

Blood Lions

EXCERPT

BLOOD LIONS

THE BELL TRILOGY #3

“Do not try to fight a lion if you are not one yourself.”

African Proverb

ONE

His cell vibrated—UNKNOWN CALLER. He took it anyway. The voice was new and the warning old; he had heard them all before. But this time, if it was true, he could not go on.

Elliott focused. He would remember each word, each pause and inflection. It lasted twenty-three seconds, then the caller was gone.

He punched speed dial—Tony Wilcox, Memphis Homicide. Tony picked up immediately. Elliott was direct. “Have you heard from the DCPD?”

“Shit . . .” Tony swore under his breath. Elliott had to hear about it just seconds after the proprietary information reached the MPD. *I need time to . . .* “Elliott, I want you to slow down. Where are you? Your place, of course. I’m coming now.” *Don’t do anything, goddamn it . . .*

Elliott heard enough, what he could not bear. He dropped his cell and fell to his knees.

“Elliott!” Tony yelled. *Don’t do this. Please, just give me some time to . . .*

Leaning against the sofa, his heart beat in his throat and ears popped. He gasped for air, and then he puked. Elliott stayed down digging his fingers into the carpet as his demons stirred. They would have their way with him soon.

“Elliott . . . Elliott?” But Tony was now lost somewhere between the sofa cushions. Nothing more he said mattered. “Elliott, don’t . . . Listen. We need to talk. I’m coming now.” He grabbed his coat and ran down the hall of Memphis police headquarters. His car sat out front. He could get to Elliott’s in five minutes, but it would be too late.

The door was open. Running to each room Tony called his name. Then he saw the vomit next to the sofa, and the overturned lamp. And he found Elliott’s cellphone.

Seven hours later Dr. Elliott Sumner sat on the edge of a bed in a cheap hotel somewhere in north Arkansas off I-40. The rain let up. An empty bottle of scotch laid on the floor, another half-empty on the nightstand. For the first time in hours he found himself in familiar territory—alone, drunk, and ready to end his miserable life.

He looked into the barrel of the .357 magnum and rationalized, *one hollow-point will take off the back of my head, and it will be done.*

She was supposed to go to New York City for only a day, he cried inside, not D.C. We talked about it. I did not know what we were up against, not this time. But they knew we had it in our possession. They had to have it—to control it. But it is too big. It would change everything. Oh God, I didn’t believe it possible. It is too much for anyone to bring into this world.

He looked into the cracked mirror on the wall across the dismal hotel room. Like the time before, he stared at the haggard, tormented man and he saw the pain and a way out. Elliott slid the carbon steel barrel into his mouth and wrapped a finger around the trigger. He closed his eyes.

I don’t want to live forever . . . He pulled.

ONE MONTH EARLIER

The Memphis Tribune

MPD Find Heads on Mud Island

Carol Mason, VP Investigative Reporting

Memphis, TN April 14, 2010: Decapitated heads on poles around a campfire were found by Memphis police in the early morning hours today. Following an anonymous phone call, world-renowned forensic pathologist, Dr. Elliott Sumner, and Memphis Homicide Detective, Tony Wilcox, were first to arrive at the scene on Mud Island.

On an isolated bank along the Mississippi River, human heads were on display atop poles configured in a semicircle around a small fire. Memphis police, County Sheriff's Office, and FBI were called in. Air, water, and ground searches are underway as the disturbing multiple-homicide crime scene is investigated by the medical examiner and CSI. Officials closed the north end of Mud Island to the media and public.

Unnamed sources close to the investigation say the ritual-like display included heads that had been frozen for several weeks. "We have a dangerous killer—or killers—out there and need to move quickly," Detective Thompson said. "There's a lot of evidence to work through that may connect to more deaths." Dr. Sumner and Detective Wilcox were unavailable for comment.

