

Chapter 20

By six o'clock in the evening, things started to wind down at Flaherty & Associates. Ted had gone home, as had Abiba. She was usually the last one out, but her daughter had a dress rehearsal for the Miss Washington Pageant. She couldn't miss that.

The two dozen or so other women who worked there slowly filed out of the office. There were some who came in late and worked late, but only a handful.

Catrina sat at her desk, staring at her blotter. She held a roll-tip pen in her hand and doodled aimlessly on the pad, a Martini glass here, a bottle of Jack Daniels there. Her mind was a million miles away.

Where was Karen? Had something happened to her? Had Caglione's goons picked her up? Or was she in hiding?

And was her disappearance connected to her husband's? Had they planned this together? Had they stashed away Caglione's money somewhere and arranged their disappearances? Were they going to meet up and laugh at their victims?

But if so, why had she hired Katrina? What could she possibly gain? If they were faking then Katrina was the one person likely to figure it out. It didn't make sense.

If Karen were hiding, where would she go? Not back to Vegas. That was too obvious. Did she have friends, family elsewhere?

Catrina pulled up her Karen Randall file. Ted was slowly bringing her into the Twenty-first century. For two decades she had done all of her work on paper, now her young computer genius had all of their files on some computer somewhere.

At least they could share them. They could all make notations, add documents, pictures etc. Anyone with the proper authority could access them from anywhere.

She smiled. Her young compatriot sure loved his toys, loved to use his fancy sunglasses to bring up files and search the Internet when they were out of the office investigating. *Oh well, it is, after all, the Twenty-first century*, she thought. No matter how much she denied it, she was living in the Information Age.

Her phone rang. It took three rings before she came out of her reverie and realized what was making all the noise.

“Flaherty & Associates, Catrina speaking,” she said into the phone.

“Mrs. Flaherty,” a low, raspy voice said. “This is a friend. I have a tip for you.”

“Who is this?” Catrina asked.

“A friend,” the raspy voice said. “I’m gonna offer you a little piece of information. Listen very carefully.”

“Yes.”

“First of all, I want you to drop your Richard Randall investigation. Leave it to the cops. They’re gonna rule that he’s dead. Let him rest in peace.”

“Who is this? Why do you care?”

“Just listen. I’m telling you to drop the Randall case. It’s not good for your health. As a matter of fact, to prove my point, I suggest that you evacuate your building. I’m gonna show you that I’m not kidding. Get your people out. You have three minutes. Then there’s gonna be a little explosion.”

The voice hung up. Catrina sat frozen for an instant, evaluating the threat then jumped up.

“EVERYONE, OUT. NOW!” she screamed as she grabbed her coat and purse.

“Everybody, get out. There’s a bomb in here.” She ran to her door and saw that there were only five women still at their desks. Out. Now!”

She ran to the restrooms to check. “Anyone in here?” she screamed at the door. She dashed inside and looked under the stalls for feet.

She opened the door to the men’s room. “Anyone here?”

No answer.

Back in the bullpen, she noted that everyone was filling out the door. “Quick ladies. Be quick. We don’t know when it will go off.”

“Is everyone out?” she asked the woman in front of her as they hurried down the stairs.

“Yes, I think so,” the short brunette said.

“Good. Gail, you’re a safety monitor. Did you grab your checklist?”

“Yes, I got it.” The skinny woman with blonde hair waved a brief case at Katrina. “I have the whole kit. I’ll start calling everyone just as soon as we’ve done a head count.”

The women crashed through the door into the parking lot and ran for the far corner. Gail opened her briefcase and took out a clipboard. She noted the people present then began calling those not there to make sure they were safe.

Katrina watched, nodded, pulled the cell phone from her purse and dialed 911.

“911, what is your emergency?” the operator asked.

“A bomb threat. This is Katrina Flaherty of Flaherty & Associates. Our office is at Sixth and Massachusetts. Someone just called in a bomb threat.”

“Are you evacuating the building, ma’am?”

“Yes, I think we’ve got everyone out. We’re just doing a head count now.”

Catrina heard a soft buzzing sound behind her. She turned and looked for the source. It was above her.

There it was, one of those four bladed drone things. It was probably a news camera. How had they gotten here so fast? Did someone call the TV station with the threat too?

The small helicopter had something hanging underneath it. That wasn't a camera. What was it?

