

Justice Denied

J. A. Jance



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PROLOGUE

LaShawn Tompkins saw the sole white woman, a nun, huddled under her umbrella in the pouring rain as he turned the decrepit Windstar van off Rainier Avenue South onto Church Street. The cracked rubber on the wiper blade wasn't doing much to clear the windshield. Through puddled raindrops he caught only the barest glimpse of an anxious white face illuminated in the yellowish haze of a feeble rain-washed streetlight. His headlights flashed briefly on the gold-embossed lettering of the book she carried.

LaShawn didn't have to read the words printed there to recognize the book for what it was—the Holy Bible. It wasn't uncommon for fearless missionaries of many denominations to venture into this part of Seattle's central district to spread the word about their particular brand of salvation, but it was unusual for one to do so alone. LaShawn suspected that the nun's proselytizing companion or companions were merely out of sight somewhere, knocking on doors or chatting in someone's living room.

Not his mother's, though, LaShawn thought fiercely. Whoever these heathen-seeking women were, they had no business dragging their skinny white butts (he was teaching himself to weed the profanity out of his words, so he didn't even think the word "asses") out here where they didn't belong. And where it wasn't safe. Didn't they know their Bibles or their skimpy little Watchtower magazines would be zero defense against random violence or against the stray bullets likely to culminate any number of drug deals gone bad? Maybe they were counting on God to protect them.

"Well, good luck with that," LaShawn muttered under his breath as he pulled into the short driveway of his mother's south Seattle cottage.

LaShawn was both a neighborhood pioneer and a survivor. As a juvenile he had been one of the original gangbangers who had helped turn the quiet of Church Street into a deadly drug-dealing no-man's-land. Most of the kids LaShawn had grown up with were either deceased or in prison by now. The fact that his mother still lived there—the fact that Etta Mae Tompkins refused to live anywhere else—was one of God's little practical jokes. It was like He was saying, "See what you did, Shawny? You planted them weeds and now you gotta watch your momma live in that garden."

Zippering up his bright yellow King Street Mission wind-breaker, LaShawn stepped out of the dented van into a wholesale downpour. This wasn't the usual dry drizzle—the gentle and ever-present rain—for which Seattle is famous. No, this was a warm, heavy spring rain, the kind the weathermen liked to call a Pineapple Express. If the heavy precipitation prematurely melted the mountain snowpack, there might well be a water shortage the next summer. Another one of God's little jokes. If He sent too much rain in March, Etta Mae's flowers would thirst to death the following August.

LaShawn glanced up the street. The nun was still there, standing on the corner.

Where were her buddies? Or was she maybe waiting for a ride to come collect her?

Fair enough, LaShawn muttered under his breath. Long as you don't come nosin' around here.

If one of them tried knocking on Etta Mae's door, LaShawn would be there to send her packing. Etta Mae Tompkins may have been LaShawn's mother, but she was also the most godly woman he had ever known, bar none. She didn't need some busybody white lady coming around door-to-door and telling her what she should or shouldn't believe.

Ducking his head against the rain, LaShawn hurried up onto the porch. He came here twice a day, morning and night. So far Brother Mark had been good enough to let LaShawn use the shelter's van for these filial visits to care for his ailing mother. Unfortunately, the situation at the shelter seemed to be going downhill fast. LaShawn didn't know how much longer he would be at the mission, to say nothing of having access to the van. But for now he was still able to come by each morning to make sure Etta Mae was up and around and to fix her breakfast.

During the day Meals-on-Wheels dropped off packets of fairly decent, already prepared food. In the evenings LaShawn came by again to make sure Etta Mae actually ate it.

The floor of the porch was firm and dry under his step. When he turned the knob, the solid core door swung easily open inside the jamb. The sturdy door and its well-made frame were also LaShawn's doing-or, perhaps, the Lord's, depending on your point of view. LaShawn had hired the contractors and had overseen the work, but it was his money-the out-of-court settlement won by LaShawn's lawyers in his wrongful-imprisonment suit- that had paid the bills for all that construction.

Considering that seven years had been erroneously deducted from LaShawn's life, the settlement wasn't much, but it was enough that he could have bought Etta Mae a nice place somewhere else. The problem was, she hadn't wanted to leave. She loved the neighborhood and her old familiar house. So LaShawn had fixed the place up for her as well as he was able. It wasn't one of those Extreme Makeover things like they did on TV, but it was enough to get the job done-enough to make the place livable and comfortable.

And now that the job was finished, LaShawn was relieved to see that Etta Mae's house didn't look all that different from the other houses on the street. Had the place been too upscale, it would have been nothing more than a magnet for roaming gang-bangers looking for something to steal. No, the cosmetic changes were subtle and understated.

New vinyl siding had replaced sagging clapboard. The rickety porch had been rebuilt with a wheelchair ramp added off to one side. Insulation had been blown inside what

had once been skimpy, insulation-free walls. Dangerously old wiring and questionable plumbing had been replaced, and the whole thing was covered with a brand-new standing-seam metal roof. Interior doorways had been widened enough to accommodate a wheelchair if and when the time came that Etta Mae might need one rather than her sturdy walker, and the bathroom had been fitted out with one of those easily accessible step-in bathtubs LaShawn had read about in Guide-posts.