Mud Island is not new to horrific events. There were two in the last year. The legendary Memphis serial killer known as the Bluff City

Butcher confronted Sumner, Wilcox, and Shelby County Sheriff G.E. Taft on October 17, 2009. The alleged BCB escaped with injuries and resurfaced at the residence of billionaire patriarch Albert Bell on December 23, 2009. The BCB died attempting to escape.

Some believe the BCB is alive—that he survived the traumatic incident at the Bell mansion witnessed by over a hundred guests attending the Bell Christmas Gala. Over fifty Memphis police and county sheriff deputies were called to the scene. They surrounded the mansion. Impaled on a rooftop spire, the Butcher died before reached by paramedics.

Later, the BCB's true identity was revealed to be Adam Duncan, the biological son of patriarch Albert Bell, and the brother of Dr. Elliott Sumner and president of the LIFE2 Corporation, Jack Bellow—deceased. The three sons born in 1968 were separated at birth. Albert Bell swears to have no prior knowledge of their existence until the night of December 23rd when informed by phone.

MPD Director Collin Wade commented on the current Mud Island case and its unnerving similarities to the numerous BCB homicide cases. “This heinous crime is the work of a very sick person. The Bluff City Butcher is *not* a suspect because he is *dead*. I know because I was there the night he died. Any further speculation about the BCB is a waste of our time and a distraction from serious efforts to find those responsible for these deaths.” Efforts to identify the victims found on Mud Island are underway.

TWO

“For in that sleep of death what dreams may come.”
William Shakespeare

“Appears you’ve had an eventful evenin’, Mr. Bell.” The tall, lanky silhouette in the doorway stood over the coagulated blood, the light from the hall reflecting off the red-brown pool seeping into the grain of the polished wood floors. Five pints, maybe more, soaked through the cracks and would stain the ceiling below. The blood belonged to one of Alberto Bella’s bodyguards—the first to die in the study the night after the heads were found on Mud Island.

The wiry man knelt down. He leaned in as if talking to the corpse moved hours before. “Cut ya from the base of ya spine to the center of ya shoulder blades,” he said. “Knife moved through ya body with great force and accuracy.” He turned his head in Albert’s direction. “I’m told, don’t ya know.” In the dark by the dead fireplace Albert sat with a glass of scotch.

The man stepped over the blood pool and walked to the desk at the other end of the study. “Medical examiner said the blade of that butcher knife *bisected* every organ in its path—the liver, kidney, heart and lungs. Got the four big ones with that big ole’ knife . . .”

He stopped. The light from his cellphone lit his face, an African American wearing a uniform. He scrolled squinting at the small screen. “Let’s see, *bisected*. Had to ask what it meant. Made a note. Not a word ya hear much in my line of work. Here it is. Bisected is to cut or divide into two equal or nearly equal parts. What kind of thing can do that from behind a man?”

The light went out. “Think that’s significant. Don’t ya agree, Mr. Bell? Cut four organs nearly in half in the dark from behind. Clipped half-dozen ribs up close to the spine like a hot knife in butter. Then severed the spine with a sharp twist at top of that upward sweeping motion—left to right. Strong! Our

killer's left-handed. Bet a month's pay." Albert felt the man's eyes on him, but stayed silent.

"Yes sir, the ME said instant hip and knee lock. He's a big un, too. 310, 320 pounds of solid muscle standin' in that there doorway five seconds before he dropped like a big ole' tree. Instant paralysis. Probably tried to stand. Fell over anyway. Bet dead before he hit the floor. The one wielding the butcher knife was not your average killer. Nope, he was not. This one's got special skills. Skills we just don't see often round here."

He used his cell as a flashlight this time, moving the glow along the front of the desk and down to the floor. Albert turned his head enough to watch the light move from the desk to the blood-soaked Persian rug where Alberto Bella died.

"So this is where Mr. Bella met his maker. A knife, a fist, and part of a man's arm in the old man's chest poking out his back. You don't even see that kinda stuff in the movies, not unless there's a zombie around or somethin'. It had to be one awful thing to watch . . . you bein' a few feet away just standin' there and all."