The drone flew over Katrina's head and straight into the doorway to her building. When it hit the glass, there was a loud explosion.

“Good afternoon, boys and girls, this is Dave Lawrence and welcome back to Crime Beat, the show that focuses the harsh light of day on Seattle's seamy underbelly. We've been talking to Seattle Chief of Police, Antonio Diaz, about racial relations and racial profiling in the Seattle Police Department. This is the part of our show where you get to participate.”

Dave took a moment to collect his thoughts. This was his favorite part of the show; he never knew what would happen. “Our phone lines are open. Give us a call. What do you think about racial profiling? You can ask Chief Diaz about anything. Go ahead. Give me a call.”

Dave Lawrence pushed the button and phone lines started to light up. Good, they were out there, listening. The last few years had been particularly difficult for the Seattle Police Department. The U.S. Department of Justice had stepped in and mandated changes.

“You all know the score,” Lawrence said into his microphone. “The SPD shot and killed a Native American wood carver for refusing to put down his knife, we've all seen the video tape of officers kicking a Hispanic male, who, it turned out, wasn't even a suspect, and then there's

the video of an SPD officer punching a black woman who he stopped for jay walking. The phone lines are open. Give me a call, tell me what you think.”

While Lawrence was talking, his engineer waved a piece of paper at him. The engineer held the paper up to the window for Lawrence to read.

“Just a minute folks. We have some late breaking news here,” Lawrence said, straining to read the page.

“Holy mackerel. Folks you’re not going to believe this! We have Clayton Johnson-White, the Fly Away Bandit, on the line.”

He pushed the button for line one.

“Clayton Johnson-White, you are live, on the air. Hello. Welcome to Crime Beat.”

“Hi, Mr. Lawrence. Can you hear me?”

“Yes. Just fine. Where are you Clayton?”

“I’d rather not say. I’m not in Washington anymore. I decided it was getting a little too hot, so I beat feet for friendlier climes.”

“What can you tell us about your adventures, Clayton? How did you get where you are?”

“I like to fly, you know. I’ve been teaching myself. I’ve read a bunch of books and spend a lot of time on-line learning about airplanes. I played a lot of Microsoft Flight Simulator, but there’s nothing like the real thing. I’ve gotten in quite a bit of ‘stick time’ now. I’ve flown almost two thousand miles so far and I’m not at my destination yet.”

“Where are you headed, Clayton?” Lawrence’s pulse was throbbing in his neck.

“Out of the country. There’s a whole big world out there and I’m going to explore it.”

“Clayton, you posted a live Webcam feed on your Facebook page a few days ago. You really shoved it to the police. Are you going to do that again? To keep your fans informed about your progress?”

“Hell, yeah. Oops. Can I say hell on the radio?”

“H-E-double hockey sticks no. The FCC will probably bust us for that little outburst. Try to keep it G-rated.”

“Sorry, Mr. Lawrence. But yes, I’ll keep up my Facebook page, to let everyone know how I’m doing. I like the Go Pro camera. I’ll keep posting videos and do some live Webcam feeds. This is getting to be a lot of fun. I’m getting lots of fan mail.”

“Who is writing to you?”

“Girls, mostly. I did have a couple of offers from gay boys, but I don’t rock that way. I’m getting lots of offers from girls to stop at their places when I’m in their area. You know, this could be kinda fun.”

“Have you taken any of them up on it yet?”

“Not yet. I haven’t heard from anyone who’s where I’m going, but you never know. I should thank you, and all of the press.”

“What for, Clayton?”

“You guys made me famous. I see my name in the paper, on TV all the time. I’ve decided that I’m going to sell my story to the movies. I gotta call my lawyer and see if he can set it up. I think my story would make a better movie than *Catch Me If You Can*, don’t you?”

“It certainly has all the elements. Have you thought about a TV series? A reality show, maybe?”

“No. That’s a great idea. I could have a camera crew following me around, filming me making fools of the cops.”

“I’m not sure how that would work, but I know some TV producers, maybe we can look into it.”

Dave Lawrence, TV producer. It appealed to Dave—all those dollar signs in his future.

“Did you know that the good people of Camano Island hired a bounty hunter to find you?” Lawrence asked.

“A bounty hunter?”

“Yes. They ran a KickStarter campaign and raised the money to hire James Winston, a well known bounty hunter to track you down and bring you in.”