Why had LaShawn done all that? Because Etta Mae deserved it, that's why. Because all the while he'd been hell-bent on the wrong path, she'd believed in him and kept on praying for him anyway. Those seven long years he'd been stuck on death row she'd never missed a single month of visiting him. No matter what, she'd found a way to make the grueling six-hundred-mile round-trip journey from Seattle to Walla Walla, rising early enough on her one day off to catch the Sisters of Charity van that took prisoners' family members back and forth across the state. On those Saturdays she'd be there at the window in the visitors' room smiling at him and telling him how much she loved him and that God hadn't forsaken him. And now that Etta Mae's health was failing due to a combination of diabetes and congestive heart failure, LaShawn wasn't going to forsake her, either.

He believed with all his heart that Etta Mae was the only reason he was free.

She was the one who had begged and cajoled until someone from the Innocence Project had finally taken an interest in his case. She was the one who had pleaded with them to reexamine his trial and the evidence, including the exculpatory DNA evidence, previously concealed by the DA's office, that had eventually exonerated him of the brutal rape and murder for which he had been convicted.

Somehow, in the process of saving her son's life, Etta Mae had succeeded in saving his soul as well. Her unshakable belief had been strong enough for both of them. He had still been on death row when someone from the jail ministry had come to see him, bringing him the Good Word that Jesus had died for his sins.

And for the first time ever LaShawn had been ready to listen and to turn his sorry life around. And when the miracle had finally happened, when God had sprung wide his prison doors and LaShawn Tompkins had walked out of Walla Walla a free man, he was also a changed man-a thankful and believing one.

His lawyers had won the settlement for him, but by the time the money came to him LaShawn had dedicated his life to doing the Lord's work. Rather than taking the money for himself, he had spent it on his mother. As for LaShawn? He lived full-time at the King Street Mission, devoting his days and nights to bringing God's Holy Word to the hopeless people he met there-to troubled, angry people using drugs and booze to mask their anger and pain-people not so different from the one LaShawn Tompkins had been not so very long ago.

"Shawny?" Etta Mae called over the blaring TV news. "Is that you?"

"It's me, Momma. Come to make sure you eat your supper."

"Well, come on in, then. Don't just stand there where I can't see your face."

Hanging his dripping jacket on the coat rack, LaShawn kicked off his Nikes and stepped into Etta Mae's pristine living room. The volume on the TV set was so loud that it was nothing short of miraculous that she had heard the door open and close. LaShawn knew about his mother's worsening vision problems, but this was something else they needed to discuss-the possibility of Etta Mae's having her hearing checked. LaShawn didn't hold out much hope on that score. The first time he had brought up the subject, it hadn't gone well.

"What did Meals-on-Wheels bring you today?" he asked.

"Mac and cheese and green beans," Etta Mae replied. "At least that's what that nice Mr. Dawson said when he was putting it in the fridge. I do like their mac and cheese. Not as good as mine, but then I don't have to fix it, do I."

He went over to where she sat and kissed the top of her head. Her hair was still wiry and springy, but he was surprised by how thin it was. And how gray. He was pleased to see that she was wearing her button, the emergency alert necklace he had bought for her. That way, if she needed help all she had to do was press one button to be connected to an emergency operator.

"I'll go heat up that mac and cheese," he said. "You want to eat it here or in the kitchen?"

"That depends," she said. "Will you eat some, too?"

LaShawn shook his head. "You know better than that, Momma. Those Meals-on-Wheels are for old people. I ain't that old."

"Then I shouldn't eat them, either." Etta Mae sniffed. "You're only as old as you think you are."

"I'll eat at the mission," he assured her. "The nice ladies in the kitchen know that I'm over here feeding you, so they hold back a little something for me."

"Well," Etta Mae said. "In that case, since you won't join me, I could just as well eat on a tray here in the living room."

Out in the kitchen-also built to be wheelchair-friendly- LaShawn put the macaroni and cheese into the microwave and began counting out the evening's supply of pills. With morning and evening visits from him, they were making this work, but at some point there would be another decision to be made. LaShawn was hoping to hold that one off as long as possible. Etta Mae had told him that she'd rather die than go live in one of those awful assisted-living homes, and he knew she meant it.

He put the pills, silverware, and a napkin on the tray along with a bottle of Snapple. He was waiting for the microwave to finish reheating the food when the doorbell rang. "You stay where you are, Momma," he called. "I'll get it."

Expecting to find a missionary on his mother's doorstep, an annoyed LaShawn hurried to the door ready to send whoever it was packing. As he flung the door wide open, the first bullet, muffled by a silencer, caught him full in the gut.

He never saw it coming. As he fell, the second bullet scored a direct hit on his heart. He was dead before he ever hit the surface of his mother's newly Pergoed floor.

"Shawny?" his mother called a little later. "What was that noise? And I feel a breeze. Did you leave the front door open?"

A good five minutes after that, Etta Mae Tompkins used her emergency alert button for the very first time.