Albert looked down. He didn't see the man pointing to the empty chair on the other side of the desk. "Had to be tough, watchin' a stranger kill your grandfather like that." He got to his feet. "Seems excessive, don't you think?"

Albert touched the glass to his lips. He cocked his head, swallowed the last of his scotch, and reveled in the numbing effect. Staring over the rim, he tumbled a single ice cube in his mouth waiting for the uniformed black man to complete his elaborate setup. They each had their own ritual, their way of working up to the *gotcha* moment. This was Albert's third cop tonight. It would be his last. He eyed the half empty bottle of scotch waiting to refresh his glass.

"Excessive for the average killer." Wiping his hands on his handkerchief, the uniformed man moved across the dimly lit room to the sofa opposite Albert. A covey of police entered the study. With a wave of the hand, he stopped them in their tracks. "Everyone can leave now. I'll finish up here." The badges disappeared in the hall without a word. Albert gripped his empty glass and their eyes met for the first time.

"You okay, Mr. Bell?"

“I’ve been better.”

“I have an update on your son.”

Albert sat up. “What do you know about Elliott?”

“He’s at The Med. Ran into some complications, but the docs guaranteed me . . .”

Albert’s eyes narrowed. He lost his breath even though he tried to prepare himself for any bad news. “I’m not interested in your guarantees. I should be at the hospital. They took him out of here hours ago. You should be worried about your boss.”

“Director Wade’s in critical condition. I am worried about him, sir. They couldn’t do much for him in the ER but stabilize. He’s not strong enough for surgery. The doctor says they can’t get to the bullet easy. Risk of paralysis. They’ll take their time.”

Albert set his empty glass on the table, leaned forward and held his head pushing his fingers through his thick, silver hair. He waited for the next move on the chessboard.

“I’m Henry Cottam, deputy chief, Memphis police.”

“I know who you are,” Albert said with his head still buried in his hands.

“I’m sorry. I would have remembered meeting you, sir.”

“We didn’t meet. You’re second in command. You’re taking over for Collin Wade.”

“Well, yes . . . until the director’s back on his feet, of course.”

The dark blue uniform was flawless, starched and creased. It fit him perfectly. The badge captured the scant light in the room. It gleamed like his brass buttons and the bars on his shoulders and metals on his chest. Albert prepared for the impending inquisition. He studied Cottam through his fingers.

You look like your picture, he thought. The one the mayor brought by a month ago. Part of your vetting process—seeking my opinion. But you wouldn’t know about that. Mayor said it took a year to get you inside, a twenty-five-year veteran cop on a beat stabbed five times, shot three, and in more “educational fights” than most cops would allow without pulling a gun. You’re a patient man, and always the last one standing. You don’t know the mayor wants you at the helm. He never liked Collin. But now here you are. Let’s see what you can do.

“You’ve been through enough tonight, Mr. Bell. We’ve

been crawling over the mansion since eight o'clock. Let's make a deal. I gotta take care of my paperwork, and I know you have some questions and want me out of your hair."

Albert turned a shoulder. "I've already spoken with Detective Turner and the interim medical examiner. I've lost count of the blasted CSI people running around here asking a thousand questions. I suggest you do what leaders do, rely on your people to do their jobs and leave me alone. I'm not up for this relentless interrogation."

"I understand, but . . ."

"Clearly you don't." Albert leveled a stern look at Cottam. "I need to get to The Med."

"First you need to talk to me. Then you can leave."

"I'm a victim here. This is police harassment. Do I need to call in legal counsel, Mr. Cottam?"

He's not going to be pushed into talking. Maybe a different approach will work. "That won't be necessary, Mr. Bell. I understand your position. And yes, I will speak with Turner, the ME, and my CSI team." He sat on the edge of the sofa. "I'm not here to interrogate, Mr. Bell."

