The speed built quickly. At sixty-four knots the wheels broke free from the pavement.

He was flying!

He clumsily kept the plane level, tilting first to one side, then the other. He released a little pressure on the yoke, lowering the nose until the plane was flying at seventy-three knots, her best climb out speed. He watched the altimeter wind up. A thousand feet. Two thousand feet. Three thousand feet. This was high enough. He leveled off.

He had never felt so free in his life. He played with the controls, making big S-turns in the sky. He nosed down and picked up speed, he pulled the nose up and bled off speed. This was living.

Finally, satisfied that he could handle the airplane, he turned south and headed home.