"Good evening, Mrs. Tompkins," a disembodied voice called from somewhere behind her. "How can we help you?"

It took a moment for Etta Mae to realize it was the emergency operator speaking to her from the box in the living room. "My son!" Etta Mae wailed brokenly. "My poor baby son Shawny is dead. Somebody's murdered him. They shot him right here in my front door!"

CHAPTER 1

I was standing in my own bedroom minding my own business and knotting my tie when Mel Soames hopped into the doorway from her room down the hall. She was wearing nothing but a bra and a pair of panties, and she was doing a strange ostrichlike dance as she attempted to put one foot into a pair of panty hose.

"So what are you going to do about a tux?" she asked. "Buy or rent?"

Some questions posed by half-naked women are more easily answered than others.

This one had me stumped. What tux? I wondered.

Since I quit drinking, I find I'm in fairly good shape when it comes to remembering things. For example, we had spent most of the weekend on the road, driving down to Ashland, Oregon, to see my month-old grandson, Kyle Roger Cartwright. I remembered the eight-hour ride down, including our post-midnight arrival at the Peerless Hotel in the wee hours of Saturday morning.

I remembered spending all of Saturday alternately having my picture taken with and taking pictures of a month-old blanket-wrapped round-faced little kid who looked like he would have preferred sleeping peacefully to being passed from hand to hand during a nonstop day-long photo shoot. I clearly remembered having to explain to my

precocious four-year-old granddaughter, Kayla, that Mel was not her grandmother. And I particularly remembered how much of a kick my daughter and son-in-law, Kelly and Jeremy, had gotten out of my trying to dig my way out of that hole.

And I also remembered the eight-hour drive back to Seattle on Sunday afternoon, especially the part where I had managed to keep my mouth shut when Mel was pulled over by an Oregon state trooper for doing seventy-seven miles per hour in a posted sixty-five. (It could have been much worse. The alabaster-white S55

Mercedes sedan I bought used from my friend and lawyer Ralph Ames has five hundred horsepower under the hood, a top speed of 184, and is deceptively quiet.) But the motorcycle cop was a young guy. Mel gave him the full-press blonde treatment complete with a winning if apologetic smile and managed to talk her way out of the ticket. But then, that's Mel for you.

However, nothing in all those bits of memory even hinted at my needing a tux.

For any reason whatsoever.

"Buy," I said.

It was a desperate gamble, but I came up winners. Mel shot me a radiant smile.

"Good answer," she said. "We should probably plan on doing that at lunchtime, or maybe right after work. That way, if there's tailoring that needs to be done ..."

Snapping her panty hose in place, she disappeared back down the hall to finish dressing. I finished knotting my tie and then went out into the kitchen to drink coffee and contemplate my fate. Tux or not, Mel Soames brought something to the table that wasn't half bad.

We had met working for the Washington State attorney general's Special Homicide Investigation Team, the SHIT squad, as it's derisively known in local cop-shop circles. I had gone there after bailing out of homicide at Seattle PD. My former partner, Sue Danielson, had died in a shoot-out, and I had wanted to find a way to keep my hand in law enforcement without having to deal with the emotional stress of a partner. Ross Alan Connors, the A.G., had offered me just such a position. Mel, it turned out, had come to Washington State and to SHIT for a similar reason, only the partnership problem she was leaving behind was a bad marriage and a worse divorce. But then we got turned into partners anyway-unofficially and without either one of us necessarily meaning for it to happen.

In the course of several memorable days, Mel had ended up watching my back in not one but two life-and-death situations. It turned out she was damned good at it, too. And then when someone ran me through a greenhouse wall, cut open my scalp, and filled me full of tiny glass shards, she had brought me home from the ER and had stayed on to look after me. (Months later, little slivers of glass still pop up occasionally

when I'm shaving.)

To begin with, Mel camped out in the guest room down the hall, but over the course of time that had changed, too. The only parts of the guest suite she now uses are the closet and the bathroom. We call it her dressing room.

It goes without saying that we're both well beyond the age of consent and old enough to know that working together and living together is a very bad idea.

SHIT is a new-enough agency that nobody has ever quite gotten around to setting down in writing all the rules and procedures about what should or shouldn't be done. If they had, I'm sure cohabitation between fellow investigators would be close to the top of the prohibited list. But there's no fool like an old fool-or maybe even a pair of them.

And so, even though it's probably a bad idea, we do it anyway. Sometimes we stay at Mel's place in Bellevue, but mostly we stay at my high-rise condo in Seattle's Denny Regrade neighborhood. (Much better view from the penthouse at Belltown Terrace than from her third-story apartment in the burbs!) We car-pool together in the express lanes across Lake Washington and then pick up or drop off the other vehicle in the park-and-ride lot on the east side of the lake.

A word about my condo. New acquaintances are often curious about how a retired homicide cop happens to sit in the penthouse suite of one of Seattle's most desirable high-rises. The truth is, I wouldn't be in Belltown Terrace at all if it weren't for Anne Corley, my second wife, whose shocking death left me holding an unexpected fortune. I had never driven a Porsche until I inherited hers. And it was only after that one finally bit the dust-after being mashed flat by a marauding Escalade-that I had gone looking for something else.

