

## **CHAPTER 1**

The first time I told a guy I was gonna kill him, it was awkward for me.

But the awkwardness taught me a lesson.

By the fourth time, I'd perfected my strategy. Don't memorize your lines in advance. Just make sure the climax is clear.

Tonight would be the ninth time.

We were sitting in a Starbucks on the corner of Highway 54 and Airport Boulevard. Morrisville, North Carolina. Tuesday, March 13<sup>th</sup>. 7:32 p.m. Intentionally, I'd selected a table next to a large plate glass window. Near the ceiling of the room, a television screen was insinuating snow. Warning about a wind-chill that could trick your skin into believing the temperature was down in the 'teens. My visit to this particular Starbucks the evening before had suggested a casual costume. I was wearing a T-shirt, jeans, and a black Pea-coat. Eight other times, in eight other cities, the guy I was meeting had come straight from the office, wearing a business suit.

But this time, it was a woman.

Wearing a business suit from the sales rack at JC Penney.

And a lanyard, leading down to a DaneCo ID badge of blue and white.

Colors, that in an instant of association, matched pictures of the earth, seen from outer space.

And Dr. Cynthia Holder wanted to get right down to the purified point. "So, what is it that you do again?" she asked. "You some kind of headhunter, or something?"

"In a manner of speaking."

"I don't get it. You're telling me I don't have a choice? That I have to hire a man named Peter Flair for the research tech position?"

"You don't have to do anything. But I'd certainly advise you to hire him."

Holder looked out the window. Then, faced me again. "Let me get this straight. I'm extremely busy, but you convince me to come down here. Meet you after work. Then, when I get here, you don't even offer to pay for my green tea, and now you're telling me I have to hire a guy I haven't even interviewed yet?"

"You can interview him. If you want to."

"But you're telling me I have to hire him. For the research tech position. Whether I want to, or not?"

"You're the head of Virology. You can hire anybody you want to."

"Just as long as it's Peter Flair."

I nodded.

"What'd you say your name was again?"

"I told you. Larry Peterson."

"Well, Larry, let me tell you..."

"That's not my real name, of course."

"What the hell?" Holder said. She pushed away from the table and stood up.

I rotated my coffee cup and whispered, "Sit down, Dr. Holder."

"Let me tell you something..."

"All right." I still didn't look up at her. "Tell me something. But do it sitting down." I sampled my 'coffee of the day.' No imported whale's milk. No ten-syllable order. Just a 'coffee of the day.' With a lot of cream.

I looked around the Starbucks. Nobody'd found her squawking worth more than a diversionary glance.

She deflated back down into her chair. "Look, I've had a long day and I'm cold, so I'm gonna get right to the point. I hire who I want to hire. You got that? I make decisions like that myself. DaneCo gives me the leeway to hire whomever I want. I've never met this Peter Flair, but let me tell you something. After this little encounter, here, tonight, he's about the last person in the universe I'm gonna interview for that position, much less hire. Do we understand each other?"

"I understand you. Completely."

"Good."

"The real issue, though, is whether you understand me."

Holder snapped her fingers and pointed at the bridge of her nose.

Obeying, I stared into her eyes.

And smirked.

A touch of high voltage, this one.

"You don't tell me who to hire," she said. "I don't care how good this guy is."

"I don't care how good he is either." I sipped my coffee. Still too hot. Needed a little more Half & Half.

She leaned across the table and whispered. "Is this guy related to Herrera?"

I looked out the window and waved.

To someone far away.

She continued. "Who're you waving to? Is Herrera out there?"

"Who?"

"This Flair guy? I'll bet he's a friend of Herrera's, isn't he? Or related to him. And you think you can twist my arm into hiring him, right?"

"I don't know anybody named Herrera."

She studied my face. Looking for a distinguishing feature she could tell the police about later, I guess. But my stare held its ground. Finally, she said, "Are you the guy that broke into the lab last month? Because I don't leave that kind of information on my work computer. I take it home every night." She scrambled through her purse and removed her keychain. Dangled the JumpDrive just out of my reach. "Every night, I plug this into

my laptop when I get home. A copy of my calendar entries are on here, too. Entries like this appointment, tonight, with you—whatever you told me your name was. I keep important stuff on here, too. Stuff that's too valuable to leave at work, where some corporate James Bond like you can..."

"I don't like martinis," I said. "And I've never been to your office. But I do know where your building is. I mean, generally. Out in Research Triangle Park somewhere, right?"

Her eyes stuttered transmission errors. She leaned back in her chair, her body language convincing me that her compass was completely broken.

"OK," I said. "Here's the bottom line, Dr. Holder. And listen carefully. Don't interrupt me. Because I'm only gonna say it once." As a test, I paused. Just to be sure. "Next Monday," I continued, "Peter Flair will begin working for DaneCo as a research tech, in the Virology department, for \$143,000 a year. You're gonna make that happen. Because, if you don't," I leaned forward and whispered, "I'm gonna kill your mother, Patty, your father, Jack, and your sister, Constance."