“Wow! I had no idea. Do you know where he is?”

“The last time we heard a report on him, he was in Indiana. It seems he’s following your trail of crashed airplanes around the country.”

“Geez. I never thought of that. What does he want?”

“He was hired to track you down and bring you back to Island County to stand trial.”

“I... I guess I better watch my back. I’m going to have to be a little more careful.”

“Do you have any message for Mr. Winston, Clayton?”

“Yeah. Catch me if you can.”

Catrina kicked at the broken glass with the toe of her boot. Anger rose in her throat and tears streamed down her eyes. *The bastard.* Who had done this? Why?

Well, she knew why. They didn't want her investigating Richard Randall's disappearance. But why blow up her office? They should know that it wouldn't stop her. If anything, it would spur her on, make her more determined to find out who did this and why.

"This is quite a mess." Ted walked up behind Catrina. "Cat, I'm really sorry."

Catrina turned and saw her young partner. "Oh, Ted." She threw her arms around his neck and sobbed. "I'm just glad no one was hurt."

"Yeah," Ted felt a little awkward, but put his arms around her waist. "But why? What did they hope to gain?"

Catrina wiped her eyes. "They pissed me off, that's what they gained. Heaven help them when I catch up with them."

Police and fire investigators were still picking over the scene.

"Have you been inside yet?" Catrina asked.

"Yeah, I talked to Sergeant Carver over there," Ted pointed to a huge black man in a SPD uniform. "I got him to let me up the back way. The office is intact. All the damage seems to be in the entry way."

"And the computers and everything are still working?"

"You know how heavy that office door is. It seems to have kept the blast out. The entranceway and stairs are a mess, but inside the office itself, it's business as usual. The network and servers all seem to be okay."

Abiba showed up with two Beach Hut coffee cups in her hands. "Good morning, Mrs. Flaherty, Mr. Higuera. I thought you might need these." She offered the coffee to Catrina and Ted.

“Thanks, Abiba. You’re the best.” Catrina sipped at the coffee. “I see you patronized one of our client’s coffee shacks.”

“They’re on my way here. Drive through.” Abiba said in her upper-class British accent. “Easier than having to go to Starbucks.”

“What did you think of the baristas?” Ted asked.

“It looked like she was pretty cold to me. I can’t understand how they can work with no clothes in this weather.” Abiba shivered and her whole body jiggled. “She was a nice girl though, a single mom, working her way through school. She has a nine-year-old in the fourth grade.”

“I called the insurance company,” Catrina said. “They’re sending out an adjuster this morning. They said that this should be covered by our policy.”

“Good.” Abiba smiled at Catrina. “Look at the bright side, Mrs. Flaherty. Our old entryway needed an upgrade anyway. Our bomber just provided the funds to do it.”

“I called Hope’s contractor,” Ted said. A soft rain started to fall. “Jorge Medina, who did the remodel at Hope’s restaurant, did a really good job and his prices were fair. He’ll be out today to look at what needs to be done.”

Catrina opened her umbrella. “Okay, so who wants to keep us away from this case?”

“Not Caglione,” Ted said, turning up his collar. “He asked us for our help and wouldn’t want to scare us off.”

“Not Mrs. Randall,” Abiba said in her British accent. “She hired us to find her rat of a husband. All she had to do was call and say ‘stop.’”

“I can’t think of any reason for Karen’s sister or her husband to want us off the case, unless they killed Randall.” Catrina sipped at her coffee.

“Let’s get out of the rain,” Ted said. “Why would they kill him? They don’t have any motive.”

Catrina slid behind the wheel of her Explorer and Ted and Abiba climbed in. “Junior could want Dad out of the way. He’s a former soldier, you know. He’s no stranger to death.”

“Yeah, but Randall didn’t leave him anything. Everything goes to Karen,” Ted said.

“Maybe the son didn’t know that.” Abiba said. “Maybe the kid didn’t know about the will and the power of attorney. You said that Mrs. Randall brought those with her from Vegas. Maybe the boy didn’t know about them until after he did in Mr. Randall”

The rain changed from a soft patter to a downpour.

“Well, whoever did this, they had to be close enough to see the building,” Katrina said. “They flew the drone into the building. They had to see where they were flying.”