"Then don't get comfortable. Goodnight, Mr. Cottam."

"I plan to see this case through, starting with you. I'm in charge now."

"Yes you are, until Director Wade returns."

"To do my job, I must understand what happened here tonight. I value the opportunity to speak with key eyewitnesses, and your home is a crime scene."

Albert turned to him. "Or what?"

"Or we go downtown—holding cells, lawyers, interrogation rooms, and a very long night. One way or another, we're talking, sir. If you just work with me, we can be done soon."

Albert sat up. "Where's Detective Wilcox?"

"Unavailable. Detective Turner was closest when the call came in. That's why he was first on the scene."

Albert crushed the last of the tumbling ice cube between his teeth.

Cottam got it. "Okay—truth. Detective Wilcox was downtown in one of those holding cells I mentioned. He was detained for internal matters I'm not at liberty to discuss."

“It had to do with Mud Island, the heads on poles found early this morning. Elliott was there. He told me all about it.”

“I don’t know what Dr. Sumner told you, but Detective Wilcox was implicated along with Dr. Sumner on a procedural matter. There was a misunderstanding.”

“I see.” He dropped fresh cubes in his glass, poured scotch to the rim, and sipped. Albert looked up again. “Collin came here tonight with warrants for our arrest. It was something to do with the removal of a paper from Mud Island. Paper attached to one of those heads.”

“Correct,” Cottam replied. He glanced at his watch. “A very bizarre scene on Mud Island.”

“I’ve heard nothing more on the matter.”

“Let’s just say Director Wade had a moment of clarity—in the ER—before he passed out the last time. In his *fist* was a piece of paper with your name. That’s what he came here to get earlier this evening. Dr. Sumner had it in his possession.”

Albert leaned forward. “Elliott gave it to Collin just seconds before the shooting started. Collin had it in his hand when he got hit and went down.”

“Unlike the other papers attached to heads on Mud Island, yours was empty.”

“And what—pray tell—does that mean?” Albert asked.

“Names, dates over many years in several countries. It’s very early in the investigation, but we believe we’re looking at several hundred cold cases—unsolved or suspicious deaths. It appears the dead men on Mud Island were involved.”

“What do you mean—suspicious deaths?”

“Questionable suicides, unwitnessed accidents, unsolved homicides, and disappearances.”

“Is there some significance you found this on Mud Island? Memphis?” Albert questioned.

“We don’t know. The heads were on display to draw attention.”

“Doesn’t take a brilliant detective to figure that out.” Albert downed his drink. “And Collin Wade thought Elliott, Tony, and I were involved?”

“We don’t know what he was thinking. Maybe know more when he can talk.”

“You said he had a moment of clarity?”

“Yes. From the gurney he ordered all charges dropped and Wilcox reinstated.” Cottam touched his chin. “He saw something here tonight that changed everything.”

Albert turned to the empty fireplace. *Surely they’ll revisit that decision when and if they connect the Gilgamesh dots*, he thought.

“I don’t know if you are aware that Dr. Sumner has a very liberal consulting agreement with our city. He has enormous freedoms with regard to all investigational matters.”

Cottam glanced at his watch a second time. “MPD needed his help to find the Bluff City Butcher. Dr. Sumner had certain stipulations. The city capitulated.”

“What kinds of stipulations?”

“Dr. Sumner can remove something from a Memphis crime scene without prior approval or explanation.”

“Then the warrants for our arrest are bogus.”

“That would seem to be a correct conclusion, Mr. Bell. And for that reason, I am confused. You see, Director Wade was well aware of Dr. Sumner’s contract yet he acted on this matter. I believe when I find out why, I will know what happened here this evening.” Cottam tilted his head, assessing Albert. “Tell me what happened here tonight from your eyes, Mr. Bell.”

Albert stared at the ceiling and ran his hand over his face. He turned to Cottam. “We were at my desk.” He waved over his shoulder, almost spilling his drink.