My Mercedes S55 may have come to me used, but it's several years newer than Mel's BMW, so her 740 tends to be relegated to second-class status on most workdays. The only problem with sharing cars is my steadfast refusal to have talk radio playing in mine. Period. (In my opinion, a little bit of all-talk-all-the-time arguing goes a very long way.) So when we're in the Mercedes we tend to listen to KING-FM. I'm a latecomer to classical music, but it's the one inarguable alternative to perpetual arguing.

Once on the east side, we split up and drive on to the SHIT Squad B offices in Eastgate in our two separate vehicles. We park next to each other in the parking lot and ride up in the elevator together. Big secret-sneaky and subtle. It's a lot like thinking you're pulling the wool over parental eyes when you're in junior high and busy sneaking in and out of the house in the middle of the night. I suspect our boss, Harry I. Ball, knows all about it and simply chooses to keep his mouth shut on the subject. I believe it's a variation on the theme of "Don't ask; don't tell."

Mel showed up in the kitchen looking like a million dollars. She gave me a breezy kiss, filled our two thermos traveling cups with coffee, and we headed out. It had been

sunny in Ashland over the weekend, but it had rained from Thursday on in Seattle and it was still raining like crazy that Monday morning.

"Did you call Beverly and Lars?" she asked.

Beverly, my ninety-something grandmother, lives with her second husband, Lars Jenssen, in an assisted-living facility up on Queen Anne Hill. Beverly was fading-they both were-and I dreaded calling for fear of hearing bad news.

"Not yet," I said. "Too early."

That was nonsense, of course. Both Beverly and Lars were lifelong early risers who could have, individually and together, roused the birds out of bed.

"Try giving them a call later, then," Mel advised. "Kelly sent along that little framed picture of Kyle-the one they took in the hospital. She wanted to be sure we got it to them right away."

"Right," I said. "Maybe we can see them after work tonight."

We rode up in the elevator together. Mel ducked into her office and turned on her radio. I was surprised to see that Barbara Galvin, our super-efficient office manager, wasn't at her desk. I found her in the break room waiting for a pot of coffee to finish brewing.

"Heads up," she said. "The big guy's here."

"The big guy," of course, was none other than Attorney General Ross Alan Connors. In the two years I had worked for the man, I could count on one hand-more like one finger-the times the A.G. had sallied forth from his lair in Olympia and driven up the I-5 corridor to pay a personal visit to Squad B of his Special Homicide Investigation Team.

"What's up?" I asked.

"Who knows?" Barbara replied with a shrug. "He turned up a few minutes after I did. He's been closeted with Harry for the last twenty minutes."

I'm a guilt magnet-even when I haven't done anything wrong. In this case, I knew I was at fault. There was no doubt in my mind that Ross Connors had appeared in person to read me the riot act for carrying on with Mel. (Mel would insist I was being a sexist jerk since, in actual fact, we were both equally at fault.)

Sexist or not, however, when Ross showed up outside my door a few minutes later, I was ready to take full responsibility for our little indiscretion.

"Hey, Beau," Ross said. "Do you mind?"

"Come on in," I replied as casually as I could manage. "Be my guest."

Ross Connors is a big man, someone who fills up any room he enters. That goes triple for my tiny office. At six-four and two-eighty, he looks like what he was in high school and college, a top-drawer tackle. He's also an experienced politician with all the careful grooming, finely tailored clothing, and good looks that go with that territory.

But Ross was beginning to show his age. His wife's very public suicide a year or so earlier had taken its toll. His hair, once a distinguished salt-and-pepper, was now solid gray, and there were dark circles under his eyes-as though he wasn't sleeping well. I could certainly relate to that.

Holding a cup of coffee, Ross settled back in my only guest chair. He took a tentative sip of the coffee and then heaved a contented sigh. "Much better," he said. "I don't know who made that first pot. It was like drinking crankcase oil."

"That would be Harry," I told him. "His own personal witch's brew. The rest of us have learned to wait until Barbara Galvin makes the next pot."

"Wise decision," Ross said. "Remind me next time."

My office isn't much larger than a cubicle would be anywhere else. When Ross reached over and pushed the door shut, I figured he was building up to giving me my dressing-down, but he didn't. Instead, he took another measured sip of coffee.

"So what are you working on these days?" he asked.

This qualified as a disingenuous question of the first water because I was sure Ross Alan Connors knew exactly what each of his special investigators was working on. I decided to go with the flow.

"The missing persons thing," I answered.

Harry I. Ball, with his usual flair for understatement, had shortened the handle to MPT, and MPT was definitely Ross Connors's own personal baby. In most jurisdictions, missing persons reports could just as well go into the round file to begin with. The reports come in and they go away almost immediately. Unless the missing person in question is a little kid or a good-looking babe who catches some media attention, nothing much happens. Most agencies don't have the time, money, resources, or inclination to follow up on them.

