

Nature says otherwise

Chapter 1

‘Lying, cheating and stealing.’ Agents Collins’ open hand waved jerkily in front of his features in a staccato robotic movement. His fore and middle finger were directed towards the laptop computer sat idly waiting, a screensaver conjured up images of mountains and sky only seen through the lens of image manipulation software.

‘Crime is crime,’ he continued in a lazy, deep-south American accent; his lips, slick with coffee, peeled words slowly from the vine.

‘Doesn’t have to be holding a piece to someone’s head, ones and zeros, there isn’t such a thing as victimless crime.’

An elongated pause, as if the Agent had temporarily lost track, consciousness regained in the here and now as opposed to the last long five days spent in the courtroom, not to forget living with this case for five months.

Collins shook his head as if waking from a deep sleep to find three clustered around the table still prepared to wait patiently, the spent coffee mugs huddled around the laptop evidenced the trail of time, crumbs scattered across side plates to complement the caffeine high – a sugared supportive mechanism.

‘Well, I have to hand it to you Collins,’ a large black man lifted the back of his left hand up and against his mouth to stifle the belch threatening to erupt.

‘This was one I thought was lost to us, out in the new digital beyond, electronic frontier I hear they call it?’ A mock western voice boomed outwards, the hand shifted to tip forward an imaginary cowboy hat, nails with white calcium whorls scraped through the closely cropped, thinning hair.

‘Was a time when all you had to worry about was crossing state lines, bashing together the heads of the local law enforcement to co-operate nicely.’ He paused, Murphy’s eyes narrowed at a flood of memories marching to their own rhythm, his lips thinned and mouth twitched once, twice; a wide smile returned, his hands locked lightly over an ample stomach.

‘Looks like we have a new class of agent to tackle the evolution of white collar crime, puts the rest of us out to pasture.’ Laughter red-shifted to the bass end of the spectrum joined by the two others sat either side of Murphy, a little nervously taking their cue from their boss, always so careful to nod when he nodded, smiles set to impress.

‘Special Agent Murphy...’ Collins was halted before he had even been offered the chance to move past the first three words.

‘Collins, it’s Murph to you.’ The big man’s hands were secured over his copious stomach, shirt buttons strained under the resultant load of too many visits to fast food restaurants over the years, the vague thought of exercise a past memory.

Collins ran his tongue over square teeth, his body sank slowly back into the smooth leather of the chair that had seen so many backs steadily erode away the grain from the resident natural hide.

He flexed his shoulders, conscious of the damp cotton scrunched under the suit jacket desperate for a dry clean. His body was now operating on empty, trailing on fumes, the last traces of adrenaline soaked up by a distant blotting paper, no caffeine or sugar to supplement the high from the final day spent in the courtroom.

Collins’ vision flicked outwards, the two FBI Agents and one Special Agent sat waiting on their counterpart attentively; a sigh emitted from his chest, the tide flowing to froth one final time against the driest of sand as the moon changed from ebb to flow, the vast volume of fluid sent into reverse, another beach to the west to encroach upon.

‘Fraud by its very nature is a little complicated.’ Collins took care to ensure his eye contact bounced from one person to another, never lingering on any one of the three, trying to offer equal respect.

‘We have all seen its impact, whether on a company, family or investors.’

His voice low, melodic, intended for and only just reaching his attentive audience set equidistant around the coffee table.

Collins’ eyeline now reached outwards and beyond, the large room artificially divided to maximize the physical space it paid its rent against and maintain the uniform, corporate feel of the coffee chain, surely this setting in San Francisco was mirrored and could be found in any London, Paris, Tokyo franchise?

His mouth twisted, the first sense of emotion to intrude, eroding the projected professional persona.

‘Damned if I don’t hate an innocent mugged, whether it be for ten, a thousand or a million dollars...’

‘Why we do what we do?’ The sentiment uttered by the lady yet to offer an input, an attempt to try but failing to inject an irony into her tone.

‘Fidelity, Bravery, Integrity...’

‘We each have our own motivation for joining the Bureau.’

Murphy shrugged, aged muscle folded over itself on his pectoral muscles, the bassy laugh boomed out again, a little less reverberation around the mock-Italian papered walls.

‘This infatuation for our beloved Bureau; we should be in a bar downing tequila and not in a pretty boy coffee bar, damned if that would not set J Edgar Hoover a-rolling in his grave.’ A pause, the bass tone turned to gravel being chewed.