“Excuse me. Who was at your desk?”

“Elliott and Carol Mason sat to my left, Max Gregory to my right. Then Collin Wade appeared in the doorway. His presence was unexpected. He came into my study unannounced.” Albert dabbed his mouth with a folded handkerchief. His hand trembled. “Conversation ceased. Collin crossed the room, walked up to the front of the desk and served his warrants; plopped them right down in front of us.”

“Did he explain the warrants to you and Dr. Sumner?”

“No. He said Elliott and I were under arrest. When I started to examine the documents, he demanded Elliott give him the paper. Called it a ‘vellum’ strip. Elliott paused. I’m sure he too was set back by the director’s aggressive behavior.”

“And he gave the paper strip to Director Wade at that time?”

“Yes. Maybe within twenty seconds of Collin asking for it.” Albert’s glass stopped half way to his lips. Cottam could hear the ice cubes rattling against the crystal. Albert was frightened.

Cottam waited. He studied him. “Then what?”

Albert blinked several times. “The first god-awful explosion.” He winced.

“A gunshot?”

“Yes.” Albert leaned toward Cottam. “That’s when Collin got shot.” Albert’s eyes froze. “I watched the blood soak his shirt. His face was white as snow. His eyes—he just stared back at me. He collapsed. Dropped to his knees, and then face down on the floor.”

Cottam let Albert relax some, let the vivid images that now haunted him begin to recede. “Who shot Director Wade, Mr. Bell?”

“The man in the doorway shot him. The man holding the gun did.”

“And who was that, Mr. Bell?”

Albert shook his head and looked at the floor. “There were two more explosions. Elliott was hit next.” Albert looked up in a daze. “Hit him in his right shoulder. The blood filled his shirt before any of it sunk in. Then the second explosion came—loud. Elliott was hit a second time. Hit in his left shoulder. God, he was falling backward. He was trying to stand but . . .” Albert closed his eyes. “I thought he was going to die right then. Why are you making me go back over this again?”

“Please, this is the last time. Go on Mr. Bell.”

“Carol caught Elliott as he was falling. She guided him to his chair. Elliott didn’t move after that.” Albert set down his glass and held his head. “Blood was everywhere.” He looked at his hands, the traces of blood still there from touching Elliott’s chest later, as he was loaded onto the ambulance. Right before they rushed him to the hospital.

“Were both men shot by the same person, Mr. Bell?”

Albert lifted his head distraught, reliving the dreadful moment. “Elliott was bleeding to death. Carol was doing all she could, but she couldn’t stop it. I just stood there. Everything

happened so fast.”

“Mr. Bell, tell me who shot Elliott Sumner and Collin Wade? Who was holding the gun? Who did this, sir?”

“*You know the shooter, Cottam,*” he yelled.

“I must hear it from you.”

Albert leaned back into the sofa. He grabbed his scotch and took a long swallow then tilted his head back to stare at the ornate plastered ceiling. “My grandfather, Alberto Bella, shot Director Wade and Elliott—three bullets, three hits.”

“Are you *absolutely* sure, Mr. Bell? Is there a chance you could be wrong? You said it happened fast. It’s been a long night. Even now, talking to me, you’re hardly with it. Maybe you don’t remember correctly. Is that possible, Mr. Bell?”

“*No*, Mr. Cottam. I am certain. I know my own grandfather. After he shot Collin and Elliott, he walked to my desk with the smoking gun in his hand. He put it in my face. He was proud of himself. Damn happy. Even bragged about shooting them.”

“What exactly did Alberto Bella say to you?”

“He said policemen always got in the way of him doing business. Said that’s why he shot Collin Wade. And then he said he was in no mood for heroics. That’s why he shot Elliott. He also said he didn’t intend to kill either one, he just wanted my full attention.”

“Those were his words . . . wanted your full attention?”

“Yes. I suggest you ask Carol Mason or Max Gregory if you care to check my accuracy.”

