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*The man who pardons easily,
courts injury.*

– Corneille

*Happiness is a butterfly, which when pursued,
is always just beyond your grasp,
but which if you will sit down quietly,
may alight upon you.*

– Hawthorne

PROLOGUE
ALONE

*Solitude, seeming a sanctuary,
proves a grave,
a sepulcher in which the living lie,
where all good qualities grow sick and die.*

– Cowper

Prologue Alone

He was all alone. At least for now. With just his thoughts.

The only light in the isolated room was from the glow of the screen. When he hit "Print," the sound brought him back from wherever he had been, but not as much as the pain that pierced through him as he reached for the pages.

He read them again:

DISTRAUGHT LOCAL MAN TRAGICALLY
LOSES FAMILY, IS ARRESTED

This is just...perfect.

He turned off the computer.

Once again, he was all alone. At least for now. With just his thoughts. And the pain.

BOOK ONE
THE CRIMINALS

*Society prepares the crime,
the criminal commits it.*

– Alfieri

Book One

The Criminals

Chapter 1

Thursday, February 5, 7:20 pm

Her mind wandered in anticipation. *I wonder if tonight will be the night.*

Her last two companions had been really disappointing. Being single again definitely had its benefits, but she was not sure it was all it was cracked up to be. The sex was okay, but no home runs so far. *Frankly, most of these guys have been pretty damn dull. I may not be in Kansas anymore, but it sure seems like it. It was a lot more exciting doing this when I was still married. Maybe it was just the fact that then it was supposed to be forbidden. I hope tonight will be more fulfilling, intellectually as well as physically.*

United States Senator Jane Alistair closed her briefcase and walked out of her office. “Good night, Jimmy,” she said, imagining for just a second what an extracurricular session with James Ayres might be like. He was certainly younger. He seemed more promising than most of her partners of late. *I’ll have to give that some serious consideration, although his wife might take exception.*

“Good night, Senator,” Ayres replied, bringing Alistair back to the moment. “Let me get the elevator for you. Robert is waiting to drive you home. Please don’t forget we have committee hearings at 9:30 in the morning.” *Still quite the looker. Wonder what she did to get that committee chairmanship so quickly?*

Alistair stepped into the waiting elevator. As always, Robert Grant was there waiting for her when the elevator opened out into the parking garage below. “Evening, Senator. How are you tonight?”

“Okay, Robert, bit of a long day, how ‘bout you?”

“Fine, Senator. Thanks for asking. Let’s get you home then.”

Nothing promising in Robert, just a stuffy, loyal ride home. She had occasionally confided in Grant about one or two of her extracurricular activities without feeling judged.

Riding home, Alistair thought about tomorrow's hearings. *Not going to be any fun. Between the media and the public interest groups, keeping the focus and the heat where it belongs is becoming more and more difficult. Lately it just seems that the press is constantly watching me. Life was sure a lot easier when I was only a Midwestern farmer's daughter looking to find myself a well-off husband and settle down. Way past that now.* The thought of being watched tugged at Alistair. Instinctively, she looked back over her shoulder. *Is that car following us? Silly, where'd I get an idea like that?* Still, she waited a minute and looked back again. The car, if it was ever there, was gone now.

"Here we are, Senator. Let me pull over. I'll walk you to your door."

"Not necessary, Robert. Thanks. I'll see you in the morning," she added, sliding out the door of the limousine.

The Lakers were in town playing the Wizards, and Grant was feeling the pull of his TV set. He hesitated, then said, "Okay then, Senator. See you in the morning. Good night."

"Night, Robert."

Alistair punched in her security code, passed through the comforting and imposing interior lobby door and headed off down the path to her townhouse. She thought about the lush green landscaping that had first attracted her to this complex. Everything back home was flat and brown. *Really is quite beautiful here.*

He made sure he caught the security door before it closed behind her, quietly gaining his entrance, but letting Alistair get just a little ahead of him. Hearing something behind her, Alistair turned. Nothing. She hurried on to her front door, reaching into her briefcase for her keys. As she approached the door, Alistair definitely heard footsteps behind her this time. She turned again, more surprised than startled. "Damn! I thought I told you..."

Thwap. Thwap. *Mmm, the silencer worked great.* In one clean move, he pocketed his gun and caught her before she fell to the ground. He also managed to get her keys, open the door, and quickly get the two of them inside the townhouse.

He set her down. No pulse. He went back outside, turning on a flashlight he extracted from his pocket. No blood that he could see anywhere. He picked up her briefcase, went back inside, closed the door and confirmed that it was locked. He put the briefcase on the entry table. He then picked Alistair up, carried her into the bedroom and set her down on the bed. *Now I know where they got the expression dead weight.*

He undressed her, scattered her clothes about the room and went about his

business. Twenty minutes later, satisfied with the way things looked, and how smoothly this had gone, he quietly took his leave. *Perfect. If I don't dawdle, I can still catch the second half of the Lakers-Wizards game.*

And it would have been “perfect,” too. If not for the one slight drop of blood on the front porch he had missed—and the pair of eyes that peered out at him from the nearby shadows as he departed.