‘Come on Collins, details, tell the story but make it quick, my bladder is not what it was.’

‘We are talking about a BEC, business e-mail compromise.’

Collins paused and licked his lips, noting understanding in the eyes of the three facing him.

‘Our companies readily trade across the international, it is not unusual for Chief Executive Officers of any given corporation to e-mail their accountant to wire funds here and there to take advantage and complete a deal, the fluid nature of business so they say.’

He moved his hand reflexively upwards to tussle at the unforgiving mop of wayward hair, wax having given up its hold long ago this afternoon, so Collins continued.

‘Low and behold, in a BEC scam, when the actual CEO does get in touch, they find that the request has come from someone claiming to be them, and the company’s pouch of gold is significantly lighter.’

‘What’s the scale of the problem?’ Murphy ground out the words, fingers locked together a little tauter over his belly; the question sounded like one from an interview panel as opposed to general information being sought.

‘Last year, recorded stats register seven thousand US companies at a cost of seven hundred and forty million dollars.’ This prompted a low whistle from the lady to the right of Collins.

‘With just a little assistance from Interpol, we managed to sniff out an organized crime group known as the Millieu, being run out of Paris.’ A shrug led to an almost apologetic grimace.

‘A mistake that so many make is to take from the same trough more than once. They track IP addresses and use malware to copy the CEO’s signature and mimic their e-mail. The basics of forensic accounting and Interpol human resources have brought us to where are today.’

Collins sat back once again, the leather groaning slightly against his frame, no sense of smugness to his features; his body language portrayed a mission complete.

‘Five people put away today.’ Murphy nodded. ‘All under twenty, new breed as you say, justice is justice though; good work Agent Collins.’

‘Thank you.’ The words slowed down, rhythm in the phrasing strengthened.

‘But you knew all of this? The three of you were here in court for the final day; you have read the notes...’ Collins found himself being spoken over.

‘Forgive me but it is good for an old timer such as myself to pick up on one pushing the Bureau forwards.’ Murphy’s brow creased in a mock frown.

‘And for others to see how the bar is being lifted around them.’ The comment was thrown to the two around him, their expressions smoothed to professional neutrality as the words crashed harmlessly over them.

Murphy slowly released his fingers and the blood rushed back to plump up the large, thickset digits. As he reached into his suit pocket to retrieve an envelope his eyes never left the young man sat opposite him whose features struggled to remain impassive as he glanced warily between the three figures.

‘And this is?’ Collins fingered the rough, brown texture of the paper envelope, avoiding the temptation to flick a finger under a seal to release the message that lay within.

‘Agent Collins.’ Murphy sat back once again, a lazy smile unfolded to occupy his features.

‘That envelope.’ All four present involuntary focused for a moment on the singular sliver of enclosed parched paper hidden within a regular, rectangular gummed down manilla envelope.

‘That envelope contains your transfer to Cyber Division within the Bureau.’

Murphy paused, any sense of humour cast aside from his eyes, naked resolve shone forth.

‘We are taking you from Special Agent Dredski’s office here in the fair city of San Francisco and transferring you to New York, the Cyber Division.’

Murphy offered his large mitt of a hand.

‘Congratulations, welcome to my Division.’

The man from South Carolina struggled to restrain the flush of success, reaching across to shake the hands of the three figures in front of him.

‘Thank you sir.’ Collins’ grasped the envelope between forefinger and thumb, a conscious focus on resisting the urge to tear open the paper and see the transfer request for his own eyes, signed off confirming the verbal instruction.

Dredski would not be happy, no wonder his boss had been less than enthusiastic at the conclusion of the trial.

‘We’ll leave you to it.’ Murphy offered one final wink and clapped a heavy hand upon his new Agent’s shoulder. The two lackeys accompanying their boss offered handshakes once again, before dissipating into the background.

Collins found himself alone with the paper unfurled in front of him, words heard from Murphy echoed in the print set upon the page.

Any hint of tiredness or exhaustion long since washed from Collins' system by the natural cocktail of dopamine now released to dance between his synapses.

A single man sat with three empty chairs opposite him wearing a simple smile - the first unguarded expression for many a week unfolded upon his features.

The laptop waiting patiently on the low table had wisely long since selected sleep mode while the humans had wittered on, a matte black screen absorbed any and all energy to fall incident upon the mix of plastic and semiconductor, so the smile lingered on Collins' triumphant features.