It had finally dawned on Ross, however, that it was time for a systematic review of missing persons reports from all over the state. He had embarked on a program that included making the effort of tracking down and interviewing surviving family members, inputting all relevant information from Washington State's missing persons reports into a national database, and comparing our list to any nationwide reports of unidentified remains. This was all done in the hope and expectation that closing some

of our missing persons cases would also help close some unsolved homicides. So far the results were disappointing.

For the past two months, from as soon as I came back from medical leave, that's what I had been doing-combing missing persons reports, entering the information into national and statewide databases, and seeing what came out the other end.

For the most part it was dull, unrewarding work that could have been done by a well-trained clerk, but if the A.G. wanted full-grade investigators working the program, who was I to argue?

"How's that going?" Ross asked.

"It's a lot like looking for two halves of the same needle in several different haystacks," I told him.

"No hits yet?"

"A few. I've found three where the people had turned back up, but, for one reason or another, never did get taken off the missing persons list. This afternoon I have an interview scheduled with a woman named DeAnn Cosgrove whose father went missing back in 1980."

"Twenty-five years," Ross mused. "That's a long time."

"That's what she said when I called her about it. Why bring it up now? I told her I had to-it was my job."

Ross smiled and nodded. He didn't seem to be in any hurry, but I was ready for the other shoe to drop.

"So how are things between you and Seattle PD these days?" he asked.

This was not the shoe I expected. "Seattle PD?" I asked stupidly.

Ross grinned. "You know. Remember the place you worked for twenty-odd years?"

His "how are things" inquiry should have been easy to answer, but it wasn't.

Yes, I had worked in Seattle PD for a long time, most of it as a homicide detective. All the way along, though, I had rubbed the brass the wrong way, and the reverse had certainly been true. I hadn't liked them much, either. Something to do with my not being considered a "good team player." It turned out that working for Ross Connors had proved to be the one notable exception in a career marred by ongoing feuds with many of my commanding officers.

"So-so," I said. "Things improved a little after Mel Soames and I pulled Paul Kramer's fat out of the fire."

Kramer was the brownnosing, ambitious jerk who had been a thorn in my side from the moment he first stepped foot in Homicide. His, in my opinion, undeserved promotion to captain had been the final straw in the whole series of unfortunate events that had driven me off the force.

Months earlier, his singularly stupid episode of tombstone courage-of going into a dangerous situation without waiting for backup-had almost cost him his life, would have cost him his life if Mel and I hadn't ridden to the rescue at just the right moment.

And, of course, that was the very reason he had done it in the first place. He had realized that we were following the same trail he was. In his eagerness to beat us to the punch and gain all the credit, he had committed an almost fatal error.

"Good," Ross said. "Glad to hear it, because we seem to have a little problem, and you may be able to help."

So he wasn't here about Mel and me after all. I breathed what I hoped was an inaudible sigh of relief. "What kind of problem?" I asked.

"Does the name LaShawn Tompkins mean anything to you?"

It took a minute but then I remembered. LaShawn was a hotshot, tough-guy gangbanger who had gone to prison years earlier for the rape and murder of a teenage prostitute. I recalled that some time in the last year or so, after sitting on death row for years, he had been exonerated through newly examined DNA evidence. After his release, the state had declined to retry him. Tompkins's release had been a huge media event, and his subsequent wrongful-imprisonment settlement had caused a storm of controversy that was now the centerpiece of what looked to be a knock-down, drag-out battle in the upcoming campaign to elect a new King County prosecutor.

I nodded. "Isn't that the guy the do-gooders managed to spring from death row last year?"

"The very one," Ross agreed.

"What about him?"

"Someone shot the shit out of him last Friday evening," Ross said. "Plugged him twice, once in the stomach and once in the heart when he opened his mother's front door over in the Rainier Valley."

That didn't sound so unusual to me. In fact, it's pretty much same old, same old. A guy gets out of prison, comes back, tries to go back to doing whatever he did before he went to the slammer. He soon finds out that times have changed.

New thugs have taken over his old territory and his old contacts, and they don't like him encroaching on what they now regard as theirs.

"Turf war?" I asked.

"Maybe," Ross said. "Maybe not. That's what I'd like you to find out for me."

"Why?" I said.

For the first time since he'd sat down in my office, Ross looked uncomfortable.

"I really can't say," he said. "Or rather, I won't. Not at this time. And given the fact that there have been leaks in my office before ..."

I nodded. We both knew too much about those.

"I'm not about to put anything in writing," he continued. "Not in an e-mail. Not in a letter. Not in anything official. At this point it's strictly an informal inquiry."

I wanted to ask how come, but I thought better of it. Ross gave me an answer anyway—a partial answer.

"It may be nothing at all. Then again, it could be a big deal," he added. "Until I have a better handle on what's going on, I don't want to leave any kind of a paper trail."

It was more of an answer than I probably deserved. It was also as much information as I was likely to receive. "Got it," I said. "I'll see what I can do. So this is under the radar?"

"Yes. Absolutely."

"Can I use your name?"

"Let me know first."

"Reports?"

"Nothing written," he said. "Nothing that goes through channels and across desks. I've cleared it with Harry, so he knows you're on special assignment. I'll check with you off and on in the next few days and see how it's going."

