



## Chapter 1

It was eerie the way everything fell into place. The means to cause the poisoning. The ideal situation for taking the payoff. The way to cleanse the money. Almost as if it were pre-ordained. But if this plot was being overseen by a supreme being, it certainly was not one from the heavenly realm. Ellen re-read the letter and smiled.

“Dear Mr. Barber,

You don’t know us and never will. All you need to know is that we have the ability to contaminate the food in your restaurants with hepatitis C, and will do so if you do not follow our instructions. As proof that we can do what I say, we have already infected the food at a restaurant called “Mildred’s” in Destin,

Florida. The outbreak should start about the same time you get this letter. It will cost you eight million dollars to protect your restaurants and customers. This is a lot of money and you are probably wondering if we are serious and what is to keep us from coming back for more if you pay. Mildred's experience will answer the first question. As for the second, this will be your one and only payment. You will just have to trust us on this.

We will give you three weeks to respond. That will give you time to watch Mildred's go out of business. Your fate too, if you screw this up. Agree to the payment and you will be fine. To show your agreement, place this ad in the May 1st edition of the Atlanta Journal/Constitution, the New Orleans Ledger and the Miami Herald personal ads. JOHNSON, WE ARE READY WHEN YOU ARE. FPB. If we don't see the ad, at least six of your restaurants across the country will have the food contaminated. Two weeks, or maybe two months or six, later, another two or three will. Your chain will be out of business before the year is over. The cops can't find us, but if we find they are even looking, the contamination will immediately take place. Just be smart. Let your insurance take care of this. It will be a lot cheaper than paying for all of the lawsuits and going bankrupt because people are afraid to eat at your restaurants.

I appreciate your kind attention, and we will be watching for the ad.

OOPS! I almost signed my name.

Chow

The trio drew straws to determine each one's destination, and with hugs and backslaps began the journey that would change many lives forever, and none for the better.

\*\*\*

Jack Nebra sat back in his desk chair and stretched. He eyed the small stack of folders on his desk and reached for the one on top marked "Mangrove". The manila folder held the sum of his work on a new case, one that he had started yesterday and that tore at his heart. Louise and Lalla Mangrove. Twin girls, age three. They had been found by the maternal grandmother, malnourished, crying and soiled. Their father was in another room, dead from an overdose of prescription drugs. The mother was in bed beside him, her hands tied to the headboard and she was near death from the same drugs. Both were nude. She had strangulation marks on her neck. Both children and the mother were in the hospital under police watch. The mother was in intensive care, the children were stable.

The grandmother had to use her key to get into the house and told police the deadbolts had been locked. It was pretty obvious that this was a case of drugs and rough sex gone badly. The media were all over this one and he was itching to get on it too. Where had they gotten the drugs? How had a seemingly normal family sunk to these depths? How could parents put their children in such jeopardy? He ran his hand down his face and shook his head.

He looked at the picture of Deb on his desk and smiled. He toyed with the ring on his left hand, as it still felt a little out of place. Now that he was married, he tried to keep a somewhat normal schedule. Realizing it was quitting time, he quickly finished reading over his summary of today's court case. Satisfied, he put it in the chief's box, tidied his desk and left for the day, taking the Mangrove folder with him.

As he drove home, his thoughts turned to that afternoon's courtroom victory. This was a case where the crooks were known from the beginning, but bringing charges had taken two long years. Then the defense attorneys had managed to keep postponing the trial for another two years while their clients were out on bail. Mortgage fraud was not one of Jack's areas of expertise, but he had managed to put together all the dots and the district attorney had successfully prosecuted the case. It had been the right move for the DA to call on the expert testimony of Bill Brunson. Without it the jury may not have ever understood the intricacies of flipping houses. The practice involved rapidly re-selling the same house, escalating the value each time, until finally the last lending institution was left with nothing but a house worth substantially less than the mortgage and a bogus appraisal. The crime had been prevalent during the boom years of real estate and had been one of the contributing factors in the real estate meltdown and subsequent recession. Brunson's explanation had reduced the practice to its essential elements and helped the DA get the conviction.

## Chapter 2

Winston Barber sat in the stands watching the twelve year old swimmers compete, his wife Julia and their ten year old daughter Celeste beside him. They cheered all of the swimmers on, but especially their son Wade. He was a bright, athletic youngster, popular with the kids and known, even at his young age, for his honesty. None cheered harder than Celeste, for Wade had always been her hero. The Barbers were a well-known and popular family in Alton, West Virginia. Well known because he was the president of Alton Family Restaurants and was very wealthy. Well liked, because he was one of them. He would show up at school functions and help sell concessions; never stayed away from a workday and always gave generously to local charities and events. Julia volunteered at the school, helping many less able children with their reading and also serving as an officer in the PTA. They were active in their local church, where he was an Elder and she taught Sunday school and sang in the choir. Their children were well behaved and outgoing and rarely caused any trouble. They were an ideal family, one that inspired many others. And one soon to be violated.