Cottam paused. He was changing direction. “Is it true Alberto Bella is alias Rudolph Kohl?”

“Yes. That information has been shared recently.”

“Really. One and the same?” Cottam scratched his head again. “If that were true, your grandfather would be how old . . . at least one-hundred-fifty years?”

“Actually, he would have been a hundred-sixty-five this year, according to him.” Albert took another swallow of scotch. “He’s what they call a ‘supercentenarian’, one of the few in the world who live beyond a hundred-fifteen years.”

“Supercentenarian? Never heard of that.”

“It’s quite the topic within the Bell family. There are thirty people in recorded history that have indisputably exceeded the

115 mark. Some claim to be much older, but records are not adequate to validate. Personally, I believe it is folklore folly.”

“If you think it is folklore folly, how do you explain your grandfather, here, tonight?”

“My grandfather claimed he changed his identity to avoid talking about his age. Said it was a fruitless exercise, too distracting from the more important things in life. He said his longevity is an odd rarity. Personally, I question the dates. Immigration records in the 1800s are woefully inaccurate. Perhaps he came to America a much younger man than the documents state.” *Maybe that’ll give him enough of a bone to chew on a long while.*

Cottam tapped the side of his nose. “Okay. I will accept that for now.”

“Anything else?”

“Why was he here tonight, Mr. Bell?”

“My grandfather?”

Cottam sighed. “Yes. Why was he here tonight?”

“Other than to shoot two innocent people, I don’t know.”

“I find that troubling. He shot Director Wade and Dr. Sumner and then turned the gun on you. You’re tellin’ me you don’t know why?”

“That’s correct.”

“Your supercentenarian grandfather, with all his great wisdom, entered a secured compound unannounced, shot two innocent people and turned the gun on you. Do you really want to stick with your statement?”

“My grandfather has always been an unpredictable man.”

“Did he appear to be angry? Or was he shooting people for some other reason? Was he looking for something?”

Albert finished his scotch, set the empty glass on the end table and smiled. “You think I’m withholding information, Mr. Cottam?”

“Respectfully sir, yes I do.”

“My grandfather was a very wealthy man, a multibillionaire. He lived a life of great privilege. Got what he wanted when he wanted it. Nothing was beyond his reach. He was a very powerful man with a much longer life experience. Frankly Mr. Cottam, I stopped trying to understand my

grandfather many decades ago.”

“Then why was he here tonight, Mr. Bell? He got your full attention for what?”

Albert tilted his head to the ceiling and closed his eyes. “Alberto was just about to talk. His mouth started to form his first word, but then . . .”

“But then what, Mr. Bell?”

“I remember his gun in my face. He cocked it. His mouth opened. I thought the eccentric, old man had finally snapped—lost all his marbles. He shot two people for no reason and now he was going to shoot me.”

“Then what happened?”

“There was a god-awful groan, it came from somewhere down the hall.”

Cottam’s lips tightened. “A groan like someone in pain?”

“Gut-wrenching. We all turned to the sound, even Alberto. Someone stood in the doorway.”

“Who was it, Mr. Bell?”

“I thought Alberto’s bodyguards—a large, dark, menacing figure.”

“Did you say bodyguards? *Plural?*” Cottam pulled out his notepad and fanned through.

“Had two with him all the time.” Albert opened his eyes. “Didn’t know where those groans came from. Was it the bodyguard at the door or someone else somewhere in the house?”

“Tell me about the one in the doorway.” Cottam kept checking his notes and flipping pages.

“He started to sway a little left and a little right. Then he fell into the room. It was rather startling.”

Cottam stopped on a page and dragged a finger. “I have note of only one bodyguard.”

Albert ignored Cottam’s comment. “After he fell into the room, there was another dark figure in the doorway.”

“Did you recognize this second figure?” Cottam asked.

“No. But Alberto did. He started shooting at him. Shot three times and missed three times.”