For the first time I wondered if LaShawn Tompkins's murder didn't have something to do with whether Ross Alan Connors himself would stand for reelection.

"So I'm your secret agent man?" I asked.

Ross nodded. "For the time being. I've got a good crew of people here," he added. "All of them are hand-picked, and all of them trustworthy, but you and I have a history, Beau. I'm counting on your discretion in this matter."

"Okey-dokey," I said. "You want discretion, you've got discretion."

"Thanks," he said. "And that includes your special friend, by the way," he added as he rose to his feet.

It was a long way from what I had expected and deserved, but it was clear Ross knew all about Mel and me, and now I knew he knew. And not telling Mel about what he had asked me to do would put me between a rock and a hard place.

Ross pulled the door open. As he stepped into the corridor, he turned and looked back at me. "Life goes on, doesn't it," he said.

That throwaway comment covered a lot of territory. Ross Alan Connors and J. P.

Beaumont did have a history, one that included the pain of losing wives to suicide. This was the second time now that Ross had come to me personally when he needed something handled under the radar. In the world of SHIT, I was indeed Ross's secret agent man. He had just given me the handshake.

"Yes," I agreed. "Yes, it does."

CHAPTER 2

For a long time after Ross Connors left my office, I sat there and contemplated what it all might mean. Obviously, by limiting the scope of the investigation into LaShawn Tompkins's death to one officer and by disallowing any kind of a paper trail, the A.G. seemed to be looking for a certain amount of deniability with regard to whatever his interest might be in the homicide of a now-exonerated killer. I also gave some careful thought to what I would tell Mel when she got around to asking, as she inevitably would, what the hell was going on.

It happened at lunchtime as we were driving through rain-washed sunshine to the Men's Wearhouse in downtown Bellevue. "So what did Ross Connors want?" she asked. "Barbara told me the two of you were in your office for a closed-door meeting for a very long time."

We were in the BMW and she was driving, so she wasn't looking at my face when I answered. There's a good reason I don't play poker. My face is always a dead giveaway of whatever's in my hand.

"Just chewing the fat," I said casually. "I don't think he's ever gotten over what happened to Francine."

"His wife?" Mel asked, shooting me a questioning look.

All that had happened before Melissa Soames had turned up at SHIT. I nodded, hoping she'd go back to watching traffic instead of watching me.

"That's understandable," Mel said. The fact that she swallowed my lie without a moment's hesitation made me feel that much worse.

I had held out some hope that in the process of actually buying the damned tux I'd somehow manage to jar loose a little more information as to the whys and wherefores of my needing one. No such luck. Other than telling the alterations lady that we needed to have the tux in hand by Friday evening, Mel didn't let slip any additional details. By then I was in far too deep to ask.

After my ordeal by tux (the first one I ever purchased as opposed to rented, by the way), we hurried across the street to the California Pizza Kitchen to grab some lunch. Mel knows her way around downtown Bellevue the same way I know my way around downtown Seattle. The place was bright, busy, crowded, and noisy, which suited me just fine. I hoped that Mel would be preoccupied enough with her surroundings that she'd stop giving me the third degree about Ross's special project. Fat chance.

"So what are you up to later?" she asked.

"I have an MPT interview set up for this afternoon," I said. "Once that's over, I may end up having to go directly from there into Seattle."

"So I'm on my own for getting across the water tonight?" she asked.

"Looks like."

"That's all right," she said. "I had forgotten. I have a board meeting tonight. I'd need to bring my car home anyway."

That's when it finally dawned on me. Mel had been drafted onto the board of SASAC—the Seattle Area Sexual Assault Consortium. (Who makes up these names?)

Their annual fund-raising auction was scheduled for Friday night. Since she's on the board, not appearing simply wasn't an option, and that's why I needed the tux. But my relief was short-lived.

"What about Beverly?" Mel prodded. "Did you call her yet?"

"Not yet, but I will," I promised.

"If you go see her tonight, be sure to take that picture of Kyle along. I left it on the hallway table with the rest of the mail."

I was eager to move away from the uncomfortable subject of visiting my grandmother. "What does your afternoon hold?" I asked.

Mel rolled her very blue eyes. For weeks she'd been working on a county-by-county analysis of violent crime. She'd been complaining about it for that long as well.

"As of this morning," she said, "I'm suddenly charged with creating a catalog of violent sex offenders, which is, if you ask me, a long way away from our primary mission."

"A catalog?" I asked.

She took a bite of her pasta salad and nodded. "More like a survey," she answered. "For the past five years. Ross wants to know where Washington's released sexual offenders have been- where they went once they got out of jail and where they are now. Oh, and he also wants it ASAP."

Considering Mel's extracurricular activity with SASAC, I could see why Ross Connors had drafted her for that particular job.

"Sounds like fun," I said.

"Doesn't it just," she agreed glumly. "I guess I'll be letting my fingers do the walking."

We had paid up and were headed toward the door when, over the noise of rattling crockery, I heard someone call, "Melissa! Oh, Melissa."

I turned and saw someone-a blonde-waving frantically from a table on the far side of the cashier stand. "Is that someone you know?"