“Yeah, and they waited until all the people were out. They didn’t want any collateral damage,” Ted said. “So what do we do now? Do we back off?”

“Do you have to ask?”

Catrina started her car and pulled out of the parking lot. “I think it’s time we had a little chat with Dick Junior.”

Clayton hated to admit it, but his call to the Seattle radio talk show shook him up. The idea that a bounty hunter was stalking him sent a shiver down his spine.

He had to be more careful. The airplanes had been fun, but they’d been too easy to track. If this Winston dude was following him, that meant putting some miles between Indiana and

himself. The idea that Winston had tracked him across the country was unsettling. He needed to get as far away as possible.

First he needed new wheels, something that wouldn't be easily tracked. An older model Toyota Corolla from a shopping mall parking lot fit the bill. Next he needed to make sure the cops weren't on the lookout for him.

He found a similar model Toyota in the parking lot at a movie theater complex and switched plates.

The owners would never realize the plates had been changed. If the cops ran the plates on his stolen car, they would think that it was a legally registered car.

The next problem was money, enough to put some serious distance between him and Mr. Bounty Hunter. A hold up was out of the question, he wasn't about to hurt or threaten anyone. Clayton was getting good at breaking and entering. After raiding several houses he found a suburban split-level with five hundred dollars rolled up in a pair of socks in the dresser. SCORE!

Then he hit the road, stopping only occasionally at rest areas for a couple of hours sleep at a time and getting gas and supplies: chips, jerky, candy bars and Coke, from convenience stores along the way.

Finally he drove over the Seven Mile Bridge in the early afternoon sunlight and marveled at the blueness of the water which stretched for as far as he could see in any direction, only occasionally interrupted by a tiny island.

Sugar Loaf key looked like as good a place as any. He got off the bridge and explored the island. There was a small community on each end of the island, but plenty of vacation homes sprinkled around the key. Not that different from Camano Island.

There was also a small general aviation airport on the island in case he needed to make a quick exit. There was only one road in and out of the Keys. If the cops blocked it, he was trapped.

He needed to find a home that was off the road. It was easy to tell which homes weren't in use because the shutters were fastened shut to protect the homes during hurricane season.

It was early October and it was hot. The air was so thick that Clayton couldn't breathe. His clothes stuck to him whenever he left the air conditioned protection of the car.

He finally found the perfect place. It was a small concrete-block house on stilts far back from the main road on a crushed shell paved driveway. Surrounded by trees, it was virtually invisible from the street. No one would see his lights at night.

He was getting good at picking locks and this one offered no challenge. He decided not to open the shutters. If anyone passed by, there was no sense in letting them know that someone was staying here.

There were a few staples in the cupboards, but the fridge was empty which meant a run to the store. Key West was at the end of the highway and a big enough town that he should be able to shop without being recognized.

The run into Key West was a trip. The buildings and houses all looked like pictures he'd seen of New Orleans. Sidewalk cafes mixed with open fronted bars; businesses of all sorts crowded the main street with iron railed balconies on the second floor. He half expected to see saloon girls hanging out, waving and calling to him.

It seemed like there was a band playing on every street corner, from guys with guitars, playing Jimmy Buffet songs in front of open guitar cases looking for a hand out, to full-fledged

steel drum bands. The street performers started just before noon and played 'til the wee hours of the morning.

He found a grocery store and quickly realized his next problem; he was running out of cash. Clayton only bought a bare minimum of supplies while pondering how to find more money.

Back at the house, the French doors off the kitchen opened to a large covered deck. This was obviously the dining room. A path led from the deck's stairs past a storage shed to the water's edge where an aluminum fishing boat was pulled up on a wooden stand. The boat itself wasn't that heavy and could easily be wrestled to the water. The outboard wasn't that big, a ten horse job he could drag from the shed to the boat.

The storage shed was a treasure trove. Not only was it full of tools, but it positively overflowed with fishing gear. In the corner were a gas BBQ grill and a full tank of propane.

Once Clayton got the boat in the water and the motor mounted, he ventured out on a fishing expedition. The fishing was easy. No sooner had his line hit the water than there was a bite. Well, at least starving to death out here wasn't going to be a problem.

The one big drawback was that there wasn't an Internet connection. Not even a computer. Who lived here anyway? Hadn't they heard of the Twenty-first century? Clayton would have to venture into town to find an Internet café.