"My God! How did you...?"

"You won't be able to stop it, even if you have me arrested." I pointed out the window. "It'll happen from very far away. Your whole family. During a totally unexpected moment. And then, after I've let you feel guilty about their death a while," I returned to a whisper, "I'll kill you, too."

"But...why..." her voice had little gasps in it, "...why would you...?"

“Right now, you probably want to get up from this table, call the police, tell them what I’ve said, and demand they arrest me. But you’re not gonna do that, and here’s why. I’ve got people watching the exits of this building. One of them uses a .50 BMG. Some states have banned them as assault weapons. But military snipers?—they like them anyway.”

I stared at her.

She was motionless as a manikin.

Then, she looked out the window.

Beyond the controlled flow of traffic.

Beyond the clean, well-lighted strip-mall up the street.

And into the gap between the stores.

Black.

Unrestrained.

And infinite.

“Matter of fact,” I continued, “I’m wearing a microphone. They’re listening to our conversation, right now. And the next time you stand up from this table and make a scene, they’ll stop comparing muzzle energies. Take some serious aim. Or, maybe I’ll let you get up and leave. Just tell them to wait until you’re out in the parking-lot. Make it look random. Accidental. Do you understand what I’ve said so far, because I’m not finished?”

Holder stared at me.

Nodded submissively.

Maybe for the first time in her Alpha Omega Alpha life.

“Good,” I continued. “I realize your emotions must be talking themselves into a lynch mob right now. So, let me recap the situation for you. You’ve never seen me before tonight. Any reference to me, back on your office calendar or your little JumpDrive, there, won’t have my real name on it. And after this cup of coffee, you’ll never see me again. Either way. Believe me.”

Holder tried to be casual while her eyes scanned the edges of the ceiling. The way somebody looks at a clock on the wall while you’re spilling your guts. And hopes you don’t notice.

Without looking up, I said, “Don’t worry. My people’ve taken care of the surveillance cameras, too. Also, you’re not gonna mention this conversation to your mom, your dad, or your sister. Because that would force my people to act rather quickly. In fact, the path of least resistance is pretty simple. Tomorrow morning, you’re gonna get out of bed, take a shower, and pretend this encounter never happened. It was all a bad dream. Eventually, Peter Flair’s gonna come to your office. Hire him. Nobody gets hurt. Nobody knows. In fact, Peter himself doesn’t even know. To him, I’m just a headhunter, who’s doing my best to get him a job. And don’t think about technicalities—like firing him two days after you hire him. Peter remains employed for one year. That’s the deal. Beyond that date, you don’t owe

him, or me, anything except an honest, yearly evaluation. After a year, if he turns out to be a rotten employee, fire him. My only goal is to get him hired. After a year, keeping the job'll be something between you and him."

"May I ask a question?" Holder said.

"Sure."

"Why are you doing all this? Who told you to...?"

"My reasons are personal."

"But couldn't Flair just come in on his own? I mean, if he's qualified, he might get the job anyway. Why do you have to...?"

"He is qualified. But he's been unemployed a long time. And he's gonna lose his house next Friday. If he doesn't make a payment."

"What if I just give you the money for the house payment?"

"This isn't about money."

"Then," Holder swallowed audibly, "what is it about?"

I ignored the question. "Most of the time, people hire my clients. I don't really enjoy having to follow up on my promises."

Slowly, Holder's face tightened.

She stood up from the table.

"You're bluffing." She pointed at the window. "Go ahead. Give 'em the signal. Tell 'em to shoot me."

"It doesn't have to be like this," I whispered. "Sit down."

"No! I'm leaving here. Right now. And then, I'm gonna call the police

and get some protection for me and my family.” Now, Holder addressed everyone in Starbucks. “Listen up, everybody. This man, right here,” she pointed at me, “just threatened to kill me and my entire family. I’m gonna call the police and have him arrested. If I don’t make it home alive, remember this guy’s face. This guy right here.”

She turned and stomped toward the front door.

I angled my face into my shoulder to avoid the surveillance camera, but made it look like a shrug to the spectators. Addressing the four or five people looking at me, I said, “Bad day at the office, I guess.”

One person laughed.

Everyone else watched Holder.

Outside, in the parking-lot, she leaned against her BMW.

Talked into her cell phone.

Her free hand gesturing like a Pentecostal preacher.

Everyone kept watching her.

And so did I.

She was right. I had no people outside the building with sniper rifles. And the eight other business men, in various U.S. cities, that I’d done this to before, had all agreed to hire the people I’d told them to. But Holder was a woman. A brave woman. And the first person to call my bluff.

Eight other times, I’d told somebody I was gonna kill them.

Now, it looked like I was really gonna have to do it.