Mel's face broke into a smile. "Come on," she said. "There's someone I'd like you to meet. It's Anita."

Mel tends to refer to her friends by first names only. I knew that Anita was somehow related to SASAC, but in that moment I couldn't have remembered how for any amount of money.

Anita Nolasname stood up, held out a diamond-bedecked hand, and proffered a smooth perfumed cheek for an expected kiss. She was upper thirty-something, pencil-thin, and drop-dead gorgeous.

"Why, you must be the unparalleled Beau Beaumont," the woman said with a smile.

"I'm Anita Bowdin. Mel talks about you all the time, by the way. Says you're wonderful."

"I wouldn't believe everything I hear," I told her. When I glanced in Mel's direction I saw she was blushing, and I have to confess that the idea of Mel's talking about me in my absence put a smile on my face.

"So you're coming on Friday?" Anita continued.

"Wouldn't miss it," I said, faking for all I was worth with what I hoped sounded like sincere enthusiasm. "Got my tux and everything."

"Good boy," Anita said. "See there? You're every bit as wonderful as she says. And you'll be at the board meeting tonight?" she asked, turning to Mel.

"Yes, I will," Mel answered.

We didn't say anything more until we were back in the BMW.

"So you talk about me when I'm not around?" I asked innocently.

"Don't press your luck, buddy," Mel returned. "Wouldn't miss it!" she repeated, mimicking my delivery. "You're such a liar I'm surprised you weren't struck by lightning."

"As a matter of fact, so am I," I said, and we both burst out laughing.

When we arrived back at the office I got into my own car and headed out for my interview with DeAnn Cosgrove.

For years I went along with the self-congratulatory prejudice that causes people who live in downtown Seattle to maintain that the east side of Lake Washington is nothing but a vast residential wasteland. Driving across the lake and becoming instantly and hopelessly lost is a point of honor for some confirmed city dwellers. Now that I work in south Bellevue, however, I'm gradually getting over it. With the help of my newly purchased GPS, I had no difficulty making my way to the residence of DeAnn and Donald Cosgrove on the western edge of Redmond.

The house was one of a number of small neat family homes tucked onto a quiet cul-de-sac. A tiny fenced and well-maintained front yard was graced by a number of plastic vehicles and a small swing set. When I rang the bell it was answered by a woman in her early thirties who carried a relatively new baby on one hip while being trailed by a pair of what looked to be three-year-old twins.

DeAnn Cosgrove had the wan, distracted look of someone suffering through months of sleep deprivation. She wore a long-sleeved denim shirt with distinct traces of baby burp dribbling down one shoulder. Her hair was pulled back in a ragged pony-tail. Looking at her reminded me of Kelly. When we'd seen my daughter down in Ashland, she'd looked a lot like that, too- weary beyond words.

"J. P. Beaumont," I said, holding out my ID. She glanced at it with no particular interest. "I'm with the Special Homicide Investigation Team," I added. "Are you DeAnn Cosgrove?"

"Yes, I am," she said, nodding. "Come in. Please excuse the mess."

She was right. The house was messy-not dirty but cluttered with laundered but unfolded clothes piled two feet deep on the couch, with the dining room table covered by a snarl of papers, and with a minefield of toys littering the carpeted floor. That, too, reminded me of Kelly and Jeremy's place, for many of the same reasons. Taking care of kids doesn't leave a lot of excess time for anything else, most especially housekeeping.

"I meant to shower and have this all picked up before you got here, but..." she began.

"Don't worry about it," I assured her. "I just came back from visiting my daughter and son-in-law down in Ashland. They have small kids, too."

DeAnn gave me a sincere but haggard smile and then swiped an easy chair free of plastic toys so I could sit down. Then she settled into a rocker. Without practiced aplomb, she unbuttoned her blouse, covered herself with a tea towel, undid her bra, and began nursing the baby. She accomplished this while at the same time trying to cajole the twins-two impish little boys-into picking up their toys and putting them in a nearby toy box.

"So what's this about my dad?" she asked.

I glanced at the name on the folder I was carrying. The missing person's report for Anthony David Cosgrove had been filed by someone named Carol Cosgrove on May , 1980. DeAnn, the daughter, had been listed on the form by name.

"Who's Donald, then?" I asked. "Your brother?"

DeAnn shook her head. "No," she said. "Donnie's my husband. Cosgrove's my maiden name. When Donnie and I were getting married, I told him I wanted to keep my name just in case Daddy ever showed up and came looking for me. Luckily for me, Donnie's a really practical guy. He said it made no sense to have more than one name in our family, so he changed his name to mine. His dad didn't like the idea very much, but Donnie said he was marrying me, not his father."

It was clear that almost twenty-five years later, DeAnn Cosgrove was still grieving for her absent father and hoping against hope that someday he would return. That kernel of knowledge was enough to break my heart. It put a personal human spin on an assignment that had been, up to that point, nothing but a list of names.

"Sounds like your husband's got a good head on his shoulders," I said.

An odd expression flitted across DeAnn's face. "Yes," she agreed finally. "Yes, he does. But you still haven't told me. What's this about? Why are you asking questions about Dad after so many years?"

