

*Scales of Justice*

Chapter 1 excerpt

“Ease up, Champ,” Graham whispered. “Don’t wear yourself out and make my job too easy.” He removed the small envelope from the three-pronged plastic stick of the bouquet and opened it. “*You are the only Chance I’ll ever take. Have a great conference. I’ll see you next month...and I’ll be keeping Atlanta hot for you!*” There was a little red heart sign and the name, “*Mary.*” Graham shook his head in disgust. “He really does have a woman in every port.” As soon as the noise subsided and Graham heard the shower water, he readied himself for the task at hand. He slipped into the shadows of the far corner of the den and waited for Chance to come to him. Graham didn’t have to wait long.

Chance opened the bedroom door and wrapped the fluffy white towel around his waist. He examined the damage to his brand-new white shirt. Twisting and turning it in his hands, he noted the two missing buttons, the slight tear, and the smudges of red lipstick. “Oh well,” he said and tossed the shirt in a nearby wastebasket. “Well worth it.” Opening the fridge, he uncorked a chilled liqueur and chugged the miniature bottle. “Wow, Stacey was tenacious!”

*Shelly, you idiot,* Graham thought. He wanted to step out of the shadow and kill Chance right then, but he resisted the urge. *All in due time, Graham,* he assured himself.

“Oh well, she served her purpose,” Chance said. “Now how do I get rid of her before Janet calls?” Chance walked back to the bedroom and returned with a gold ring. Putting it on his left hand and glancing one more time toward the sleeping naked woman in the bedroom, he lifted the phone to his mouth and said, “Call Janet.” It rang once...twice...three times.

“Hey, babe,” came the sweet voice on the other end. “How’s your day been?”

“Draining,” Chance said with a smile as he looked back to the bedroom. “It was a real

struggle.”

“Oh, but I’m sure you kept up your end of the deal,” she said. “Nobody can stand up to my man.”

“You got that right.” Chance heard laughter in the background of the phone and bristled defensively, “Janet, who’s that?”

“Oh, I’m at the ladies’ book club tonight. You want to talk to anyone?” she asked.

“No thanks,” he said. “Hey, I got to go. I need to get packing for the trip back.”

“Okay, babe. I love you,” she said and then hung up.

“Yeah, yeah,” Chance said and tossed the phone to the couch to the left of Graham. Chance suddenly noticed the flowers and walked over to examine the bouquet. “When did these get...” He pulled out the note. “Mary...Mary...Mary...who the hell’s Mary?” He picked up the bouquet, smelled it once, and then walked it over to the trash can. He slapped the back of his neck. “What the hell?” He twisted around and slapped again at the stinging sensation in the back of his neck.

“The polistes annularis,” the dark figure announced calmly. “Or as we say in Tennessee, ‘The red paper wasp.’” He took a step back as Chance swung awkwardly at him. “But you lawyers...you love all of that Latin mumbo-jumbo, don’t you?” Chance fell to his knees. Graham took the opportunity to touch Chance once again with the wasp held delicately in his tweezers, this time stinging the front of his throat. Chance slapped at the wasp, but Graham pulled it safely away. “Ah...ah...ah,” Graham said with a shake of his head. “Just one more for good measure, if you don’t mind.” He put the wasp to Chance’s temple, and it obliged once again with a deadly sting.

Chance uttered raspily, “Who are you?” as he grabbed at the swelling lumps on his temple

and neck. His tongue was swelling rapidly, and Graham could tell he was already struggling desperately to breathe.

“Who am I? I guess I owe you that much,” Graham said. “What harm could it do?” He squatted a few feet from Chance and scrutinized the desperation in his face and eyes. Chance clawed his way toward the bathroom, but it was so far away. “Graham Turner at your service.” He studied his victim as Chance’s body convulsed. Graham laughed, not at Chance’s situation but his own last comment. “Well, I suppose I’m actually at the service of your wife Janet.”

Chance stopped struggling and turned his swollen neck towards Graham. Was it a joke? Chance tried to say Janet’s name, but his tongue was too swollen to utter any sound other than the heavy wheezing of each belabored breath. The couch within his reach, Chance crawled for it.

“Looking for this?” Graham asked, waving Chance’s phone in front of him. “You lawyers are way too predictable.” He put the phone in his jacket pocket. “Anyway, you asked a question and we only have a few minutes at most, so let me explain while there’s time.” Graham moved toward the bedroom door and waited there. Seeing Chance glance towards the bed, Graham said, “Oh, don’t concern yourself with Shelly; I drugged her drink downstairs as soon as I saw your overt interest in her little black dress. She’s out for at least another hour.”

Graham smiled. He didn’t have to hear the words to know the thought. “Yes, I do think of everything. That’s why they pay me so much. But your wife...” Graham paused. “Yes, your wife, she thinks of everything too. Quite a lady you have there. Well, I suppose I should speak in the past tense in that situation. Quite a lady you had, Chance.”

The lawyer’s neck was blowing up like a massive goiter and his face contorting so badly that Graham’s stomach heaved; he quickly stood and walked away as Chance struggled toward the

bathroom. Looking out the window, Graham continued, “She caught wind of your plan to leave her and cut her out of everything...last year, I think.” Graham couldn’t stand to see Chance struggle any longer. He moved back to him, stepped over the lump of flesh and said, “Save your energy, you won’t find the epinephrine kit either.” Chance collapsed; sobbing, quivering and moaning to his last gasp of breath. Graham removed the black gloves and replaced them with a set of blue latex gloves instead. He checked Chance’s wrist for any sign of a pulse. He waited and watched until he was absolutely certain Chance Harrington was dead from the anaphylactic shock. According to the research, Chance Harrington had a deadly allergy to wasp stings...especially the red paper wasp. Graham set the wasp on Chance’s neck and used the dead man’s hand to squash it. Finally, he put the dead wasp next to the bouquet Chance had dropped on the floor.

As he removed up any evidence of his own presence in the room and made certain the scene looked authentic for a bee sting, Graham said, “Thanks, Mary...I owe you one.” He closed the door, wiped the handle and waited for the elevator. He wasn’t about to walk back down fourteen flights of stairs, especially in Denver.

The elevator door opened, and Graham disappeared inside. One more dead body to lose in the endless count of bodies...one more name to forget...one more job to mark off as “Zero Retribution,” a job well done.