Winston had been born in Alton and began working in the family restaurant at twelve years old, mopping floors, cleaning tables, basically learning the business from the ground up. There were three locations when he first started. He had watched and marveled at his father as the man expanded his business through hard work and foresight. He hired very good people to help him and he always kept

Winston and his older brother Franklin informed of what and why he was doing something. Neither of the brothers resented working in the restaurants, for they had never known anything else. Their mother worked as the company accountant, personally signing all the checks way back then. Also, working there gave them time altogether as a family, and that had always been important.

Times had not always been idyllic. Franklin was killed when he was sixteen years old and driving home from a date one Friday night. For some reason, he lost control, left the road and hit a tree. No one else was hurt. No one else was involved, and no one else was to blame. And, oh, how they had all wanted someone or something else to blame at the time. It was a terrible time of sadness. His father became a driven man. He was no longer content to grow the business one restaurant at a time. He hired more people to search out locations, started franchising, and worked twelve hour days, seven days a week. Winston's mother, Maggie, withdrew into a shell for a while and was not nearly as loving to and protective of Winston as she once had been. Winston was dealing with his own grief, and without much support from his family.

It was during this time that Winston started to rebel. His grades dropped and his father was too busy to notice. He started experimenting with alcohol and marijuana. He skipped school and began dating girls older than him, who could drive and who kept him out late. His work in the restaurant deteriorated and he was undependable. Finally, his boss, Paul Madison, who had been with his father from the beginning, fired him. Madison was a kind man of great integrity and strength. Of all the men in the company, he was the one his father admired most, and he considered him a partner and friend.

When the elder Barber learned of the firing he was furious, and he called both of them into his office and demanded an explanation. Paul Madison regarded his friend and boss for a full minute before speaking.

"Jim, you and I have been friends for a long time and I value that more than you will ever know. I am going to say some things that pain me and will probably hurt you as well. When I am done, I will do whatever you ask me to do. Even if that means leaving the company. I only ask that you hear me out." He took a deep breath and glanced at Winston, then started again. "When Franklin was killed it hurt this entire town, but I think that it has had far more devastating an effect than anyone could have foreseen. Since then, you have changed. You work too long. You ignore your family and son. You ignore your wife. You don't realize that Winston is crying out for help. His grades are dropping. He is running with a rough crowd. I have smelled alcohol on his breath too many times to count. Look at him. He has lost at least twenty pounds this year, and he could not afford to lose any of them. Look at his eyes- he looks forty not fifteen. Jim, your family needs grief counseling. I can't understand how a man as smart as you has not seen that. You may think that you are dealing with this okay, but look at your family. They are not. When was the last time you and Maggie went out together? Or even had a family meal together at home. When was the last time you asked Winston about his grades? Did you even know he had dropped off the track team two months ago? I fired him because he was coming to work half drunk and sometimes not at all. I can't swear to it, but I think he is smoking grass too. And it hurts. I love him as if he were my own son. But he isn't. He is yours and you need to wake up and start ignoring the business and not your family."

Those few minutes had been the catalyst that started the turn around. Mr. Barber, with tears running down his cheek, had not trusted himself to speak for a moment. When he did he thanked Paul Madison and asked Winston to remain. He started out with an apology for neglecting him and the moment quickly turned into an emotional reunion. Father and son left the building after stopping by to collect a surprised and somewhat bewildered mother and wife.

It was hard work and they did get grief counseling; but the Barbers were able to patch up their family. Winston's grades gradually improved and his behavior returned to normal under the now watchful eyes of his parents. A little over a year later he was given another chance at his job and determined never to disappoint Mr. Madison again. Years later he would look back at this time of his life and realize how influential Madison had been.

Ten years ago, Winston took over the company after his father passed away. Under his leadership the company continued to grow and was regarded as one of the finest family restaurants in the country. Winston Barber was not as demanding as his father, but he was just as smart and much more approachable. He was a loving husband and father and a fair and consistent boss. The forty plus employees in the modest two-story brick building that served as the company headquarters respected him and were loyal to him.

Winston still opened all of his own mail and he sat now staring at the extortion letter, a sick feeling in his stomach. He read it a second time and used the intercom to call Joe Durance, who immediately put down the report he was reading and came to the president's office. Winston wordlessly handed him the letter and Joe sat down to read it. While he was reading, Mr. Barber discovered two more envelopes addressed to him and marked "personal / confidential", just like the first one. He did not bother to open these. He just sat them aside with the envelope from the first letter. He went back through the stack of mail carefully to see if there were any other unusual letters, and finding none, set the stack aside and stared glumly at his security chief.

When Joe looked up at him after reading the letter, Winston pointed to the letters he had set aside. "Two more."

Joe looked at the three envelopes, noticing the postmarks, and he too left the letters unopened. "We better call the insurance company and get someone over here. And we need to keep this quiet until we figure out what to do. If the news gets out it could have the same effect as these bastards are threatening. People just won't take the chance of eating with us."

"This one is going to be tough, Joe. I'll get hold of Jim Johnson over at National Insurance. He will know who in his company to contact, and we can trust him. Be thinking about who else we need to call, and what our plan of action should be. Unfortunately, I guess the insurance company will be calling the shots."

Joe picked up the letter. "I want to make a copy of this; I'll bring it right back."