“You’re telling me your grandfather successfully shot the length of this room, hit Dr. Sumner in each shoulder, and missed

a closer and larger target three times?”

“That’s right. Maybe your CSI boys can explain it. They dug bullets from my wall across the hall. I’ll bet the same bullets you take out of Collin and Elliott.”

“You said he missed three times. They only found two bullets in your wall.”

Adam was hit. “Don’t know about that either. That dark figure crossed the room and got to Alberto before the trigger got pulled a fourth time.”

Cottam made a note. “How did that man in the doorway kill Alberto Bella?”

Albert rubbed his eyes. “A knife. My grandfather got stabbed in the chest. He dropped his gun and collapsed where your people found him.”

“Who killed your grandfather, Mr. Bell?”

“It was dark and happened fast.”

Cottam closed his notepad and sat up straight. “Your stories match Miss Mason’s and Mr. Gregory’s. I’ve not yet spoken with Dr. Sumner.”

Albert brushed his sleeves and sat up. “*Truth* is often consistent, Mr. Cottam. Now if you don’t mind, I need to get to the hospital.” He started to stand.

“You know what I think . . . ?”

Albert leaned back. “No. What do you think, Mr. Cottam?”

“I think the three of you are interfering with the investigation of a multiple homicide.”

“And I believe *your imagination* is working overtime, Mr. Cottam. You are new.”

He smiled. “I could charge all three of you.”

“I don’t think you will.”

“Oh, why’s that?”

“Forensics are too compelling.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying the city prosecutor will look at this case. He will see Alberto Bella held the gun that shot three people. The survivor, unaccounted for tonight, was the one with a knife that went up against my grandfather’s gun and saved your director’s life and three others in the room.”

“Still, you three are holding back. You’re obstructing

justice. I could arrest you.”

“One day your director will be able to answer your lingering questions to your satisfaction. You won’t arrest me tonight.”

Still, Cottam pushed. “Director Wade was unconscious when the man in the door entered the room and stabbed Alberto Bella.”

“Not true. I’m surprised you run with such an assumption. I never told you that.”

“Can you prove to me he was conscious, Mr. Bell?”

Albert smiled. “Collin kicked Alberto’s leg the third shot. May have made the difference—why he missed the man charging him.”

Cottam shook his head. “Two were slain by this unidentified man. He must answer for that.”

“From where I sit, the only crime he committed was leaving the scene after stopping the real killers in the room. He left before we could thank him. You make this far more painful for the victims than necessary. We survived. Our failure to identify the man who saved our lives is not a criminal offense. It’s just something *you* want to know.” Albert wiped his mouth with his handkerchief. “There’s no crime here except what my demented grandfather and his bodyguards did to innocent people.”

Cottam relaxed his shoulders for the first time. “It’s in your best interest to involve the Memphis police department.”

“The dangerous people are dead. I’ve told you everything I know. Hopefully the two innocent people live tonight. There’s nothing more to this. We’re done here.”

“You say the dangerous people are dead?”

“Alberto and his two henchmen.”

“*Two* henchmen? You mean bodyguards?”

“Yes. Alberto introduced me to them in January—Bentley Masher and Boris Tanner. Looking back now, I should have paid much closer attention, asked questions.”

“Do you know for a fact both men were here tonight?”

“Yes. Mr. Masher stood at the door. He’s dead. I saw his body. Mr. Tanner was with Alberto and Masher in the beginning. He left after Alberto shot Collin and Elliott, I assume to cover the flanks. God knows what else they had in mind tonight.”

“There was no Boris Tanner listed among the dead or

injured.” Cottam pulled out his notepad a second time and flipped through the pages inches from his nose under his light.

Albert retrieved his empty glass. His ice cubes were almost gone. The bottle of scotch on the end table was now empty. “They said three were dead. I assumed Mr. Tanner was one.”

Cottam slid his notepad into his pocket and held his two-way radio to his mouth.

It was too late . . .



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