"It turns out there are literally hundreds of unresolved missing persons cases in this state that have gotten zero attention ..."

"Tell me about it," she said.

"I work for the Washington State attorney general, Ross Connors. He's asked my agency, the Special Homicide Investigation Team, to go through those cases and see if by cross-checking we can bring some of them to a close."

"I've heard about cases like that," DeAnn offered. "Cold cases where they eventually

figure out that an unidentified body somewhere else is someone who's been missing for a long time."

"Yes, so if you don't mind ..."

But I didn't even finish asking the question before DeAnn Cosgrove launched into her story. "It happened the day Mount Saint Helens blew up," she said at once.

"Daddy went fishing that weekend and never came home."

The day Mount Saint Helens blew up. If you lived in Washington State or even anywhere in the Pacific Northwest at the time, those words conjure a day you remember—a beautifully clear Sunday morning in late spring when the mountain—some Native Americans referred to as "Louwala Clough," or Smoking Mountain—suddenly roared back to life after being quiet for 123 years. The initial blast caused a huge avalanche and sent up an immense overheated cloud of three-hundred-degree pumice and ash that killed every living thing inside a two-hundred-square-mile area.

"So your father was one of the fifty or so people who died?" I asked.

"The actual number was fifty-seven," she said. "Daddy wasn't ever counted in that official number because they never found any trace of him—no sign of him or his vehicle. But Mount Saint Helens is where he had told my mother he was going that weekend—he said he was going fishing on Spirit Lake."

I had gone camping on the edge of that pristine lake myself years ago—long before the mountain blew up. In advance of the actual eruption—between the time of the first sizable earthquake underneath the mountain in March and when the first big eruption happened on the eighteenth of May—I remembered reading about a curmudgeonly old guy—memorably named Harry Truman—who had told interviewers that if the mountain ever exploded, he'd just go out on the lake in his boat and wait it out. There was only one problem with Mr. Truman's plan—the lake was vaporized in that initial explosion, and so was he.

It seemed likely to me now that if Anthony David Cosgrove had been anywhere near Spirit Lake at the time, he had most likely met a similar fate. But I remembered, too, that investigators had found traces of many of the human tragedies left behind in the volcano's aftermath. Etched in my memory were images of eerie shells of burned-out vehicles still smoldering in the devastated wilderness and testifying to the fact that for the people trapped inside those vehicles, there had been no escape.

In the decades since then, though, Mount Saint Helens and the surrounding area have been subjected to an almost microscopic examination as scientists study both what happened back then and what's happening now. The area where millions of board feet of timber were felled in one cataclysmic blast is now an ongoing laboratory of Mother Nature at work, reclaiming that which she has previously destroyed.

With that in mind, it seemed strange to me that no fragment of Anthony Cosgrove's vehicle had ever been found. Still, there was always an outside chance that something had surfaced and no one had bothered to notify his daughter. Bureaucracies are notoriously dim when it comes to taking the feelings of individuals into consideration.

By then the baby seemed to have fallen asleep. She held him to her shoulder, burped him, and then went to put him down somewhere out of sight. The process made me wonder a little. I knew that Kelly had nursed Kayla when she was a baby.

Kyle, on the other hand, seemed to be a bottle baby. When we had been down in Ashland, I had noticed this and wondered about it, but there are things fathers can ask and things they can't. This was one of the latter.

When DeAnn returned to the living room, she brought with her a small gold-framed photo of a young man wearing a vintage 1970s hairdo and equally dated horn-rimmed glasses. Grinning goofily for the camera, he held a tiny, red-faced, wrinkly baby- held her awkwardly and carefully, as though he was concerned she might break.

It was one of those standard set-piece types of photos that are part of most families. They're usually trite, poorly lit, and unoriginal, but they're wonderful all the same. They testify to the fact that no matter what may happen later-death or divorce, midnight arrests for shoplifting or wrecked first cars-at that point in time, that newly arrived child was a joyfully welcomed addition to his or her family.

"Your dad?" I asked, handing the photo back to DeAnn.

"Yes," she said. "It's the only one I have. After he was gone, Mom went through the house and got rid of most of his pictures. This is one my grandmother happened to have."

She put the treasured photo up on the mantel, settled cross-legged on the floor, and then gathered her rambunctious twins to her as if finding solace in their wiggly presence. Having corralled their toys into the toy box, spurred on by an amazing combination of motherly prodding and patience, they now cuddled up next to their mother on the carpeted floor. With their heads in her lap and their feet sticking out in opposite directions, they gradually settled down. One of them clutched the tattered corner of a faded yellow blanket while the other industriously sucked his thumb.

Waiting for them to drift off, I tried to remember if Scott and Kelly used to do that when they were little-just fall over and go to sleep like that, regardless of where they were or what was going on-but I didn't have a single memory I could focus in on. At the time, I wasn't that kind of a father. Driven, intent on earning enough money to support them and also intent on drinking too much, I had recklessly squandered my own children's childhoods. It's something I've come to regret every day of my life.

"How old were you when it happened?" I asked.